



# Her Forbidden Prince (Al-Sintra Family #7)

**Author:** *Elizabeth Lennox*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Secrets, Puppies and Fiery Hearts!

The dog bolted down the street, hotly pursued by the most jaw-dropping man Carys had ever laid eyes on. Tall, built like a dream, with a smile that practically melted her from the inside out. One small hitch: Carys didn't believe in love at first sight. And, even worse—this gorgeous mystery man turned out to be her new boss. Not just her boss, but the owner of the entire company.

Prince Rafi Al Sintra couldn't believe his own luck. The woman of his dreams just happened to work for him, and every second spent around her only made him more determined to make her his. But Rafi's keeping a royal-sized secret, and Carys's past has a few skeletons waiting to come out. Can they keep their passion—and each other—safe, or will their explosive chemistry be too hot to handle?

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

The warning shouts pierced the peaceful hum of morning.

Carys Remington flinched, her head snapping up from the letter in her hands.

Around her, pedestrians scattered like startled birds.

A woman shrieked as her coffee exploded from her grip, the paper cup cartwheeling across the sidewalk and splattering caramel-colored liquid across the pavement.

Horns blared from the nearby intersection, and someone shouted, “Watch out!”

What in the world?

A pulse of unease struck Carys as she took in the chaos.

This wasn't some casual city commotion. People were backing away with wide eyes and flailing arms. For a split second, she wondered if a gun had gone off.

Or maybe the police were chasing someone through Rittenhouse Square.

But there were no sirens, no uniformed officers.

Then she saw it.

A blur of motion. Brown and black fur. Massive. Barreling directly toward her like a freight train let loose from its rails.

A dog?

No—not just a dog. This was a leviathan in canine form.

Easily over a hundred pounds, it bounded across the grass and sidewalk with terrifying speed, eyes gleaming with either madness or pure, unfiltered joy.

Its ears were pinned back. Its mouth hung open, tongue lolling, thick ropes of drool catching the sunlight.

Carys's breath caught, and the letter fluttered from her fingers.

The air suddenly smelled of crushed grass, hot asphalt, and something faintly metallic—fear, maybe.

Around her, the crowd's panic crescendoed into a chorus of screams and scrambling footsteps.

She was frozen, her heart hammering in her chest like it was trying to punch its way out.

Move! her brain screamed. Do something!

But she didn't.

She stared at the charging creature, caught in that strange, surreal moment when time slows to a trickle. The dog's paws pounded the earth like war drums. His muscles bunched and flexed with every stride. Sunlight flared off his coat, revealing a sheen of health, strength, and raw power.

It was beautiful.

And it was coming straight for her.

Just as she braced herself for impact—legs locked, ready for pain—she noticed the tail.

Wagging.

Not low and menacing. High. Exuberant. The dog's eyes weren't filled with rage. They sparkled with joy, tongue flapping out the side of his mouth like a giant pink flag of peace.

Oh.

He thought this was a game.

Carys blinked, stunned. The beast wasn't attacking. He was... playing.

A bark erupted from his chest—loud, deep, but unmistakably happy.

Carys dropped to her knees without hesitation, arms open wide. “Come here, you goofball!”

In that instant, the fear evaporated. The sun beat down on her shoulders. The city's roar dulled beneath the thunder of approaching paws. The scent of the park—fresh mulch, warm cement, summer-blooming flowers—rushed in to replace the adrenaline in her lungs.

The dog let out a delighted yelp and launched into her arms like a missile of fluff and affection. She toppled backward, laughing as paws the size of oven mitts landed on her thighs, then shoulders.

“You big baby!” she gasped, half-laughing, half-straining to stay upright. “You’re just a puppy, aren’t you?”

He wriggled and licked Carys’s face like she was his long-lost soulmate.

His tail thumped wildly against the concrete, smacking a nearby trash can with hollow thuds.

The crowd, moments ago terrified, now stood stunned and silent.

Then someone let out a tentative chuckle.

The woman who’d lost her coffee shook her head. “I definitely need to switch to decaf.”

Still grinning, Carys rubbed behind the dog’s velvety ears. “Where’s your collar, honey?” she murmured, her fingers sliding along his thick neck. “Where’d you come from?” She found the collar, buried under thick, rough fur, and held on.

No tags. No leash. Just a big, gorgeous German Shepherd, panting happily against her chest.

“Where’s your momma?” Carys asked, shifting her weight but keeping her hands on the dog’s collar—not too firmly, but enough so that the dog knew not to run away. “Huh? Where is she? I bet she’s upset that you ran away. Why did you do that?”

The dog’s ears twitched and he nuzzled Carys’s hand again, gently asking for more rubs.

Carys obliged happily. Was there anything more wonderful than a dog?

She loved animals. If she had her way, she'd live on a farm out in the middle of nowhere, with dogs and cats, chickens, goats, and those adorable baby cows that she'd seen on the internet lately.

Yeah, she knew the baby cows grew into big cows—but that would be okay.

“Okay, boy,” she whispered, pressing her face against the dog’s fur. “Let’s go find your momma. What do you think?”

The dog whined slightly, twisting his head around to press his nose into Carys’s blond hair.

“Yeah, I know, sweetie,” Carys replied, responding to the tone, if not the words.

German Shepherds were incredibly intelligent dogs.

Briefly, she wistfully contemplated asking the owner of this beautiful boy to let her take him home.

But she lived in a tiny studio apartment.

This sweet boy needed a larger house with a huge backyard so he could stretch his legs properly.

Plus, her apartment building had a strict weight limit, and this handsome fellow was definitely over that limit.

“Besides,” Carys whispered conspiratorially to the dog, “you wouldn’t like the neighbors. The guy next door thinks playing the tuba at midnight is a perfectly acceptable hobby. And let’s not even start on the lady downstairs who conducts tap-dancing classes for her cats.”

The dog tilted his head, almost as if he understood and sympathized.

Carys laughed, rubbing him behind the ears.

“You’re good, honey. Everything is good.

But I doubt you’d like apartment living.

You need space. Maybe even a doggy mansion.

I can barely fit a houseplant in my place without it feeling crowded.”

As the dog leaned into her caresses, Carys added, “And trust me, boy, you do not want to share space with Mr. Fluffy, my temperamental cactus. He’s prickly in more ways than one.

” She sighed, giving the dog one last affectionate pat.

“But if you ever want to visit and critique my tuba-playing neighbor, you’re more than welcome.”

That’s when she saw another beast—this one taller and broader—running down the path.

This beast wasn’t a puppy. This beast was...

magnificent . Her breath caught in her throat as she watched the man jogging toward them, his dark hair glinting in the sunshine.

He was running in dress shoes and a suit, but there was no masking the incredible glory of his physique.

The flat stomach and broad shoulders were...

