



Death Row (Alibis collection)

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Category: Horror

Description: With all hope of an appeal fading away, the fate of a condemned murderess takes a shocking turn in a breathtaking short story by the #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Housemaid*.

Talia Kemper is on death row for murdering her husband. She had an alibi and no known motive, yet Talia's unwavering protestations of innocence have always been ignored. Then one day in the visiting area, she sees a recognizable stranger she's certain is her husband. It turns out the man she's been convicted of killing may not be dead after all. But as the days tick away toward Talia's execution, what will it take for her to be believed?

Freida McFadden's *Death Row* is part of *Alibis*, a collection of stories about lies, truth, and deception. It's just a matter of what you can get away with. They can be read or listened to in one sitting.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

My name is Talia Kemper, and with my time running short, there are a few things I need you to know about me:

First, I am currently on death row for murdering my husband.

Second, my attorney has filed one last appeal, but if that is rejected, I will be executed by lethal injection in two weeks.

And last, I am innocent.

I didn't kill my husband.

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Present Day

It's entirely possible that being on death row is worse than death. I can't say for sure, since I haven't yet experienced death (will have an update on that soon), but I have experienced death row, and it's hard to imagine anything much worse.

The worst part about death row is the seclusion. Prisoners on death row are kept isolated from the rest of the prisoners. We get a single cell, and we don't eat in the dining hall with all the rest of the prisoners. When we go out in the prison yard, it's always alone with a guard.

You might think, hey great, who wants to share a crowded cell with a bunch of other women? When I first heard that I'd be avoiding gen pop, I didn't think it sounded so bad. I had heard horror stories about maximum security prisons. I imagined being beaten or raped or stabbed with a shiv while the guards were looking the other way.

But no, this is worse. Much worse.

Currently, I am lying on the bed in my cell. I spend twenty-three hours of the day in this cell, which is roughly the size of a parking space. Humans are not designed to be locked in a cage for 95 percent of the day. I have a small bed that is really just a metal slab attached to the wall, covered by a thin mattress. Actually, calling it a "mattress" is a stretch. It's more like a thick blanket that has been folded over a couple of times. There is a small desk with a stool that is also welded to the wall. And of course, a metal toilet and sink.

If I roll to my side on this sorry excuse for a bed, I can just barely see the one tiny

window, only slightly larger than my hand, which is close to the ceiling. I'd have to stand on my bed in order to see outside, although there's not much of a view, which Noel always says is the most important thing about picking a place to live. That was what he used to say, at least, before he was murdered.

Occasionally, I get to shower—a rare treat—but I often wash my body at the sink with a rag and chemical-smelling soap. The only people I ever talk to are the guards, and it's not like we're having any great conversations. Visitors are rare. Usually, it's just my lawyer, Clarence Bowman.

Whenever I leave this cell, I am shackled. I am allowed to go into the yard for one hour each day, although I am put in a different cage within the yard. They treat me like a wild animal that could turn on them at any time. But I suppose if they really think I'm a murderer, that makes sense. Who knows what I'm capable of?

“Kemper.” A voice jerks me from my self-pitying thoughts. “Food.”

I sit up from the faux mattress, my back screaming in pain. It's supposed to be good for the back to sleep on a hard, flat surface, but there's nothing good about this bed. There's also nothing good about the food delivered to my cell, which is slid through a narrow slit in the door. Breakfast is delivered at six in the morning, lunch at eleven, then dinner at four thirty.

“It's dinnertime,” the voice adds. It's Correctional Officer Rhea Clark. I'm supposed to call COs by their last names, the same way everyone calls me by my last name, but she introduced herself to me as Rhea, so I feel I have license to call her that.

“Thank you,” I say as she passes my tray to me through the gap. My voice is hoarse, because I hardly use it anymore and don't drink enough water. Sometimes when I try to swallow, it feels like there are glass shards in my throat.

I take the tray to my desk and sit on the stool to eat. I read somewhere that the state pays less than fifty cents per meal for each prisoner. When I look down at my tray, I believe it. My dinner consists of a fish patty, which was almost certainly recently frozen (and still sort of is), and a pile of soggy green beans from a can. When I bring my face too close to the plate, the smell turns my stomach.

Noel wouldn't have minded prison food as much as I do. He lost his sense of smell when he was younger during a game of peewee football. He broke his nose during a tackle, and that was all it took to shear the delicate olfactory nerve fibers transmitting scents to his brain.

"I didn't know you were allowed to tackle other kids during peewee football," I said to him when he told me the story for the first time.

He winked at me and tapped the bump on the bridge of his nose. "Oh, the way I used to play it, you did."

Sometimes I fantasize about a greasy fast-food burger with a side of crisp french fries. After years of prison food, I don't fantasize about filet mignon or lobster—mostly just fast food. I wonder if I could ask for a Big Mac for my last meal.

I'm meeting with Bowman tomorrow about my appeal. Sometimes he calls me, but this time he wants to meet in person, which means whatever he has to say is important.

I am naively hopeful about the appeal, although I am always hopeful. How could anyone think that I killed Noel? I had no motive—he was the love of my life. And most of all, I have an alibi.

Yet here I am, about to be executed for his murder.

And the worst part of it all is how much I miss him.

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Before

In all my time waiting tables, I've never spit in anyone's drink before. But it looks like there's a first time for everything.

It all started last week, when my boyfriend of two years dumped me for a trashy blond. It was bad enough that he was cheating on me and that he ended what I'd thought was my best relationship to date—the one that might stick—but then today, the blond who ruined my life just walked into the café where I work and plopped down at one of my tables. I can't tell if she didn't recognize me or didn't care, but she sat right down and ordered herself a salad and Diet Coke.

She'll be getting a little more than she ordered, though.

After filling the cup from the fountain, I expectorate a decent amount of saliva into my mouth. Then I lower my head and regurgitate it into the fizzy liquid.

There. I won't get Franklin back from her, but it's something . A start.

“Oh my God, did you just spit in that drink ?”

I wrench my gaze away from the Diet Coke, my cheeks flaming. Naturally, I got caught—I always do. I'm the worst criminal ever.

I hazard a look at the source of the voice. It's the new waiter who started a few days ago—Noah, I think. He's about my age, maybe midtwenties. I haven't had a conversation with him yet, but he seems competent, like he's worked in the service

industry before. I heard he's a grad student supplementing his flimsy stipend, like I am. He has pretty eyes the color of hazelnuts (my favorite nut) with long, dark lashes, although he is saved from being too pretty by a bump on the bridge of his nose, which looks like it's been broken before and gives him a bit of a rougher look.

"Uh . . . I . . .," I stammer. "I wasn't . . ."

"Spitting barely does anything," he lectures me. "You're supposed to hawk up phlegm. That's the best way to do it."

"Oh." I clear my throat. "Well, I wasn't aware of that."

"Let me show you." The boy seizes the drink from my hand and hawks up a pretty impressive glob of phlegm, which he spits into the cup. I almost want to applaud. "Okay, now you try." When I hesitate, he gives me a stern look. "This is important to learn. It's a life skill."

He spends the next minute or so coaching me on how to hawk up phlegm into the Diet Coke. By the time we're done, I would say the blond's drink is about 25 percent phlegm (and 15 percent spit, leaving about 60 percent actual soda).

"Well done," he says. "You're a fast learner."

I grin at him—my first real smile in a week. "Thanks, Noah."

"Noel," he corrects me. "Noel Kemper."

"I'm Talia," I say. "Talia Monroe."

"I know," he says in a way that makes me think he's been waiting for an opportunity to introduce himself. "So who are we serving this phlegm cocktail to?"

“The blond at table nine. She cheated with my boyfriend. Ex -boyfriend.”

He nods in understanding. “Sounds like it’s deserved then.”

“Yes,” I agree, although it’s far less than she deserves. Him too.

“Any interest in getting a drink after the shop closes?” he asks me. He says it in a casual way, like it’s no big deal, but there’s an eagerness on his face that’s unmistakable. “I can give you tips on how to piss in the soup.”