Carys's heart pounded, a different kind of tension gripping her now. The man's powerful strides ate up the distance, his eyes locked on the dog.

She could see the intensity in his gaze—a mix of concern and determination that made her stomach flutter.

The way his suit clung to his muscular frame, hinting at the strength beneath, sent a thrill through her.

As he closed in, the sun highlighted the chiseled lines of his face, and Carys felt a wave of awareness wash over her. His presence was as commanding as the dog's had been exuberant. The air seemed to thrum with energy, the sounds around her fading into the background as he approached.

The dog nuzzled Carys's hand. For a brief moment, she looked down. Was the beast laughing at her?

Ridiculous.

Still, she looked back up, staring at the man who was slowing as he approached.

He really was stunningly handsome—in a completely-out-of-Carys's-league kind of way.

She knew the type of men who were typically attracted to her.

They were the geeky, accounting types with glasses sliding down their noses.

The men with cheap suits and scuffed shoes.

Not the shockingly handsome, muscle-bound leaders of industry like this one.

He came to a stop in front of her, heaving a sigh of relief.

As he reached them, Carys noted with mild annoyance that he wasn't even out of breath—despite sprinting like a scene out of an action movie.

“Sorry about that,” he said, flashing a smile that could probably launch a thousand ad campaigns. “He’s still learning to stay by my side.”

Carys blinked, trying not to be too dazzled by his perfect teeth and those maddeningly expressive eyes. “It’s okay,” she managed, her voice a little breathless—though not from running. “He’s a sweetheart.”

Dark eyes. Tanned skin. And citrus aftershave. Her gaze roamed over his face, unable to tear itself away. She liked the way his lips curled slightly when he spoke. Noticed the barely visible scar beneath his lower lip. She wanted to ask him how he'd gotten it. Something reckless, no doubt.

He was beautiful. Ruggedly, achingly beautiful.

Her heart thudded harder and she felt a bit unsteady—until the dog leaned against her leg, anchoring her with warm, living weight.

Carys wanted to say something witty. Tease him. Make him laugh.

But her mind blanked. She had nothing. Not a single clever word.

A wet nose nudged her hand.

She looked down, and the sweet boy stared up at her, head tilted in that charming,

German Shepherd way.

“He got away from us,” the man said.

Carys blinked, still not processing his words. This man had short-circuited her brain. Handsome men didn't normally affect her like this. But he was different. He made her skin tingle.

“What's his name?” she asked.

The man's mouth twisted slightly. “Aida, ironically.”

They both looked down at the fluffy boy. Aidan—no, Aida —shifted slightly on his haunches, and Carys could have sworn he was smiling .

When she looked up again, her stomach fluttered.

“But why is that ironic?” she asked, hoping for something intellectual to mask her attraction.

“Because in Arabic, the name means ‘one who returns,’” he said, his voice low and steady.

At the sound, Aida's head dropped slightly, like he knew he was being gently scolded.

Carys bent down, scratching the dog's head. “Aida,” she whispered, “I think you're beautiful. And a very good boy.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi's eyes locked onto the woman, captivated.

Her blond hair shimmered like silk in the sunlight, a tumble of soft waves that made his fingers ache to touch them—to test if they were as smooth as they looked.

Her pale skin practically glowed, and her full, pink lips...

God help him, he wanted to taste them. She was breathtaking.

Real and vibrant in a way that made everything else—the city noise, the chaos, even the dog—blur into background static.

He didn't even know her name.

And yet his imagination was already betraying him with a string of increasingly indecent fantasies.

That's rude, he told himself. You haven't even said hello.

His gaze dropped to Aida, the guard-dog-in-training who had caused this unexpected detour. The massive shepherd had flopped on the grass, belly up, completely surrendered to the woman's gentle hands. She scratched behind his ears with a warm smile that made Rafi's chest tighten.

Lucky bastard, Rafi thought, jealousy flaring as Aida let out a deep, blissful sigh and closed his eyes.

The dog knew he was being smug. Rafi swore Aida's tail wagged just a little harder in his direction, taunting him.

Behind him, his security team approached—panting, grim-faced.

He shouldn't have sprinted off like that.

They would've caught up to Aida eventually.

But instinct had taken over, and now here he stood...

watching this stranger rub his dog's belly while his thoughts spiraled into territory that was wildly inappropriate.

Still, he didn't stop watching. Couldn't.

She shifted on the grass, her back to him, her movements unselfconscious and fluid.

His gaze traced the elegant line of her spine, the curve of her waist. The way her fingers lingered just a moment longer on Aida's fur than necessary.

His brain taunted him with the image of her hands on his skin, and he clenched his jaw, trying to drag his focus back to sanity.

He'd ask her to dinner. That was a start.

“Well, I'm sure that Aida is in good hands now,” she said brightly, rising to her feet and brushing her palms together. “I have to get back to work. My break's over, and I've got a mountain of things to get done.”

She gave the dog one last affectionate pat. “Be a good boy!”

Then she turned.

Her smile still lingered, but her focus was already shifting, and Rafi felt something tighten in his chest. He opened his mouth to stop her—but she was already walking away, her purse swinging at her side. She disappeared around the bend, the dappled light of the trees swallowing her whole.

Rafi stood frozen, torn between chasing after her and staying grounded in reality.

But Aida made the choice for him.

With a sudden bark, the dog lunged in the direction the woman had gone, nearly slipping free again. Rafi dove, catching him by the collar just in time.

“Hold up!” he growled, bracing against the dog’s powerful body.

Pedestrians were already backing away again, eyeing the large German Shepherd with new concern. Rafi tightened his grip, whispering calm reassurances as Aida struggled against him.

“Who’s got his leash?” he barked over his shoulder.

One of the guards stepped forward immediately, leash in hand. “Here, sir.”

Aida whined, ears low, eyes locked on the path where the woman had vanished. He looked up at Rafi, pleading.

And Rafi—who wasn’t normally one for foolishness—actually considered it. What if I just let him go? What if Aida caught up to her? Just a few more minutes. One more conversation. Her name. Her number. Something.

But Aida wasn't trained for that. Not yet. Too risky.

"No," Rafi murmured with regret. "Not today."

He clipped the leash, securing it with a tug. "We're getting a harness. He's going to pull this trick again."

"Yes, Your Highness," the guard said, but Rafi was barely listening.

His eyes caught a flicker of movement near the bench where the woman had been sitting. A piece of paper lifted slightly in the breeze, curling like a beckoning finger.

He stepped forward, picking it up— a letter . Folded, slightly smudged. His eyes skimmed the first line before he forced himself to stop.

"...hurting your father's feelings..."

Curious, he flipped it over—and there it was. Scrawled in the top corner in neat, slanted handwriting: Carys.

His pulse kicked. Finally, a name.

He tucked the letter gently into his jacket pocket and turned to the sketchpad lying beside it. The pages fluttered slightly in the breeze. He opened it and smiled.