He’s cute—that’s undeniable—but my head fills with protests about just having gotten out of a relationship and how I barely know him. But I don’t say any of that, because I realize right then that none of it matters. Because somehow, I sense there’s something special about Noel Kemper, who made me smile for the first time since that asshole broke my heart.

“Okay,” I say.

“Great!” His face lights up with a grin so infectious, all I can do is smile back. “There’s only one thing you need to do first.”

“What’s that?”

“Wake up.”

Huh? I frown at him. “What did you say?”

“Wake up, Talia.”

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Present Day

I wake up, my heart pounding.

For a moment, I forget where I am and think that I am lying in bed with my husband. There's a distant beeping sound coming from somewhere within the prison that almost sounds like my alarm clock at home. Any moment now, Noel will silence the alarm and stumble in the direction of the bathroom, where he will pee for so long, it's amazing that he has any fluid left in his body when it's over. Then he will crawl back into bed and cuddle with me for a few more minutes before we have to start our days.

And then I remember. I remember that I'm in a prison cell, all alone, and Noel is dead. The only place he's still alive is in my dreams.

The dreams seem to be getting more vivid, which is even more frustrating. I still remember the day Noel and I met at that café, and in my dreams, it's like I am there . I can almost reach out and touch him.

I grab the flimsy blanket, trying to cover my body. It must be winter because it's ice cold in the cell. During the winter, it's freezing, and during the summer, it's a sauna. There is no air-conditioning whatsoever. Honestly, I'm lucky they give me a toilet and not just a bucket in the corner of the room in which to do my business.

I hear a scratching noise from the corner of the room. I can barely see because the lights have been off in the prison since ten o'clock sharp, but the sun has started to rise in the sky, and there's just enough light coming through the tiny window to make out some of the details of my room. I squint into the corner, trying to make out the

source of the noise.

Sure enough, it's a rat.

It's a big one too. Much bigger than the rats I used to see on the outside. It's so big that it almost looks like a mutant rat from some sci-fi TV show, who might also do karate. And the rats here are so bold . They have no fear whatsoever. The rat knows I can't hurt him. The most dangerous object I've been given in the cell is a spork.

Do rats bite humans? There was a time when I would've googled this information, but I can't do that anymore. I don't have access to the internet. So I just have to lie here in bed and wonder if the giant rat is going to bite me.

Today is the day that I meet with Bowman about my appeal. Technically, I get unlimited appeals on death row, but if this last one fails ... well, then what? I've been banging my head against the wall for years, and I'm tired of it.

The part I don't understand, though, is why. Why would they think I killed my husband? It's not like I had a criminal record. It's not like we were having marriage troubles. And on top of that, at the moment Noel was killed, I was having dinner with my friend Kinsey. She vouched for me, as did the waitstaff at the restaurant.

But the prosecutor argued otherwise. It doesn't matter if she had an alibi. She set the whole thing up. If not for this woman, Noel Kemper would still be alive.

The scampering of the rat grows louder. He's coming closer to my bed.

Maybe I shouldn't be so frightened of a rat. Don't kids keep rats for pets? I'm so lonely in this cell—maybe I could turn the rat into a companion. Noel and I always talked about having children, but that never ended up happening, and now it never will. But I can have a pet rat. I can even name him.

What's a good name for a rat? How about ... Pat? Pat the Rat.

The scurrying of the rat grows louder. I lose track of him for a moment, because it's still so dark in the room. Did he go back out the hole that he came in through?

And then I see it. Two glowing red eyes staring at me from the other end of my bed.

Pat the Rat is on my bed.

Despite the fact that I was planning to turn this rat into my pet and/or surrogate child, I start screaming. There's something about finding a rat in your bed that is particularly disturbing.

"Kemper!"

The harsh voice of the guard from the other side of the door is enough to quiet my screams. It's not Rhea. I can't tell who it is, but I would recognize Rhea's voice.

"Kemper!" the guard barks again. "What's going on in there? Are you injured?"

"No, I just . . ."

I look around the dimly lit cell. My screams have frightened off Pat the Rat. He's vanished back to wherever he came from. Or at the very least, he's not on my bed anymore.

I could tell the CO about the rat, but what are they going to do? Get an exterminator? Very unlikely. Besides, I don't want them to hurt the rat.

"I had a bad dream," I finally say.

The guard grunts. I don't expect any sympathetic words, and I'm not disappointed. "Go back to sleep or shut up."

I don't see how I could possibly sleep after my encounter with the rat, but I guess I'm more tired than I thought. Because when I lie back down on my bed, my eyes slowly drift shut.

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Before

Y ou screwed up, Noel.”

Noel has just emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair is still damp from the shower, and he lets the towel drop to the floor before rifling around in the top drawer of our dresser for underwear. From where I am lying on our queen-size bed, I avert my eyes, trying not to allow Noel’s body to distract me from my irritation with him.

“Oh yeah?” he says. “How did I screw up?”

“Did you call to reserve the Vineyard for June first?”

Noel steps into a pair of boxer shorts, nearly losing his balance in the process. “Not yet. But I will. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“We don’t have plenty of time.” I let out a tortured sigh. “Noel, I told you that wedding venues book out a year in advance. I told you that you needed to book it right away. And now it’s too late.”

When his head peeks back out of the shirt he’s thrown on over his head, his lips are turned down. “Are you serious? Someone booked it?”

“I’m serious. We lost it to ...” I pick up the crumpled paper on the nightstand. “Marie Machudo and Albert Swecker.”

“Shit.” He sinks down onto our bed, his head hanging. “I’m so sorry, Talia. I know you had your heart set on getting married there.”

He looks so guilty that I start to feel guilty. Yes, I did want to get married at the Vineyard. But the thing I’m really looking forward to is marrying Noel Kemper. Over the last two years, we have been inseparable. When he got down on one knee and told me that he couldn’t imagine life without me, I felt the same way. It doesn’t matter where we get married, only that we’re getting married.

That said . . .

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I have a feeling that the Vineyard is going to get an unexpected cancellation for June first ...”

I hold up my phone, where the website with the Vineyard’s phone number is on the screen. I am not above playing dirty to get my dream wedding location.

Noel’s mouth drops out. “Hang on ...”

“What?”

“Are you ...” He squints at me. “Are you saying that you’re going to call the Vineyard and pretend to be Marie Machudo to cancel their reservation?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, it’s your fault,” I say defensively. “ You screwed up and didn’t make the reservation.”

“So you’re going to lie to fix it?”

“Maybe I am.” I lift my chin, meeting his eyes. “Is that really so wrong?”

“Lying is objectively wrong, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t care then.”

I turn my attention back to my phone. I start to press the button that will make the call to the Vineyard, but before I can, Noel reaches over and snatches the phone right out of my hand.

“Hey!” I cry. “Give that back.”

“Nuh uh.” He stands up, holding it out of reach. He is, frustratingly, about eight inches taller than I am. “I’m not going to let you do this.”

“Why not?”

“Because”—he looks me straight in the eyes—“you are an absolutely horrendous actor. You will blow our cover in like five seconds.”

“I won’t . . .”

“You will,” he insists. “Let me call. I’ll be Albert. I’m a much better liar than you are.”

That impish smile is playing on his lips, which annoyed me the first time I saw it, but later it became one of the things that made me fall in love with him. I could look at that smile all day long. Except ...

I suddenly get an uneasy feeling in my chest as my world goes on tilt. Something about this interaction feels “off,” although it’s hard to explain how. It’s almost like ... it’s not really happening. Like I’m replaying a reel in my brain, and if I reached out to touch Noel, he’d disappear into thin air.

But that’s ridiculous. Noel is real, obviously .

I’m just upset about losing my dream venue. But that’s about to be remedied. Noel will call, and he will pretend to be Albert Swecker, and he will secure our reservation at the Vineyard for our wedding.

He is, as he pointed out, a very good liar.

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate that.”

He grins wider as he drops the phone and pulls me closer to him. His lips are close enough that I can feel the heat of his breath. He leans in to kiss me, but before his lips can touch mine, I wake up in a prison cell.

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Present Day

It's time for my visit with Clarence Bowman.

There's a routine for visitors, and it's not pleasant. Good thing I don't have many visitors. Even my best friend, Kinsey, has come only a handful of times. My parents might have visited, but they are both long gone. When I was a teenager, my father died of a heart attack in the bed of another woman, an unfortunate occurrence that pretty much scarred me for life. My mother went later, after such a prolonged and agonizing battle with cancer that the first thing I did after she was buried was sign an advanced directive to ensure that I wouldn't end up the way she did. But it looks like my death will be quicker than expected. Well, it will if Bowman doesn't have good news today.

If Noel were alive, he would have come to visit me every chance he got—the irony, of course, being that if he were alive, I wouldn't be here in the first place.

I can't leave my cell without being shackled, so that is a process I go through before meeting with Bowman. In preparation for Rhea entering my cell, I have to stand against the wall with my hands planted on the chipping paint. Then she comes in and shackles both my wrists and ankles. After that's done, I tense up, waiting for the pat-down.

“Don't worry,” Rhea says in a voice that is not unkind. “I'll be done quickly.”

Sometimes the pat-downs are agonizing, especially when a male guard is doing it. But as promised, Rhea is quick about it.

When Rhea is sufficiently satisfied that I am not packing heat in my tan prison jumpsuit, she escorts me to the area where Bowman is waiting for me with news on my appeal. As we walk, I once again hear that distant beeping sound from somewhere within the prison walls, and the sound gets louder until it suddenly dies down again. The silence is even worse, though, and with nothing to distract me from my thoughts, my stomach flip-flops. Is it possible that there's good news waiting for me?

"How did Bowman look?" I ask Rhea.

She's thoughtful for a moment. "He looked the same as always. Wearing a nice suit. Losing his hair a bit."

"Was he smiling?"

She doesn't hesitate this time. "No."

Well, great.

Rhea leads me into the visiting area, which consists of a series of booths with glass partitions to separate me from anyone coming to visit. On either side of the glass is a stool and a bright-red phone so that I can communicate with my visitor without having to breathe the same air.

Thank God the prison has these shackles and glass to protect the rest of the world from me.

Clarence Bowman is seated in the booth nearest to the door. As Rhea warned me, he is wearing a nice suit. And his hairline is indeed receding.

And also, he is most definitely not smiling.

I sit down across from Bowman, and even when he's looking right at me, his lips don't twitch. I'm not sure I want to hear what he has to say anymore, but I may as well get this over with. My right hand trembles slightly as I reach for the phone on my side of the glass, and he does the same on his side.

"Hi," I say.

"Hello, Talia."

"So?" My voice wavers on the syllable. "What's the verdict?"

"The appeal was denied." He pauses. "I'm so sorry."

How could this be? Even though I've been expecting it, the news is like a punch in the gut. With less than two weeks left until my execution, my appeal has failed.

"I don't understand." My eyes fill with tears, and at this moment, I would give absolutely anything to have my husband here to hold me and comfort me. "I would never have killed Noel. How could anyone think I would do that?"

Bowman has nothing to say to that. Despite my persistent claims of innocence, he thinks I'm guilty. I can see it all over his face.

"I have an alibi," I remind him. "I was with Kinsey."

"That's true," he concedes, "but the prosecutor convinced the jury that you set up the explosion to happen in advance. And the appeals judge agreed."

"Can't we try again? Don't I get unlimited appeals on a death sentence?"

Bowman considers my request for only a moment. "We can try if you want, Talia.

But at this point, I would say there's no hope." He pauses meaningfully. "Sometimes it's better to let go than to drag it out."

Drag it out? The man is talking about my life , for God's sake!

But then again, what life do I have to go back to? I've drained my savings in my failed attempt to avoid a death sentence. My husband—the love of my life—is dead.

"What would you like me to do, Talia?" Bowman asks me.

"You can stop." My voice is choked as I speak into the red phone. "No more appeals."

"You're doing the right thing," my lawyer says in a gentle voice. "I've seen this many times before, and you have to know when to let go."

He starts talking about some details and legal jargon, and I tune him out. I've been scared that my appeal will be rejected, and now that it's happened, all I feel is numb.

I'm going to die. In less than two weeks, I will be executed by the state.

When we hang up, Rhea approaches to take me back to my secluded cell. She puts out her hand to steady me as I rise from the stool with my shackled ankles. I start to turn away, but just before I do, something catches my eye.

It's a man on the other side of the glass, speaking to another inmate.

He's wearing a dark suit—a black jacket paired with a black dress shirt. His dark hair is neatly combed, and his face is clean shaven. As Rhea leads me out of the room, I can just barely make out the bump on the bridge of his nose, as if it had once been broken.

That man. He looks so much like ...

“Rhea,” I gasp. “That man over there, talking to the redhead. Who is that?”

Rhea ignores me. “Come on. Time to go.”

“But ... wait! Just one second. Who is—”

“Time to go , Kemper.”

I look back one last time at the man in the dark suit. He’s talking to the redheaded inmate, his attention focused on her, but then, just as Rhea is pulling me from the room, he raises his eyes to meet mine.

Oh my God.

It’s Noel .

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Present Day

Rhea.” My voice is hoarse. Even though my throat has been hurting for the last several weeks, it feels even worse right now. I can barely even get any words out, but I still push forward. “Can you please stop? I need to ...”

Rhea finally pauses for a moment, turning to look at me with barely disguised annoyance. “What is it, Kemper?”

“That man—the one visiting that other inmate—he’s ...” I swallow, trying to moisten my sore throat. “I think he’s my ...”

How am I supposed to say this? I’m pretty sure that man in the visiting area is my dead husband.

Yes, I recognize how that would sound.

Rhea sighs heavily. “Spit it out or start moving.”

“He looked like my husband.”

That gives her a moment of pause. Her somewhat scruffy eyebrows inch upward. “Your husband that you murdered ?”

“No,” I say quickly. “I ... I mean, yes, that husband. But I didn’t murder him.”

She smirks at my assertion.

“He looks a lot like Noel.” I shuffle my shackled feet. “A lot like Noel.”

“But your husband is dead,” she points out. “And he didn’t have an identical twin, did he?”

He did not.

“Who was that man?” I press her.

“Hell if I know.” Rhea grabs my arm, clearly weary of this conversation. “Come on. Let’s get you back to your cell.”

As far as Rhea is concerned, the matter is concluded. But I keep thinking about that man all the way back to my cell, and I don’t stop thinking about him, even when I fall asleep that night on my crappy mattress with Pat the Rat staring at me through the darkness.

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Before

I ' ve had three glasses of wine tonight, and I'm starting to feel it.

This is the first party Noel and I have thrown in close to a year. After he finished his postdoc, he got a job at a pharmaceutical company, and even though he warned me that the workload would be more than we were used to, it's been rough.

But Noel says it's worth it. Not just because of the money, but because he's working on a medication that's really important. Not just one that prevents male-pattern baldness, he'd said, although I personally think those medications are important too. (Thankfully, Noel—now in his early thirties—doesn't need them yet.)

Anyway, it's nice to have friends over at our house. It's a Saturday night, and we're young and not yet burdened with children (although Noel has been talking about the latter more and more lately). Why not spend an evening making slightly tipsy conversation with friends and strangers?

In fact, I'm going to have another drink.

I'm reaching for the bottle of rosé that's on the table I set up with the wineglasses when my good friend Kinsey joins me and reaches for her own glass. She and I used to have lunch together at least once a week, but somehow we've gotten out of the habit. Noel isn't the only one who's been busy lately.

"Having fun?" Kinsey asks me.

“Oh yes.” I tip the wine bottle to fill the glass nearly to the brim. “Thank you for coming.”