She was an artist.

More than that—she was a brilliant one. Page after page filled with marketing concepts. Clean lines. Sharp humor. Relatable characters. And all of it centered around a single product: a running shoe his company had been trying to sell without success.

Until now.

He flipped another page. Another campaign idea. Then another. His grin widened with each sketch.

She didn't just work for him. She was about to save the product line.

He checked his watch. Less than an hour until he saw her again— Carys.

“Aida, my boy,” he said, resting a hand on the dog's head, “you're my hero.”

Aida's tail thumped the ground, and he barked softly before looking down the path again, as if still hoping she'd return.

“I know,” Rafi murmured, scratching behind his ears. “I'm hoping too.”

He tugged gently on the leash. “Come on, partner. Let's go find her.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Out of the corner of her eye, Carys noticed several of her co-workers hurrying down the hallway. “What’s going on?” Carys asked, looking up from her new sketchbook. She was trying to recreate the ideas she’d worked on over the past few weeks since she’d stupidly lost her sketchbook earlier today.

“Mandatory meeting in the conference room,” Marsha called out, passing by Carys’s cubicle.

Marsha paused, her glasses dangling from a beaded string around her neck as she leaned over the edge of Carys’s three-quarter height wall.

“Rumors are that layoffs are coming!” she explained in a mock-whisper.

Carys gasped, her stomach tightening. Layoffs meant that the company was trying to downsize. Was she on the list? Was she going to be cut?

She couldn’t lose her job! She finally earned enough to cover her rent each month, buy food, put a little money away for emergencies, and have a small budget for fun stuff.

For a moment, Carys considered calling Andi, her best friend, who worked in the finance department.

Andi worked for the finance director, but her friend was relatively new in her position as well.

If layoffs were coming, would Andi also be on the list?

Most likely not. Andi was a financial guru, so she was probably safe.

But the people currently on the marketing staff weren't pulling their weight.

The last several marketing campaigns had been extremely expensive, but absolute duds.

Personally, Carys hadn't liked the concepts. They'd relied on the old-school methods that had worked ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago. But with social media and the changed attention span due to the shorter video ads, the old marketing concepts didn't work anymore.

She'd offered her ideas to Dave, her boss.

But he didn't like them. Carys had suggested a more subconscious marketing concept, something that wasn't an in-your-face idea.

Pushing a commercial regaling shoppers with the product had worked in the past, but consumers were more sophisticated now and they were too busy for the old-style commercials.

Buyers wanted products that solved a problem.

Looking up, she noticed that everyone in the department was moving toward this mysterious meeting. She looked at her calendar, but she didn't have any meeting on her schedule. Was she supposed to be in that meeting? Marsha had mentioned that it was mandatory.

"Carys! Aren't you coming?" another colleague called out.

"To what?" she asked, completely confused. "I didn't get an email about a meeting."

Mark waved his hand as he hurried down the beige carpeted hallway, his eyes alert and concerned. “It’s an ‘all-hands’ meeting. We got an email from Dave about twenty minutes ago. Come on,” another person called out.

Nervous now, because she hadn’t received any such message, Carys stood up and followed the line of people heading into the department’s main conference room.

Since Carys had been the only one to not receive a message about the meeting, did that mean that she was about to be laid off?

Her heart thudded against her chest as she followed everyone to the conference room.

It was packed, which was a good thing, because Carys wanted to hide in the back of the room just in case she wasn’t supposed to be here.

While they waited for the meeting to begin, everyone whispered, speculating about what the meeting was about. Layoffs and firings were the main supposition. Suggestions about who would be on the chopping block came next.

Carys crossed her arms and pressed her back against the wall when two people turned to look at her, pity in their eyes. She swallowed hard as her stomach twisted warningly. Did they know something? Had they heard that her name was on the chopping block?

Thankfully, someone walked into the conference room from the opposite end of the room, pulling everyone’s attention in that direction.

Carys still shrank back, wondering if she should slip out and head back to her desk to pack up her belongings.

It would be more dignified if she could just leave without everyone witnessing her

“walk of shame”.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming on such short notice,” a deep, sexy male voice announced. Carys couldn’t see the man because she was shorter than the people in front of her, but that was okay. It was nice to be invisible.

“I’ve called this meeting to talk to all of you. We have some excellent products in this company. However, it doesn’t matter how good something is, if we can’t announce to the world that our product is better than the others out there. Right?”

There was a murmuring of agreement and several of the people in front of her shifted on their feet. Had the energy in the room just intensified? Carys noticed that her coworkers seemed to stand a bit straighter too.

“Since we’re all in agreement, I’m announcing that we need to halt all currently running marketing campaigns.

They’re terrible.” There were a few gasps of shock, but Carys pursed her lips, trying to stifle the “Yeah!” that wanted to burst from her lips.

“The current campaigns aren’t selling the company’s products.

We need to shift to a more dynamic approach.

” Through the gaps in the bodies in front of her, Carys could see a part of the man’s face, but not all of him.

She shifted slightly, bringing the man’s arm and shoulder into view.

Suddenly, that arm lifted a notebook in the air and Carys recognized her sketchbook.

She gasped and someone in front of her turned, looking at her curiously.

“Sorry!” she whispered, pressing harder against the wall behind her.

“I’m looking for Carys?” the deep, sexy voice called out.

Carys froze. Should she speak up?

“Carys Remington?” The sexy-voice person clarified. “The owner of this sketchbook.”

Before Carys had a chance to brace herself, the people in front of her stepped aside, revealing her hiding place to the man with the deep voice.

Looking up, she locked eyes with the man from the park.

He was even more breathtaking here in the office where he towered over the others.

The tallest person in the marketing department was Dave, the director, who was only about five feet, nine inches tall.

The man standing there staring at her was nearly a head taller than Dave.

Carys’s mind fizzled as she stared into the dark depths of the gorgeous man’s eyes she remembered from the park.

But instead of the soft, fascinating smile he’d given her earlier today, the man’s expression was tight and determined. Triumphant almost.

Why triumphant? Was he about to fire her? Now? In front of everyone?

Carys straightened up, lifting her chin slightly. If she was going to be fired, then so be it! She'd leave with her head high!

“These drawings,” he began, then pulled his eyes away from her. Carys felt as if she'd suddenly been released. She was like a life raft floating in the roiling ocean, adrift and vulnerable, the waves of uncertainty crashing around her. Exposed and bereft, she felt a sudden cold of disconnection.

His eyes lifted, locking onto hers again, and it felt like a lighthouse had pierced through the storm.

The turbulent sea calmed, and Carys felt anchored and secure.

The warmth and intensity in his gaze made her feel safe, like she was no longer alone in the vast, chaotic ocean.