“You’re slurring, Talia,” she giggles.

“No, I’m not!”

“You totally are.”

Am I? Oh well. The nice thing about throwing a party at your own house is you don’t have to worry about driving home.

“So.” Kinsey seizes the bottle of rosé and pours her own glass. I don’t know how many she has had, but she looks very sober. “How is your handsome husband?”

I laugh. “Busy.”

She looks pointedly at the glass of rose-tinted wine in my hand. “I guess you’re not knocked up yet like everyone else we know.”

“Oh, no.” I take a gulp of wine to emphasize the point. “Noel wants to start trying soon ... he talks about it way too much. But he barely makes it home for dinner more than a couple of times a week. I don’t want to be a single parent.”

“Wow.” Kinsey’s eyebrows shoot up. “That sounds terrible. Hopefully, it’ll calm down soon.”

As we discuss Noel, it occurs to me that I haven’t seen my husband in a while. We got separated after a few of my work friends drew me into a conversation, and he started to look bored and wandered away. And that was ... an hour ago? Where could he have gone?

“Excuse me,” I say to Kinsey. “I need to find Noel.”

My friend shoots me a concerned look, but she steps away to allow me to navigate the living room, checking to see if I missed Noel talking to somebody in a corner somewhere. But he’s not in the living room or the dining room, as it turns out. He’s not in the kitchen, either, which smells a bit like marijuana, although Noel wouldn’t have noticed that due to his lack of smell. I even knock on the bathroom door, but the voice that comes from within is female.

Where did my husband go?

Before checking upstairs, I open the kitchen door, which leads to our small backyard. The weather is quite nippy this evening, and I don’t expect anyone to be out here. The entire yard is lit only by the small bulb mounted over the back door, which makes it hard to see much. If I’d looked quickly, I might have missed Noel at the far end of the yard, standing just a little bit too close to a woman I don’t recognize.

What the hell is going on here?

Even though it’s freezing and all I’ve got on is a sleeveless blouse, I march out into the yard to intercept whatever is going on between my husband and this young woman. Strangely enough, even though there’s snow dotting the ground, I don’t feel the slightest bit cold. It’s the oddest sensation to walk out into the frigid night air yet not even so much as shiver.

Once again, I get that feeling of vertigo, where my world goes on tilt. This isn’t real, a voice in the back of my head insists.

But I ignore the voice, because this is very clearly real. I can see with my own eyes that my husband is with another woman, all alone in our backyard. They’re not touching, although who knows what would have been going on if I’d emerged from

the house a minute later.

Noel raises a hand in greeting. “Hey, Talia.”

I ignore him completely and focus my attention on the mystery woman. “Who are you?” I snap at her. Up close, she is even prettier than she looked from across the yard. “I didn’t invite you.”

“I’m Arielle,” she says. “Chet invited me.”

Chet? Who the hell is Chet? We don’t know a Chet.

“Noel here keeps trying to convince me that the police are going to come soon to break up the party.” Arielle smacks my husband playfully in the arm. “You are so bad .”

I want to reach out and strangle her with my bare hands. I want to choke her until she dies, and then bury her body in the backyard. The fact that Noel is standing right here and wouldn’t go along with it is the only thing preventing me from doing it.

“Get out,” I say to Arielle.

She laughs, assuming I’m joking, although by the way Noel’s eyes widen, it’s clear he realizes it’s not a joke.

“I’m serious.” My gaze is laser focused on this girl who has been hitting on my husband. “This is my house, and I want you to get out right now.”

She blinks a few times, the smile dropping off her face. “But ... I came with Chet ... I don’t have a ride back.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Talía ...,” Noel says in a low voice.

“Get. Out. Of. My. House.” I enunciate every syllable, speaking the words around clenched teeth. “If you don’t get out right now, I really am going to call the police. It won’t just be a silly joke my husband is telling you.”

“Talía,” Noel says again in that same warning voice. He turns his attention back to Arielle, an apologetic expression on his face. “You don’t have to leave. This is—”

“No.” Arielle is backing away now. “I ... uh, I think I’ll go. If Chet can’t take me, I’ll get an Uber.”

“Good for you,” I mutter.

Arielle quickly makes her way across the backyard, stumbling awkwardly in her strappy heels. It’s only after she’s disappeared back inside the house that I turn to Noel and realize he’s gawking at me.

“What the hell was that, Talía?”

He thinks that I overreacted, although he didn’t seem to notice the way she was looking at him. She wanted him. She was ready to pounce, and she would’ve done it if I hadn’t interrupted them.

Or maybe he did notice. And he liked it.

“You know,” he says, “Chet is never going to let me hear the end of it at work tomorrow.”

Oh. I guess Chet isn't a made-up person. "She was flirting with you. And the two of you were alone together out here."

"So?"

"So?" I throw up my hands. "So she wanted you."

"She didn't 'want' me."

"Of course she did!" I shake my head. "You're really hot."

The tiniest of smiles breaks through his grim expression. "Well, thanks. But even if that's true, it's not like anything was going to happen." He takes a step toward me. "I'd never cheat on you, Talia. You know that."

I do know that. I trust Noel. I wouldn't have married him if I didn't trust him. But when I saw him with that other woman, I just ... I lost it.

"I love you, Talia." His brows knit together. "You're the most important person in the world to me, and I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I will always be faithful to you."

"You swear?"

"On my life." He takes another step closer to me. "And you know it's true, because if I ever did cheat on you, you'd probably kill me."

I laugh at his joke, except ... well, is it a joke? Noel says he loves me, but I love him just as much. I love him so much that the thought of him ever being unfaithful to me is unbearable . If he ever did something like that ...

"Let's go back inside." Noel throws his arm around my shoulders. "You look like

you're freezing."

Even though I don't feel the cold, I crave the warmth of his body. I close my eyes, waiting for him to press his lips against mine. But he doesn't.

"Open your eyes, Talia," he whispers in my ear, his breath tickling my neck.

"What?"

"Open your eyes."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

Present Day

My eyes fly open.

I was dreaming about Noel again. The same way I have almost every night recently. The dreams seem so real. So real that I feel like I could lean forward and kiss my husband, but every time I try to, I wake up before it happens.

I never get to kiss him—I always wake up first. Every. Single. Time.

Two days ago, I was certain that I saw Noel visiting with that other inmate. That man looked so much like my husband, even down to the broken nose. It had to be him.

Except how could it be? He's dead. Whether I killed him or not might be a matter of debate, but he is most definitely dead—nobody is arguing that point. I saw his dead body. The only place he is still alive is in my dreams, but that was no dream.

Although . . .

After the explosion, I saw the paramedics wheeling Noel's body out of our incinerated home. But of course, there was a sheet covering him, from head to toe. They wouldn't let me look—they said it was better if I didn't see him like that.

So the fact is, I never actually saw Noel's body and confirmed that it was him. The police told me they used DNA to positively identify his scorched remains, but all I have to go on is what they told me. What if the DNA evidence was wrong?

What if it wasn't Noel who burned to death in that house?

Yes, this all seems incredibly unlikely. If it wasn't Noel who died that night, who was it? Some random burglar who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? That still wouldn't explain the DNA match. And it wouldn't explain why Noel vanished without a trace.

The most likely explanation is the most obvious: I've been missing my husband so desperately that I imagined that stranger was him.

Before

Noel is late getting home again.

I sit at the kitchen table, checking my watch as I drum my fingers against the table. It's nearly nine o'clock, and he told me that tonight he would definitely be home by seven. Seven came and went, along with several apologetic text messages. I'm so sorry. I'll be home earlier tomorrow night for sure. I promise.

Why am I even surprised? These days, it's more surprising when he actually makes it home when dinner is first coming out of the oven. I'm getting sick of his apologies—sick of keeping our dinner warm in the oven until whatever time he decides to come home.

Finally, at ten minutes after nine, the lock turns in our front door. I get to my feet and remove the chicken I made from the oven. It was delicious and juicy at seven, although it has surely dried out over the last two hours. Noel will insist it's great, though. He always does.

"I'm so sorry, Talia." Those are his first words as he bursts into the kitchen, wearing his usual work outfit of a wrinkled dress shirt, no tie, and khaki pants. "One of the tests we were doing ran long. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't."

"Uh-huh." I toss my ruined chicken on the kitchen table, even though what I really want to do is throw it at his head. "Well, I know your work is very important."

"You're important," he insists. "And we're almost at the finish line. I swear."

“Uh-huh.”

“After this is done,” he says, “we are going to take a vacation. Maybe the Bahamas or Hawaii. Someplace warm with beaches and no phones at all.”

His words defuse my anger a bit. That does sound like a very nice vacation. Although a vacation where we never left our room for two weeks would also be nice.

And maybe we can get pregnant on the dream vacation. I couldn’t have imagined it five or six years ago, but I’m finally ready to start a family. If Noel would only cut back his hours a little, he’d be a great dad. A baby might be the motivation he needs to spend more time with his family.

He crosses the room to where I’m standing. He gently tugs off my oven mitts and puts his arms around me. He leans in to kiss me, and I almost let him, but then at the last second, I stiffen under his embrace. I turn away so that his lips only brush the top of my forehead.

“Do you want to eat?” I say in a voice that sounds like it isn’t my own.

“Yes,” he says, “but first, let me jump in the shower. I feel like I’m covered in chemicals. It’ll be five minutes. I promise.”

“And maybe tonight,” I add, “you and I can ... you know ...”

He grimaces, which is the last reaction I would expect from a red-blooded male whose wife just told him he was going to get lucky tonight. “Talia, honey, I’m so beat. I ... I’d probably fall asleep in the middle of it. Rain check?”

I nod slowly. “Rain check.”

I stand frozen in the kitchen as I watch my husband climb the stairs to the second floor of our house. His instinct to take a shower is a good one. Noel has lost his sense of smell, but I haven't, and I am very aware that he reeks of another woman's perfume.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

Present Day

I wake up with a jolt, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I've been dreaming about Noel every night recently, but this is the first dream I've had that took place after I found out that he ... well, you know.

It's not a time I want to think about. I certainly don't want to dream about it. It's bad enough that my days on death row are so miserable—I used to look forward to escaping into my dreams. If those dreams turn into nightmares ...

I sit up on my flimsy mattress, noticing that I am covered in a layer of sweat. It's very uncomfortable, but I have no change of clothes within my cell. So I just need to deal with the discomfort. That annoying beeping sound is also going off somewhere in the prison, which may have been what wrenched me from sleep. There's no end to the torment I have to endure in this place.

On the plus side, at least there isn't a rat in my bed.

“Kemper?”

I lift my head at the sound of the female voice coming from behind the door to my cell. It sounds like Rhea. She must have pulled the night shift.

“Kemper? Are you awake?”

I crawl out of bed and stumble in the direction of the door. “Yes,” I say, although my

voice is even more hoarse than usual. My throat feels painfully parched. I'd sign a confession for an extra glass of water with my meals. "I'm awake."

"I just wanted to tell you," Rhea says in a whisper, like she doesn't want the other guards to hear her, "I looked into that man you were interested in. Found out who he is."

I am suddenly wide awake. I forget all about my sweat-soaked clothes and the rat that is almost certainly scurrying around my cell. "Who is he?"

"He's a chaplain," she says. "His name is Richard Decker. Father Decker."

A chaplain? I suppose that makes sense, especially given the way he was dressed. But it also doesn't make any sense at all. He looked so much like Noel. The fact that he's a chaplain might explain why he was in the prison the other day, but it doesn't explain the similarity in appearance. It doesn't explain the feeling I got when our eyes met.

"Could I see him for a visit?" I ask her.

There's a pause behind the door. "Yes. I can arrange for Father Decker to give you your last rites once they move you to death watch."

Death watch. When there are three days left before my execution, I will be moved to death watch in preparation for the final event. It is not something I am looking forward to.

"My understanding," Rhea says, "is that he has performed last rites before for other death row inmates."

Everything she is telling me strongly indicates that Father Decker is exactly who he

says he is. He is a chaplain who counsels inmates and offers last rites when they are needed. The thought that this man could be my dead husband is almost too ridiculous for words.

Yet, I can't stop thinking that's exactly who he is.

"Please set it up," I croak.

"I'll do that," Rhea says softly. "I think it will give you peace."

I want to look that man in the eyes. When I do, I will know exactly who he is.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

Before

How could I have been so stupid? I've wanted so desperately to trust Noel that I've missed every blatantly obvious sign that he's been cheating on me.

The perfume, for one. After I smelled it that one time, I became attuned to it, and every time he came home, I sniffed him and realized he always smelled like that perfume. It's been a week, and every single time he goes to "work," he comes back stinking of eau de slut.

There's also, of course, his constant absences. And the lack of interest in sex. The first couple of years we were married, we were hot and heavy. And even after that, Noel was always up for it if I was. Always. It's only in the last six months or so, right when his "work schedule" has ramped up, that he has complained about being too tired.

I have spent most of the last week driving myself crazy. I even took a day off from work and parked outside the building where Noel works, determined to follow him, the same way I did with Franklin when I suspected he was cheating on me all those years ago. I had been so furious with Franklin—I was planning to go postal on his beloved car with a Louisville Slugger. But the cute boy with the infectious grin who taught me how to hawk phlegm into a Diet Coke kept me from doing anything rash.

There's nobody like Noel to stop me now, so I spent the day sitting outside his building in my car. He never left once, which made me realize that if he is cheating, it must be with someone he knows from work. Do they do it in an empty lab? A supply closet?

It's five o'clock now, and I'm sitting on our living room sofa. I've got a paperback copy of *The Nantucket Restaurant* by Pamela Kelley in my hand, and even though I was devouring it last week, I haven't managed to read even a sentence since smelling that perfume. Noel has promised he will be home for dinner, and he seemed to really mean it.

As I shift on the sofa, trying to find a comfortable position, something crinkles beneath me—it sounds like a piece of paper. I reach under the cushions, searching for the source, and come up with a small scrap of paper. It's a receipt.

I peer at the fading print on the receipt, from a local jewelry store. The last four digits of our credit card number were used to purchase a fairly expensive necklace. Since the receipt was dated well over a week ago and there are no anniversaries or holidays coming up that he might be holding on to it for, it seems that if it were meant for me, he would have given it to me already. No, I strongly suspect the recipient of this intended gift has already received it.

Maybe she's wearing it right now.

How dare he? Noel never buys me jewelry, and certainly never anything this expensive. Apparently, I'm not worth it. But she is.

This isn't really happening. It can't be. Noel wouldn't cheat on you—this must all be a terrible dream.

A text message pings on my phone. My blood boils—it must be Noel, telling me he's going to be late again. Except, as it turns out, the message is from Kinsey:

Feel like grabbing dinner out tonight? I'm so sick of home cooking.

I don't feel like having a fun night out. I am so furious, it feels like I might explode.

Noel swore he would never cheat on me. He promised on his life. He knows it's something I'm sensitive about, and the fact that he would betray me this way feels unforgivable.

Whoever this other woman is, he is clearly infatuated with her. He loves her more than he's ever loved me—after all, he's never bought me a necklace that costs four figures. He's probably figuring out a way to try to leave me.

I ignore Kinsey's text message and wander into the kitchen. Even though I have zero appetite, I may as well throw something together for dinner. It won't do me any good to starve to death.

I fill a pot with water and put it on the stove. I turn the dial on, but the flame doesn't catch right away. Our stove is a piece of shit and really needs to be replaced, but that's the last thing I want to think about. After all, if Noel and I get divorced, we will have to sell the house. No point in buying new appliances right now.

I wait for the burner to ignite. The odor of gas hits my nostrils, which twitch in response. This seems to happen too much with this stove, but Noel is never bothered by it because he can't smell the gas.