He was a lifeline, pulling her from the depths of uncertainty back to solid ground, leaving her breathless with the sheer relief of it.

No, relief wasn't the right word. Because this man was dangerous. Not malicious, she thought, but...definitely dangerous.

“Your ideas are brilliant,” he announced. “We're going to implement them for the next campaign.”

It took her a pregnant moment to understand his words, then Carys's jaw dropped and she heard gasps of surprise throughout the room.

Dave cleared his throat and Carys was vaguely aware of the marketing director trying to appear as if he were still in charge of his department, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the taller man.

She was his prisoner and Carys didn't care that he had her tethered to him in such a sensuous hold.

Someone patted her arm and said, "Congrats." For some reason, that touch seemed to break the spell and Carys glanced around, suddenly feeling her face flame with color.

Thankfully, the man on the opposite side of the room pulled everyone's attention back to him.

"The ideas in these sketches are the best I've seen in a long time.

" He turned to Dave, handing him the sketchbook.

Dave flipped through the sketchbook and Carys shrank back again when Dave finally looked up to glare at her.

She'd shown him those ideas several months ago and he'd laughed her out of his office, telling her that she needed to go back to marketing school.

He'd hated her ideas and she hadn't had the courage to bring anything else to him since that horrible meeting.

The man continued, pulling Dave's gaze back to him.

"But this is just one product. I'm looking for new and interesting ideas, people.

We have more than one hundred products that need new and innovative ideas to get the consumers' attention.

I want something interesting. I want something that no one has tried before.

Give me new and daring ideas.” He offered a general nod to the group.

“We’ll have daily inspiration meetings. I’m open to anything and everything.

Give me your weirdest, stupidest, most bizarre ideas.

The original concept might not work, but your idea might spark something that can be built upon.

” He looked around. “I want this group to start acting like a team. If you think that sharing ideas and collaborating to build a brilliant marketing idea isn’t a good idea, then submit your resignation.

I want new ideas. I want crazy, wild, off the wall ideas.

” Carys was entranced. This...this is what a leader should be, she thought with admiration.

“That’s all,” he announced with another nod to the group, then his eyes lasered in on her. “Carys, could I speak with you in my office please?”

There were two sets of doors to this conference room and everyone immediately started slinking out through the back door, near where she was standing.

Some of the younger team members looked excited, even eager.

But Carys knew that Dave and his assistant director, Tanya, had suppressed so many ideas over the years.

The older team members had been beaten down.

Dave and Tanya didn't want to cede power by accepting new ideas for fear that they'd be phased out by younger, more vibrant marketing concepts.

So now, the new guy was eliminating the gatekeepers.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi knew that, despite his obvious approval of her marketing ideas, the rest of the marketing staff suspected that Carys was about to be fired, which was ridiculous since he'd just told them to emulate her concepts. Let them think whatever they wanted, as long as they did their jobs.

They'd been systematically beaten down and humiliated by the imbecile director and then crushed under the assistant director's very spiky heel.

If Dave and Tanya had worked to create an atmosphere of idea-sharing instead of one that forced competition, then there wouldn't be a sense of doom looming over the staff now.

Rafi watched quietly as the staff filed from the conference room. Some looked hopeful, but most were wary. Soon, the room had cleared, except for Dave and Carys.

The director puffed up his chest as he reached for his ugly tie, straightening the knot self-importantly. "We should have a conversation prior to your meeting with Carys."

Rafi glanced at the shorter man, hoping the contempt he felt was adequately hidden. Probably not.

"We'll talk later, Dave," Rafi stated firmly. "Right now, I need to speak with Carys."

"Those aren't her ideas!" Dave snapped.

Rafi turned, giving the man his full attention. "Then who created them?" he asked, tapping his forefinger on the sketchbook.

“They’re my ideas,” Dave asserted. “I told Carys about them months ago, and asked her to flesh them out a bit.” He stared up at Rafi, willing him to believe him.

Rafi glanced at Carys, noticing that she looked wounded and angry, frowning at the floor.

But she didn’t say anything. Apparently, the lovely Carys didn’t assert herself, even though Rafi was one hundred percent certain that Dave was lying.

But his claim meant that he couldn’t fire the ass as he’d planned.

He should have realized Dave’s nature sooner, but he’d been too eager to find Carys again.

Dave was sticking to his lie, building on it. “Unfortunately, Carys never got back to me about them.”

Rafi nodded. “Well, they are brilliant ideas.” He tapped the sketchbook again. “We’re going with this concept for the shoes. I’ll get Carys to start on the campaign.”

Dave glanced over at Carys, fury in his hazel eyes. When the shorter man looked back at Rafi, he was still angry, but there was now a hint of worry in the director’s eyes. And that, more than anything, told him that the guy was trying to steal Carys’s ideas.

Dave shook his head. “She’s not strong enough or experienced enough to run a campaign on her own.”

Rafi lifted a dark eyebrow, but then crossed his arms over his chest. “I hear your concerns, Dave. Thank you for sharing them with me.”

The director huffed a bit, but he recognized the dismissal. The man shot one more venomous glance in Carys's direction before he left the conference room.

Rafi then turned to Carys, noting the anger and tension in her shoulders.

She wasn't too thin, which was good. He'd dated reed thin women in the past and, looking at Carys's round, soft curves, he realized that he suddenly preferred women with more softness to them.

Carys was gorgeous from the top of her blond, beautiful head to her boot-tipped toes.

Had she been wearing boots earlier? He hadn't noticed, which was significant because he kinda had a thing for women who wore boots. Leather boots were his favorite, but boots with heels...! He was in lust!

Lifting his eyes from her feet, Rafi looked down into her pretty, blue eyes. "We didn't get around to names earlier. I'm Rafi," he said, finally introducing himself. He extended his hand.

"I'm Carys," she replied, her voice appealingly soft. "Carys Remington." Her fingers were cold as Rafi wrapped his fingers around hers. The sensation felt like a lightning bolt and he stepped closer, watching with interest as her eyes widened.

"Your dog is very sweet."

Rafi nodded, then realized that he was staring. He started slightly and released her hand, then immediately regretted it. He enjoyed touching her. She was soft and sweet. Immediately, he wondered what it would feel like to hold her in his arms.

Clearing his throat, Rafi looked down at her sketchpad, tapping it with his finger.

“I didn’t mean to be nosy, but you forgot this on the bench in the park.

I glanced through the pages, looking for a name so I could return it to you.

” He flipped open the sketchpad again and pointed to the running shoe concept.

“Did you come up with this idea yourself?”

She shrugged, nodding and glancing at the sketches, running her hand over the images on the page.

“It was inspired by something someone said one morning. One of my co-workers had gotten into a fight with her husband the previous night, and then went for a run to clear her head, then they’d talked things through later that night.

” She indicated the page that outlined someone running through the streets, flashes of stress popping into her mind; screaming baby, angry husband, demanding boss.