The stench of gas in the kitchen grows stronger. Natural gas is actually odorless, and the smell is added in order to alert people that there's a gas leak. If I came into my kitchen and smelled gas the way I do now, I would know not to use the oven and possibly to call the fire department.

Noel wouldn't know, though.

If I left some food on the stove for him to heat up, he would do it even if the gas odor was stifling. He would have no idea that igniting the stove would result in an explosion that would seriously injure him.

It might even kill him.

Of course, if such a thing were to happen, I couldn't be here. If there were an explosion, I wouldn't want to be anywhere nearby. And of course, I would need an alibi.

Yes, Officer, I was with my friend Kinsey all evening. It was such a terrible tragedy. If only I had been home, I would have smelled the gas. I could have stopped it.

Noel deserves this. I loved him with my entire heart and soul, and what did he do? He betrayed me in the worst possible way.

I take out my phone and type a message to Kinsey:

Let's go out!

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

Present Day

I have been moved to an area adjacent to the execution chamber, which is referred to as the death watch area. It's not any nicer. Much like my previous dwelling, my room is about the size of a parking spot. The mattress is slightly more comfortable, although not much.

We are making preparations for the event. Kinsey brought in an outfit for me to wear so I don't have to die in my prison clothes. Instead, I will die in black slacks and a blue cotton blouse—so much better.

I will also get to decide what I want for my final meal. It's not as exciting as all that, though. I have been informed that there is a price limit of forty dollars, so it's not like I can get an omakase experience for my final meal.

And then, of course, I will have my visit with Father Decker.

Ever since I laid eyes on that chaplain, my dreams about Noel have been growing darker. The two of us had so many happy times together, but at the end ... No, the end wasn't so good. I did things that I regret.

Terrible things.

But if he's alive ... If, somehow, that gas explosion did not kill him, and he's still here and breathing ...

It's possible. I never saw his dead body. He could be alive.

I want it so badly it hurts.

On the day before my execution, Rhea fetches me from my cell in death watch. We go through the same rigmarole of shackling my arms and legs, then patting me down. I barely even notice it. All I can think about is Noel.

I'm going to see him.

"You're shaking," Rhea notes as she leads me to the visiting area.

"Yes . . ."

"It will be good for you to meet with the chaplain," she says. "You're almost at the end now."

Yes. I am almost at the end. Short of a miracle, I will not avoid execution.

The only thing that could stop it is if my husband is still alive, because you can't be executed for murdering someone who is still alive.

I follow Rhea to the visiting area. She's right—I'm shaking like a leaf, and when we get close, I nearly trip over my own feet. It's entirely possible that this man is just an ordinary prison chaplain. In fact, that is the most likely scenario.

We reach the visiting area, and I am the only one here. Much like the yard, they have cleared it for me to be alone. There is only one man waiting on the other side of the glass. He is here to give me my last rites.

Slowly, I walk toward the man dressed in black with the white stripe on his collar.

Before

While my house slowly fills with gas, Kinsey and I are sitting together at a Korean barbecue restaurant.

Before I left, I sent a text message to Noel, telling him that I was going out with my friend, but I left food on the stove for him to heat up—just some spaghetti and meatballs left over from the night before. I put it in a pot and covered the lid, making it as easy as possible for him. All he has to do is light the stove.

He hasn't responded to my text message. He's probably running late as usual. He'll probably saunter in at around eight, and the first thing he'll do is shower off the smell of her perfume, but after that, he'll go right for the stove because having sex with his mistress works up an appetite, I'm sure.

I'll have to stay out until at least nine o'clock. Or until the police call me to tell me what's happened.

"You seem distracted, Talia," Kinsey says. "Is everything okay?"

Distracted is an understatement. I stare down at the flame of the barbecue pit between us, wishing we had eaten anywhere else. All I can think about are the flames that will be coming out of my stove. The ones that will torch my cheating husband alive.

"I'm fine," I say.

I'm not fine. Why did he do this? How could he do this to me?

I loved him so much. I wanted to spend my life with him. I wanted us to have a family together. Yes, it's been hard to deal with his work schedule, but that is something I can understand. But his betrayal is something I can never forgive.

My phone buzzes from where I left it in my purse. It's probably Noel, telling me he's going to be late. I don't reach for my phone. It would be rude, since I'm having dinner with my friend, and if I have to stay out until ten, Kinsey will be up for it.

I will have the perfect alibi.

"How is Noel doing?" Kinsey asks.

Noel is the last thing I want to talk about right now. "Fine. Great."

She frowns. "Seriously, are you okay?"

I've opened my mouth, ready to tell her to mind her own damn business, when we get interrupted by an unfamiliar voice. "Talia? Is that Talia Kemper?"

I rotate my head around. There's a woman in her seventies standing over me, wearing a pink blouse and woven dress pants. Her white hair is cropped close to her head, and she's got on a pair of huge tortoiseshell glasses with a beaded chain hanging from them.

"Can I help you?" I ask the unfamiliar woman.

The elderly woman beams at me. "My name is Lisbeth Sharp. We haven't met before, but I recently came aboard the project that your husband is working on. I've been a chemist for forty years, so I was hoping to lend my expertise."

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry ... he hasn't mentioned you."

She laughs and waves a hand. “Maybe not, but he talks about you all the time. He’s always so anxious to get out of the lab to get home to you. I recognized you right away from the photo he keeps tacked in his workspace.”

As the woman babbles on about their project, I become aware of something that is making my stomach sink.

She reeks of the same perfume that’s been clinging to Noel when he comes home.

“Anyway,” she says, “my husband is waiting for me, so I won’t bother you. I’m sorry we’ve been keeping Noel from you so much lately. But things are wrapping up soon, so I promise, you’ll get him back. In fact, things went so well today that I insisted he go home early.”

Lisbeth says her goodbye and limps across the dining room to an adorable elderly man. He gets to his feet and kisses her when she approaches him. They look the way that I thought Noel and I would look someday.

I have made a terrible mistake.

“Talia?” Kinsey says. “You look really pale ...”

I don’t even answer her. I fumble around in my purse until my fingers close around my phone. I pull it out, and sure enough, there’s a message from Noel on the screen. It came about twenty minutes ago.

On my way home. Sorry to miss you, but thanks for leaving me some food. Have fun with Kinsey!

And then a second message:

I love you.

Oh God. I have to stop Noel from turning on that burner. I can't let that happen. Kinsey is asking me if I'm okay, but I ignore her as I click on my husband's name. He can't possibly be home yet. I can stop this before anything happens.

But the call goes right to voicemail.

I try again, but the same thing happens. Did he turn off his phone? Sometimes he does that when he wants to focus.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I imagine Noel walking into our gas-filled house. Maybe he'll take a shower first, but maybe he won't. Maybe he'll go right for the stove and turn it on. And then ...

Or maybe it's already happened. Maybe that's why his phone is going to voicemail.

No, I can't think that way. Noel can't be dead. He can't .

"I'm sorry, Kinsey." I shove my phone back into my purse and practically leap out of my seat. "I have to go."

My friend is calling my name, but I ignore her. I've got to get home before my husband does. If I don't, Noel is going to die, and it will be all my fault.

Present Day

Father Decker is wearing the same kind of black jacket and black dress shirt that he had on the other day, when he was visiting with another inmate. But this time, I clearly see the white stripe on his collar associated with his status. Again, his hair is clipped short and he is clean shaven, unlike the way he was the first time we met.

And yes, I am 100 percent sure that this man is my husband.

He says his name is Father Richard Decker, but now that I am sitting across from him, even with a pane of glass separating us, it is clear to me who he is. He has the same face, the same bump on his nose from when he broke it during an illegal tackle in peewee football, and most of all, he has the same eyes.

When you look into the eyes of the love of your life, you know it.