In each of the squares, the woman just kept moving, with a close up on her feet moving along the street that focused on the shoes.

By the end of her run, she feels more relaxed.

The subconscious message is the shoes relieved the day’s stress.

“It’s brilliant. We’re going with it.” He closed the sketchbook. “And you left this as well,” he explained, pulling the single piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. “I didn’t read it. But I found your name at the top.”

The woman glanced at the letter and looked horrified. Then she shoved the letter into her pocket and schooled her expression to blandly professional. “Well, I’d better get

back to work then.”

“Have dinner with me tonight,” he blurted out, then silently cursed himself.

That was not particularly smooth and he could see by the look in her eyes that she was going to reject his offer.

“I’d like to talk to you more about some of the other concepts you’ve drawn up.

” He shifted slightly, leaning against the conference room table, trying not to loom over her.

He knew that some people were intimidated by height and Rafi wanted to appear as approachable as possible.

“You’re quite creative.” He flipped through the pages.

“And your drawings are...excellent. Did you study art in school?”

“Actually, I studied marketing.” She shifted on her feet and he watched her eyes. They were so pretty! And so revealing. He watched as several expressions flitted through those eyes and wondered what she was thinking.

“Why don’t we...?”

“Sir,” Dave interrupted, poking his head back into the room.

Rafi turned to frown at the marketing director. Then straightened to his full height when the ass glanced at Carys and smirked knowingly.

“Sorry to interrupt, but you wanted to discuss the marketing budget for the next

launch, sir.”

Rafi nodded sharply, wishing he could just fire the ass on the spot. Instead, he said, “I’ll be with you in a minute.” He waited until they were alone again, then sighed. “What about it? Dinner tonight? Will that work?”

She nodded, the overhead lights making her blond hair sparkle around her shoulders.

“Yes. Fine. Dinner would be great. I’ll bring my other ideas and we can discuss them in more detail,” she agreed and grabbed her sketchbook, pressing it to her chest. Lucky sketchbook, he thought as he watched her hurry out of the conference room.

Damn, she was lovely! And intriguing! What was in the letter she’d hurriedly shoved into her pocket? He should have read it when he had the chance, but hadn’t wanted to intrude more than he already had.

An unexpected noise behind him interrupted Rafi’s contemplation.

Dave. The marketing director really was a pain in the ass!

And, apparently, an eavesdropper too. With a silent sigh, he turned and left the room, fighting to hide his dislike for the marketing director as he passed him in the hallway.

The man seemed to run a tight program. Too tight.

The creativity was smothered and that wasn’t the way to produce good ideas.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

It felt like days instead of hours until dinner time arrived.

But finally, Rafi finished up his last meeting of the day.

At this point, he accepted that he was going to have to fire Dave.

It was still undetermined if Tanya was a good fit for a leadership role.

But Rafi wasn't going to make a move until he had more information.

And now, it was time to shut down the business for the night. Rafi headed out of his office to look for Carys. Interesting name. He'd never heard of anyone named that before. It was unique, just like her.

"Are you ready?" he asked, peering over the edge of her assigned cubicle.

Another thing he wanted to do is get rid of the cubicles.

He'd never thought they were conducive to productivity.

Companies installed them because cubical walls were less expensive than real walls, but they tended to cause more distractions.

Oh, he knew that companies claimed that cubicles encouraged team building, but that was a load of crap.

Stepping back from the wall, Rafi watched as the woman he'd been thinking about all

afternoon stood up, her sketch pad pressed against her chest again.

For the first time today, he noticed the dress she was wearing.

It was just a simple, black dress, but it hugged her curves delightfully.

She'd topped the dress with a red and black patterned scarf around her neck, but between those blond tresses and her sparkling blue eyes...

not to mention the leather, heeled boots...

he hadn't noticed what she'd been wearing until now.

She looked nervous and gestured vaguely toward the conference room. "We don't need to go out to dinner. I could update you quickly right here."

"But I'm starving," Rafi countered. "And you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast, have you?"

Her mouth fell open slightly and he knew that he was right. "How did you...?"

Rafi chuckled at her surprise. "I didn't until this moment.

" He turned and started walking, hoping that she would fall in beside him.

He definitely didn't want to have this conversation in the office, where anyone could overhear.

Not that they were going to discuss anything but business.

Still, he wanted to discuss business with the lovely Carys Remington more privately.

He knew the exact moment when she fell into step beside him. He could literally feel her presence. Later, Rafi would ponder that reaction, but for the next few hours, he was just going to enjoy this beautiful woman's company.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys stood very still as the elevator doors closed, trapping her in a confined space with an intensity she could almost taste.

There were four other men in the elevator, but they barely registered in her consciousness.

Every nerve, every instinct was focused on the man beside her.

The tall, intimidating presence that seemed to dominate the small space.

Who was he? Rafi...what was his last name? Her mind raced with questions.

Her heart pounded in her chest, each beat reverberating in the tense silence.

The air felt charged, as if any moment a spark might ignite a wildfire.

She stole a glance at him, his profile sharp and unreadable, exuding an aura of controlled power.

There was something about him that whispered of danger, something that set her on edge.

The other men in the elevator were inconsequential shadows compared to the palpable force of his presence.

The slight, almost imperceptible shift in his stance as the elevator descended only heightened her awareness of him.

Carys's pulse quickened. She could feel a bead of sweat trickling down her spine.

What was it about him that appealed to her so?

The questions gnawed at her, her curiosity mingling with a primal sense of awareness of her femininity.

The elevator seemed to crawl downward, each second stretching into an eternity, amplifying the tension that coiled tighter with every passing moment.

So many questions popped into her mind. Where was he from? Where had his soft, almost melodic accent come from? Just how tall was he? And what would it be like to kiss him?

Her mind's eye immediately conjured a scene where they were sitting together at a conference room table while they dug into Chinese food containers.

He'd be next to her so that he could see her sketches.

His knee would bump hers. She'd go very still.

Or maybe they'd both be reaching for the last broccoli floret and...

? Nope, that wouldn't happen. Carys hated broccoli. He could have all the broccoli. Ick.

She substituted the broccoli with a fortune cookie. They'd both reach for it, their fingers would touch, and she'd smile awkwardly, trying to play it cool.

Except she'd probably end up knocking over the soy sauce, making a mess, and they'd laugh about it. Yeah, that seemed more realistic. She could already imagine

him teasing her, making a lighthearted comment about her fortune-reading skills. She snorted in amusement before she could stop herself.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, gesturing toward the open elevator doors.

Carys hitched her tote bag higher onto her shoulder. “Nothing important,” she replied, then hesitated, not sure she wanted to get into the big, black SUV waiting by the curb. “What’s that?”

“A vehicle?” he offered slowly, obviously not sure what she was asking.

Carys huffed and stopped. “I know that it’s a vehicle, but...is that a driver?” She tilted her head as if a different angle might change what she was looking at. “Do you have a chauffeur?”

“I have bodyguards,” he corrected, putting a hand to the small of her back, gently nudging her closer to the car.

She glanced quizzically up at him. “Oh, so that many people hate you?” she asked mischievously.

“Hate me?”

Carys shrugged, feeling saucy all of a sudden. “Yeah, people who need bodyguards generally have a lot of enemies.”

He rolled his eyes. On anyone else, the gesture might be annoying. But on Rafi, it looked sexy as hell. Maybe it was sexy because it was combined with a rakish grin. Before she realized what was happening, Carys was sitting inside a very luxurious SUV and he was next to her. Close!

Carys looked everywhere but at the man sitting beside her. He was just too overwhelming, she told herself.

“The uh...I worked on the script for the uh...” she started to say, then forced herself to look at the man next to her. His dark eyes seemed to ignite something inside of her. She was hungry, but not for food. This man...the warmth and scent of him appealed to her in a way she didn’t quite understand.

Before she could decide how to react, the door to the SUV opened and a doorman offered her a hand. “Welcome to The Saint Brasti.”

The Saint Brasti restaurant? No way! It was impossible to get reservations here! Carys and her best friend, Andi, had read about this place. Just last month, they’d bought the ingredients for one of the items on the menu and had laughed at how badly the resulting charred mess had turned out!

But before Carys could argue, to explain how they couldn’t dine here, Rafi stepped out of the car. He came around to her open door, one hand extended toward her, as the doorman stepped back. “Let’s have something to eat before we discuss the marketing campaign.”

“Oh!” she whispered. She was hungry, but was it for food?

With a mental snort, she took the offered hand. Of course, she was hungry for food. What else was there to be hungry for?

But the moment his long fingers closed around hers, Carys knew she was in trouble. The unexpected heat that traveled up her arm was almost shocking. She looked up at him, very aware of how far she had to tilt her head back.

“We should...um...go somewhere else,” she whispered.

“Why’s that?” he asked, his voice lower now. His fingers tightened around hers. Had he moved closer? “I’ve heard excellent reviews about this place.”

“Yes, I’ve heard...great things too.” Had his chest just brushed her breasts?

He nodded toward the entrance. “Then let’s go inside and have some dinner.”

Unfortunately, he took a step toward the doors, leaving Carys feeling strangely abandoned and...wanting.

He tucked her hand onto his elbow, leading her through the shiny, red doors. Carys walked beside him, thinking that she should pull her hand away. But before she could, he pulled her closer, putting his hand to the small of her back. It felt both reassuring and intimate.

“Good evening,” the pompous man behind the wooden podium said, not even blinking an eye at the fact that she and Rafi weren’t in formal attire.

Thankfully, it was a weeknight, so the other patrons weren’t in cocktail attire either.

Friday and Saturday nights, most of the patrons would be heading for the opera or the ballet.

Carys smiled her thanks as the host led them toward a table next to a floor to ceiling window that looked out over the city.

Immediately, a waiter appeared, handing her a leather-covered menu.

Although, as she looked around, she noticed the other female diners wore obviously expensive designer clothes. They definitely hadn’t bought their clothes at the discount retailers. Her dress might have a famous label on the tag, but the name wasn’t a top of

the line designer.

“Would you like a cocktail? Or wine?”

Carys lowered her menu to look at the man sitting across the table. Rafi was truly an impressive sight. His broad shoulders were drool-worthy and the rest of him, plus the air of confidence, caught second glances from women they'd passed by.

“I don't need wine,” she replied, thinking that a bottle of wine in a place like this probably cost more than she earned in a week. “Water is fine.”

“You don't like wine?”

Carys looked around, noting the modern chandelier and the silk draperies that graced the floor to ceiling windows.

Since the windows were three stories high, the sparkly curtains were spectacular.

However, they were also pulled back to highlight the extraordinary view of the river with the city in the distance.

Everything here sparkled. The waiters walked expeditiously through the tables, the other diners created a low hum of conversation and there was music; a grand piano in a corner being played beautifully.

This was one of the most expensive and sought-after places in the city, and she was here with a gorgeous man.

“I should leave,” she whispered.

Rafi placed a hand on hers. “Carys, you're starving. I can see it in your eyes.” The

sommelier stepped up to their table and gave Rafi a small bow. Without asking her, Rafi decided, “We’ll have a bottle of the Chateau Margaux.” The man said something fawning, then quickly disappeared.

“That sound expensive,” she argued, frowning at him. “Call him back and tell him the house red wine is fine.”

Rafi laughed, leaning back in his chair as he shook his head. “No.”

Carys blinked, glaring at him. “No? Just no?”

He shrugged one shoulder in a very European manner. “No. I like good wine and I’m not going to order the ‘house’ wine by the glass.”

Carys’s eyes narrowed and she subconsciously tilted her head slightly. “Are you a wine snob?”

He chuckled again. “I suppose I am. And I hope that you might become a wine snob after trying the wine I ordered. Once you try it, you’ll never be able to go back to house wines again.”

Carys folded her arms over her chest, resting her elbows on the table. “Then I’m not going to try it.”

“Why would you deny yourself a taste of one of the best wines in the world?”

“The best?”

He grinned. “Okay, maybe just an excellent wine. Not the best.” He leaned forward. “The best vintages are in my wine cellar.”

Carys rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Of course you have a wine cellar.”

He lifted a dark, mocking eyebrow. “You don’t?”

She grunted. “Not only do I not have a wine cellar. But I don’t even have a wine pantry or a wine fridge. In fact, I store my wine in one of those cross-hatched things on top of my fridge.”

He cringed. “You should never store your wine over a fridge. Heat rises from the top of the unit, which alters the structure of the wine.”

Carys laughed, leaning back into her surprisingly comfortable chair. “You’re kind of cute when you’re protecting a bottle of wine that I got on sale at the grocery store.”

He shuddered mockingly, and then the sommelier arrived with the bottle, showing the label to Rafi.

He examined it gravely, then nodded his approval.

The wine pouring ritual started and Carys watched with fascination.

Rafi sniffed, swirled, and then sampled the wine, nodded, then the wine was poured for her as she kept a straight face, watching with suppressed amusement.

Rafi watched her...no, frowned at her, during the entire ritual.

“I’m not going to try it, Rafi,” she told him firmly, crossing her hands in her lap. She was unaware of the playful smile curling her lips or the sparkle of daring in her eyes.

“Why not?”

She toyed with the scarf she wore. “Because if it’s really as good as you say it is, then I’ll love it. And the wines that I currently have stored on top of my fridge are going to taste horrible in comparison. I’ll never be able to drink wine again.”

He threw back his head, laughing at her logic, and warmth washed over her, like stepping out into the sunshine.