I can't stop staring at him as my entire body goes cold. I've been dreaming of this man every night, but this is real. He is really here in front of me, after I thought he was gone forever. I want to reach through the glass and throw my arms around him. I want that kiss that I've been aching for in my dreams every night.

How is it possible he's here? He's supposed to be dead .

"Noel," I breathe, although my voice is so soft that he doesn't hear me.

"Talía, is it?" the chaplain says to me. "My name is Father Decker. I was told you'd like me to give you your last rites?"

His voice throws me. That's not Noel's voice. It's deeper, almost like the voice of an older man in his fifties or sixties. But then again, Noel was always good at faking it. That's how he managed to get our wedding at the Vineyard—by pretending to be Albert Swecker.

“Noel,” I say, louder this time. “I know it's you.”

He smiles kindly at me, which only cements my certainty of his identity. “Father Decker,” he corrects me.

Why is he doing this? Why is he pretending to be a chaplain when we both know very well who he is? Is this his revenge for ...

Well, for what I did.

“Noel,” I say urgently. Our visiting time is limited, and I have to get this out. “They're going to execute me. By lethal injection. Tomorrow. ”

“Yes,” he says, “and now I will give you your last rites.”

“You don't understand!” Tears spring to my eyes. “They're going to execute me for killing you . But you're alive. You have to tell them, Noel. If you don't, they're going to kill me!”

Father Decker, who is actually Noel, doesn't seem to know what to make of this. Instead, he plows forward, his hands touching the glass partition between us since he can't touch me. “Loving and merciful God,” he begins, “we entrust our sister to your mercy ...”

“Noel!” I cry, loud enough that Rhea raises her eyes. “ Stop talking. You have to listen to me. You have to tell them the truth. I didn't kill you!”

“Welcome her now into paradise,” he is saying, “where there will be no more sorrow, no more weeping or pain ...”

“Please!” The tears are now rolling down my cheeks. I couldn’t stop them if I wanted to. “I don’t know why you’re pretending not to know me, but I know it’s you! You’re the only one who can stop this from happening!”

“May Almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and the life to come,” he continues. “May He open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy.”

“I don’t want everlasting joy!” I cry. “I just want to get out of here! I want to go home ... with you!”

“Kemper,” Rhea says in a low voice, indicating that I have crossed a line.

The man across from me has stopped talking. Has he finished the last rites? If he has, that means he will be leaving. My last chance for redemption will walk out the door, and tomorrow, I will be put to death.

“Noel.” I put my hands together in an act of prayer or pleading—maybe a little of both. “Please help me. Please. I love you.”

I expect the man to stand up from his stool, fed up with my antics. Nothing I have said has swayed him, but then something changes in his eyes. He leans forward, and his gaze locks with mine.

“I love you so much, Talia,” he says in a voice that now sounds like his own. “I ...”

“Visiting time is over!” Rhea barks. “Let’s get going, Kemper.”

“No!”

But the light has gone out in Noel’s eyes. He has gotten off his stool, and now he is walking away, without even a final glance in my direction. It was him, like I suspected, but he has no interest in helping me get free. He knows what I tried to do to him, and this is my punishment.

“That was my husband!” I tell Rhea as she helps me to my feet. “He admitted it! He’s still alive!”

“Uh-huh . . .”

“It’s him,” I insist. “I told everyone that I didn’t kill him. He’s still alive! He’s pretending to be a chaplain.”

Rhea gives me a pitying look. She doesn’t believe me, and it’s clear that nobody else will either. Noel has fooled everybody into thinking he is dead, and if nothing happens in the next twenty-four hours, I will be the one who is dead.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:17 pm

Present Day

Today is my execution day.

The electric chair is rarely used anymore—most deaths are done by lethal injection, as it is felt to be the most humane option. Bowman explained to me that the protocol in this state calls for the injection of three drugs. First midazolam, a sedative. Then vecuronium bromide, which will paralyze my muscles. And last, potassium chloride, which will stop my heart from beating.

It's supposed to be more humane, but I have heard that, in reality, the protocol is akin to torture. Even after the sedative enters my bloodstream, I will still be awake. And then, after the second injection, I won't be able to move or speak as my heart beats erratically and the drugs work to kill me. It could last as long as fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes of torture.

I have showered this morning—a rare treat—and now I am dressed in the outfit Kinsey brought for me. It's the first thing I have worn besides my prison uniform in a long time, and it's nice to feel like a human being for a couple of hours before I die.

As for the last meal, there was a mix-up and it didn't get delivered. Instead, my last meal was gray hamburger meat and waterlogged carrots.

As I wait in my cell, all I can think about is the chaplain I met with yesterday. It was Noel. He all but admitted it. He knows that I am going to be put to death today, and he did nothing to stop it. He's going to let me die as a punishment for what I did.

I have so many regrets. I shouldn't have allowed my jealousy to get the better of me. I could say that my father's death in the arms of another woman did a number on me, but that would be avoiding taking responsibility for my actions. I turned on the gas in our house. I knew that Noel wouldn't be able to smell it, and I gave him instructions to turn on the oven, expecting that the resulting blast would kill him.

It was a terrible thing to do. Even if he had been cheating on me—which he wasn't—I should not have done it. I have woken up every night this week from nightmares where I relived that final day. I see myself making all the same mistakes, and I am helpless to stop it from happening.

Rhea comes to my cell, which means it's time. I'm glad it's her. It's nice to see a familiar face before I die.

"You look nice," she tells me.

"Thank you."

"Your hair is a bit messy, though," she notes. "Would you like me to brush it for you?"

It's such a kind gesture. I nod, and Rhea picks up the brush that Kinsey brought for me with my clothes the other day. She runs it gently through my hair, smoothing out the tangles. My hair is so horribly tangled that it almost hurts when she works through the knots, but I let her do it. I don't want my hair to be tangled when I die.

"There." Rhea puts down the brush, a look of satisfaction on her face. "Much better."

"Thank you."

"Are you ready then?"

In response, I rise to my feet. She shackles me one last time, and I follow her into the execution room, which is adjacent to my cell. That's the benefit of being on death watch—there's not far to go when it's time.

The execution room is small, although larger than my cell. There is a stretcher in the middle of the room, and a slim middle-aged man in scrubs is standing in front of it. Rhea helps me onto the stretcher, and they undo my handcuffs, instead strapping me down to the stretcher.

I was told that the execution room always has a phone in it, in case there is a last-minute reprieve. I don't see a phone in the room, but it doesn't matter. There will be no reprieve for me.

"Hello, Talia," the slim man in scrubs says to me. He must be the executioner, although his voice reminds me a lot of my lawyer's.

"Hi," I squeak out.

"My name is Albert," he says. It's the same name as the man whose wedding venue I stole all those years ago. "I'm going to insert an IV into your arm."

I watch as the first needle pierces the skin of my arm. I barely feel it, though. My heart is beating so fast that it hurts. I suppose that will stop soon and forever.

"Just relax," Albert tells me. "This will all be over soon."

Yes, it will.

"I'm going to inject the sedative now, Talia," he says.

He doesn't ask permission, since it's not like I'm allowed to refuse. I watch the clear

liquid being injected into the IV, and almost instantly, a deep fatigue comes over me. I feel my eyes start to drift shut.

“I didn’t do it, you know,” I say, as if this man cares even the tiniest bit.

Albert is busy drawing up another syringe. “Hmm?”

“I didn’t do it.” My voice slurs on the words. “I didn’t kill my husband. I’m innocent.”

Albert is quiet for a moment, his fingers frozen on the syringe that will paralyze my muscles. He exchanges looks with Rhea and then lets out a deep sigh.

“Yes,” he says, “we know.”

What?

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Before

During my drive home, I call Noel about twenty times. I have left five increasingly panicked voicemails about the gas leak. “Call the fire department,” I said in each message. “Don’t touch the stove!”

The only problem is that he might never check his phone.

I can’t believe I thought he would cheat on me. He has been nothing but faithful the whole time we’ve been together—nearly ten years now. He loves me. And now there’s a chance he could be dead, and it would be entirely my fault.