His amusement took Carys’s breath away. Goodness, he was gorgeous!

Those high cheekbones and sharp jawline were the kind male models dreamed of having.

But there was a confidence in him that most handsome men could never achieve. It was...intoxicating!

Carys had never had a confident male role model in her life, so she pulled back from Rafi’s allure. In that moment, she knew that she could lose herself in his magic. She’d craved a strong, male figure in her life, one that hadn’t rejected her since she was twelve years old.

“Carys?” Rafi asked, leaning forward. “What just happened?”

Carys fiddled with the silver knife and spoon beside her plate, refusing to look at him. “I don’t know what you mean,” she lied.

“One moment, you were laughing with me, and now you look as if you’re about to cry.” He reached out and, for some reason, Carys put her hand in his. His warm fingers wrapped around hers comfortingly. “What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” she said, dismissing that horrible time in her life.

She'd gotten past her father's rejection.

She was stronger because she'd learned to be independent.

She lifted her chin and banished the painful memories.

She reclaimed her hand, tucking it under the table but immediately missed the warmth.

"Something obviously happened, but I'm won't press you about it." He nodded to the glass of wine. "I will, however, dare you to try the wine, because I truly think you'll appreciate this vintage."

Carys eyed him for a long moment. He waited patiently.

She sighed, accepting defeat as she rolled her eyes.

"Fine! But only because I really love wine." With a sigh, she gave in.

"This might be the only time in my life that I'll get to taste a really good one.

" She lifted the glass and sniffed, swirling the wine as she'd seen him do.

The "legs" of the wine were pronounced and the aroma...

complex. She couldn't identify the various scents, but they were compelling.

When she took her first sip, Carys let the flavors flow over her tongue, paying close attention to the different notes. After swallowing, she closed her eyes, sighing at the aftertaste that just...warmed her mouth with hints of pear and berry, maybe a touch of brandy.

“Perfect, right?” he asked, interrupting her nearly orgasmic pleasure.

Carys glared at him over the rim of her glass. “You’re ruining my concentration, sir.”

He grinned, lifting his hands, palms out. “Forgive me. Please continue.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi watched, utterly fascinated. As she sniffed and stared into the ruby depths of the wine, he couldn't tear his eyes away.

When she took her second sip, Rafi tensed unknowingly.

He watched as she swirled the wine in her mouth, then leaned her head back, closing her eyes as she once again savored the flavors.

“Oh my!” she whispered as his body tightened with lust. “That is...exquisite!”

Holy hell! His body throbbed, feeling like he was on the edge of a climax just from watching her take a sip of wine!

Yes! But even more important, Rafi realized he desperately wanted to hear her say those same words after he brought her to her own climax.

He wanted to feel and taste her pleasure on his tongue and around his shaft as she shattered just like that!

He wanted to give her the same pleasure with his body, to feel her shudder and know she was experiencing the same aftershocks.

She sipped again and Rafi tensed, waiting for her next reaction.

It was just as powerful as the first time.

“Wow!” she said with awe. He watched, his muscles tightening as he fought for

control of his body.

It took monumental effort, but as he shifted in his chair, slowly, he regained control of himself.

Then he had to watch as she gently put the wine glass down. She did so with such precision, he couldn't help picturing those fingers touching him, wrapping around his erection and slowly, carefully, exploring every inch of him.

Damn it! What the hell was she doing to him? He always maintained control! He prided himself on never losing his cool. But Carys had vanquished his self-control with just a few sips of wine.

“Thank you,” she said in a reverent tone, gripping the edges of the table.

When he lifted his eyes from her fingers, staring into those blue depths, he saw that she was just as overwhelmed as he was.

“Food,” he blurted. He noted the surprise in her eyes and inhaled. It took him several moments to relax.

“Food?” Carys echoed softly.

“Yes. Food. Eating. Dinner.” He slowly inhaled again. Finally, he reached for the menu. “Are you in the mood for chicken? Beef? Seafood?” He glanced at her. “Are you a vegetarian?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys shook her head. “I’m ‘plant forward’ but I love meat,” she explained, feeling as if she were moving through a hazy, erotic dream.

Her body was throbbing, intensely aware of the man sitting across from her.

Every movement fascinated her. As he gripped the menu, her eyes lingered on his hands, wondering what it would feel like to have those hands cup her breasts.

His fingers were long, like a pianist’s.

How would it feel if the pad of his thumb brushed over her nipple?

What had he asked her? Oh, right! Food.

“What does ‘plant forward’ mean?” he asked. He looked genuinely interested and she didn’t understand why they were still here. Why didn’t he just toss the menus aside and put her on the table?

“Um...I tend to eat plant-based foods as much as possible. I do eat meat, but I aim for fruits, vegetables, and legumes most of the time.”

“That sounds interesting. When did you start doing that?”

She sighed and laid the menu down. Folding her hands in her lap, she tried to concentrate on the conversation.

“I tried to be a vegetarian during college. But I realized I was just eating cheese for

my protein and knew that wasn't healthy.

"She shrugged and took a deep breath, trying to stop wondering what it would be like if he kissed her.

She looked away, staring unseeingly out the window.

"I started researching nutrition and..." she shrugged. "Now, I just eat what seems delicious."

"How about a steak for dinner? I know this restaurant serves delicious steaks."

Carys shook her head. "Not tonight. I don't think I could truly enjoy a steak just now."

The heat in his eyes intensified and Carys shifted slightly in her seat. She didn't want to eat. Her hunger was a distant memory now. She was nearly trembling with a need that was completely unfamiliar and she had no idea how to deal with it.

"Chicken then," he decided.

Why was he still talking about food?

The waiter arrived and they both ordered chicken, but different dishes. Carys wasn't exactly sure what she selected. In fact, she merely glanced at the menu options and ordered the first chicken dish that caught her eye.

"Tell me about yourself," he urged.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. "I'm pretty boring, actually."

“I doubt that. Where did you grow up?”

They discussed their past. She told him about growing up in the suburbs, playing soccer on the weekend and the piano lessons that she’d despised. He told her about growing up in Lativa. He’d played soccer too, when he’d gone off to university, but hadn’t ever learned to play a musical instrument.

She’d taken French in high school. Rafi spoke French, Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin fluently.

Their meal arrived and Carys might as well have been eating sawdust. She had no idea what was on her plate since her eyes continuously drifted to his.

“Should we get out of here?” he asked.

Carys froze, staring into his eyes. She saw the promise there and was startled when she found herself nodding. “Yes. Please!”

He lifted his hand and the waiter appeared.

“We need the check.” Then Rafi shook his head and stood up.

“You know what? Never mind.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out several hundred dollars, which he handed to the wide-eyed waiter.

“This should cover it.” Then he took Carys’s hand, and they left the restaurant, nearly running.