No. I won’t let that happen. I’m going to get home in time and stop him from being harmed by my stupid, stupid mistake.

If he’s dead . . . or horribly burned . . .

I push my foot against the gas, going as fast as I dare. Getting pulled over by a police officer would slow me down, and I might not make it in time. I have to make it in time.

Except Lisbeth told me Noel had already left work, which means he must be home by now. Even if he took a five-minute shower, he would be done by now.

Please, Noel. Please don’t turn on the stove ...

When I am about five minutes away from the house, a fire truck swerves past me, its

lights flashing. Wherever it's going, it's in a great hurry to get there. And it's heading in the direction of my house.

I push my foot more firmly against the gas pedal.

Just as I feel like I'm about to lose my mind, a call pops up on the display on my dashboard. I can hardly believe it when I see Noel's name. Is it really him calling me? Or did somebody just find his phone in the debris of the explosion? I press the green button to take the call.

"Talía?"

It's Noel's voice. I can't stop myself from bursting into tears. They stream down my face, blurring my vision. "Noel!" I cry. "Are you okay? I was so worried!"

"I'm fine," he says, sounding absolutely and completely fine. "I turned off my phone when I was at work, and I just got all your messages."

"Don't turn on the stove!"

"I won't!" He laughs. "Actually, I stopped off to get fast food on the way back. I didn't feel like spaghetti and meatballs, so there was no reason to turn on the stove. But I called the fire department, and they're going to check things out."

So that's why the fire truck was headed to my house. Thank God .

"Anyway," Noel says, "enjoy your girls' night out with Kinsey. I'm handling everything, okay?"

"Okay . . ."

“And when you get home,” he adds, “I’ve got something for you that I’ll give you as soon as we can get back into the house. I spent a little too much on a necklace for you, but I never buy you jewelry, and I want to show you how much you mean to me. I hope you’re not mad that I spent so much.”

The necklace was for me. Of course it was.

I start to tell him that I am absolutely not mad, and that I can’t wait to see him, and also that I love him. And the first thing I’ll do when I get there is I’m going to wrap my arms around him and give him a kiss that I feel like I’ve been wanting to give him for so long now.

But my eyes are so blurry from crying that I don’t notice the stop sign partially concealed by an overgrown tree, and before I can get out the words to tell him I’ll be home soon, a Mack truck going much too fast slams into my car. For a split second, I hear crunching metal and shattering glass, and then everything goes black.

Present Day

“We’re doing the right thing,” a male voice is saying. “I know it’s hard, but like I’ve said, you have to know when to let go.”

The voice is coming from right above me. It sounds like Clarence Bowman, my lawyer, but that wouldn’t make sense. My eyes drifted shut after Albert injected the sedative, and when I now try to open them, they won’t open on my command. Is that because of the vecuronium bromide?

The beeping has also become much louder. It always sounded distant when I heard it in the past, but now it feels like the source is right in the room with me. Directly above my head.

Beep, beep, beep, beep . . .

“It’s too soon.” It’s Noel’s voice, suddenly in the room with me as well. Why is he here? Chaplains aren’t allowed in the room during executions. “It’s only been a month. She ... she still might wake up. It’s possible, isn’t it, Dr. Bowman?”

“I’m sorry, but the chances are remote.” It’s the voice of my lawyer again, Clarence Bowman, but why did Noel call him Dr. Bowman? “She hasn’t made any attempts to breathe on her own since the accident. The scans show her brain is more blood than brain. At this point, I would say there’s no hope of her ever waking up.”

Not making any attempts to breathe on my own? I try to open my mouth to ask what he’s talking about, but then I realize there’s a tube down my throat. I try to swallow,

but the pain is intense. My throat feels like it's on fire. And that beeping is relentless . How can anyone stand it?

"You can't do this." It's Noel again, his voice choked up. "You've got to give her more time ..."

"I'm sorry." Bowman— Dr. Bowman—sounds genuinely sad. "Your wife has an advanced directive, though. She didn't want to be kept alive this way, and we have to honor her wishes. We've waited as long as we can. We even had Father Decker come in yesterday to give her last rites."

" No. " I become aware of the sensation of Noel's hand gripping mine. I try to squeeze him back, to let him know I'm still in here, but I can't. I can only lie there, letting the machines push air into my lungs. "Please, no. Please don't do this, Dr. Bowman. Not now ..."

"Rhea washed her up and brushed her hair this morning," Dr. Bowman says in a gentle voice. "Now she's going to inject a sedative in her IV, and then we'll turn off the ventilator. She'll go quickly after that."

"Don't worry." It's Rhea's voice now, speaking in that same gentle tone. "It will be quick and she won't feel any pain. I promise."

Noel squeezes my hand tighter. I don't know if I've ever heard him cry before, but the sound is unmistakable. "Wake up, Talia," he pleads with me. "Please wake up. I love you so much."

"She knows you love her," Rhea tells him. "I'm sure she knows. And now she's moving on to a happier place. This will release her."

Noel doesn't reply. He's still crying.

“Okay then,” Dr. Bowman says. “I’m turning off the ventilator now.”

Noel clings to my hand as the last whoosh of air is pushed into my lungs. And then the sounds around me fade out slowly, like a song that is coming to an end.

Learn to drive, you lunatic!”

A horn blares loudly as I blow through the stop sign. My head is spinning, and I wipe tears from my eyes. I need to get myself under control. That damn Mack truck nearly hit me. I would have been killed.

As I continue on my way home, something is tugging at me. Something that feels like a memory or a dream or ... I don't even know what. But I wasn't asleep, so how could I have been dreaming? It doesn't make any sense.

It's another five minutes of driving before I get back to my house. Noel is sitting on the rocking chair on our front porch, reading a book. He puts it down when he sees me and meets me at my car.

“Hey.” He grins at me, and I get this odd sensation of having missed him, but not actually. My God, I can't believe how close I came to doing something horrible. “The firefighters said the oven was fine; the knob just got stuck somehow. I'm sitting outside while the house airs out.”

I can dimly hear a fire alarm going off within the house, a persistent and grating beeping sound. I clear my throat, which burns when I try to swallow. “Good idea.”

“Are you okay? You look ... off.”

“It's just been a weird day.” I lean against the car, not quite able to support myself. “While I was driving home, I nearly got hit by a truck.”

He looks alarmed. “Whoa.”

“I’m okay,” I say, “but I had this bizarre ‘life flashing before my eyes’ moment. I imagined that ... that I had been in a terrible accident and I was in a coma. And I kept having these dreams about you, except the dreams would always end before you could kiss me.”

“So ...” Noel tilts his head thoughtfully. “What you’re saying is you want to make out?”

I start to laugh, but then something else grabs my attention. The fire alarm seems to have grown louder, even though we’re not even inside the house. “Why is that alarm so noisy?”

He shakes his head. “What alarm?”

“It’s like a ... a beeping sound.”

Beep, beep, beep, beep . . .

He pauses, listening for a moment. “Nope. I don’t hear it.”

How is it possible he doesn’t hear that alarm? It’s so loud . Has he gone deaf ? Because that’s the only way he wouldn’t hear that awful beeping. I’m about to comment as much when, quite abruptly, the beeping halts.

“The alarm stopped,” I say. And strangely enough, my throat feels better too. It’s like a terrible weight has been pressing on my chest, and now I have finally been ... released .

And I feel lighter—happier—all of a sudden.

“Glad to hear it.” Noel flashes me that same endearing grin that made me fall in love with him all those years ago. “Now let’s see about getting you that kiss you were hoping for.”

As he leans in and presses his lips against mine, I melt into the kiss that I’ve been waiting for and think about how lucky I am. I spent my entire relationship with Noel tormenting myself with whether I was good enough or if he might leave me for another woman, but now it is so crystal clear—he loves me with all his heart. He has always loved me. And as long as I live, he always will.

I can’t believe I came so close to losing everything.