The SUV was already waiting at the curb, the back door open and waiting for them.

Carys had no idea where they were going because Rafi held her hand, his thumb

stroking the inside of her wrist. She'd never realized that her pulse point could be such an erogenous zone, but at the first pass of his thumb, she gasped.

She wanted to leap onto his lap, wrap her arms around his neck, and kiss him.

But the driver and the guard were the front seat.

So instead, she sat there, staring up at him, feeling her heart pound against her ribs as other places throbbed with urgent need.

It was almost embarrassing how turned on she felt.

"We're here," Rafi rasped. Carys had no idea where "here" was, nor did she care.

He slid out of the seat, still holding her hand.

She slid with him, barely remembering to grab her tote bag as she stood up.

She slung it over her shoulder as she followed him into an unfamiliar building.

A part of her had a moment's hesitation since she was following a man she barely knew, into a strange building, in a part of the city she wasn't familiar with, but Rafi led her into a private elevator, and directly into his arms. Since the two men followed them into the elevator, Carys tensed, wanting so badly to kiss him but not wanting their first kiss to have an audience.

She gripped his upper arms tightly as she stared into his eyes, his hands pulling her just as tightly against his body.

That's when she noticed his erection throbbing against her stomach as her knees went weak.

This wasn't the tepid warmth that she'd felt when other men had touched or kissed her. This was a molten, white-hot, painful level of need. Carys was on the edge of insanity and if he didn't kiss her soon, she might scream.

Thankfully, the elevator doors opened and the men stepped out first. Carys was oblivious to everything. Her whole focus was on Rafi.

"In here," he hissed, practically pulling her through a door...

and straight into his arms again. Carys didn't hesitate.

She was exactly where her body screamed to be.

When she felt his hands on her back, pulling her closer, she whimpered and went up on her toes, reaching up to pull his head down to her.

And then...finally...he kissed her. Carys's head spun with desire as he nipped at her lower lip, demanding that she open for him, and when she did, the experience was shocking!

Someone kept whimpering and she tried to ignore it, focusing on touching him, shoving his clothes out of the way so that she could touch his bare skin.

There were ripping sounds. Then she felt him pick her up.

Carys wrapped her legs around his waist, kissing her way down his throat.

She heard a door close again, then he set her on her feet and began stripping off her clothes.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi was nearly out of his mind, desperate to be inside Carys, to feel her clench around his shaft, screaming his name.

But he needed more than just that. He needed to explore her skin, to learn her body.

He tossed her dress away and released her bra clasp, tossing it away too.

Then he looked down at the most perfect breasts he'd ever seen.

For a long moment, he simply stared, too entranced to do anything more.

But another of those sexy whimpers and he leaned in.

His mouth found one nipple while his thumb stroked the other.

He felt her back arch, pressing that nipple more firmly into his mouth.

He sucked hard, intoxicated by the feeling of her writhing against him.

When her fingers dove into his hair, he groaned, then moved his mouth to the other nipple, pinching the one his mouth had just abandoned. "Rafi!" she cried out, spurring him on. He sucked harder, needing another moan, another sound from her. Those sounds were like water and he was dying of thirst.

Then she did the most amazing thing. Rafi was just about to switch back to the first nipple, needing another taste, but Carys's grip on his hair tightened.

“Don’t...stop!” she hissed, arching against him, pressing that nipple to his lips.

So, he continued teasing, while his thumb and forefinger pinched and stroked her other breast. Then, unexpectedly, her body tensed.

For a moment, Rafi didn’t know what was happening.

But when realization dawned, he was stunned.

Then he was so turned on, he was literally in pain because Carys, lovely, charming, delightful Carys had climaxed!

“That was so hot!” he groaned, shifting his abdomen against her core to help extend the orgasm. When she laughed, it was lovely and sexy. The way she rolled her hips against him, as if she were pulling the last bits of pleasure from her orgasm, made his head spin. Damn, that was hot!

She sighed and Rafi looked down at her breasts.

But he’d enjoyed them enough. Time to discover what other parts of this beautiful woman’s body was as sensitive.

So, he moved lower, kissing and nibbling his way down her stomach.

With deft fingers, he removed her panties.

But when he looked at her boots, Rafi couldn’t take them off.

Just sliding his hands over the leather was turning him on even more.

So now, as he looked down at her, she was completely naked except for her leather

boots.

“Stay just like that,” he ordered and stood up, wondering vaguely when they’d ended up on the bed. “Spread your legs for me, Carys.”

She did, but not wide enough for him. He paused with one hand on his belt, then spread her legs wider. She was so beautiful! Her pink folds glistened with arousal and he could just see that nub. A part of her that he couldn’t wait to explore in more depth.

Quickly, he stripped off his clothes, tossing everything out of the way. Then he came toward her, watching her, sensing her nervousness. But that wasn’t what he wanted her to feel.

Rafi kissed her softly, slowly...until he felt her body melt. Only then did he kiss his way down her body again.

“I think I’ve had my pleasure,” she teased with a soft sigh when he kissed the soft swell of her stomach.

“I disagree,” he replied, and moved even lower.

With his fingers teasing a path, his mouth followed.

Rafi inhaled the sweet scent of her, then licked.

Yes, delicious! Carys had just become his favorite flavor.

She tasted like nectar and he licked, teased until he heard her hiss, then his mouth slid over that nub while his finger slid into her heat.

Immediately, he felt her muscles tighten around his digit.

He had to clench his teeth and take a moment to regain control.

He wanted to give her at least one more climax before he entered her.

However, it came faster than he'd expected.

As soon as he started sucking and his finger twisted inside of her, Carys's back arched and he felt her body quake with another release.

It was so erotic, that he couldn't hold back this time.

Moving over her, he thrust into her, taking her gasp of surprise into his mouth.

He started moving, pulling her hips closer.

Every cry from her made his mind spin with lust. He was moving faster, harder and...

too soon, he felt his own orgasm explode through him.

He couldn't see for a long moment as the pleasure ripped through him.

When he opened his eyes again, Rafi looked down at Carys, then wanted to do it all over again when he recognized her smile of intense satisfaction. Rafi collapsed against her, pressing his face against her neck as he let the last shudders of pleasure wash over them.

Finally, he rolled to the side, taking Carys with him so she was draped over his chest, her soft, blond hair tickling his neck and cheek. With a gentleness that bordered on reverence, he stroked her hair, her back, and her bottom, smiling when she squirmed

closer.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

The following morning, Carys rushed back to her apartment. She was vacillating between telling herself that the previous night had been wrong, and smiling dreamily at the memories of the pleasure Rafi had given her.

But as soon as she stepped through the door of her own apartment, Carys could tell something was...

off. Everything was still where it should be and yet...

something was wrong. Carys looked around, not sure why she was hesitating.

Instead of heading directly to her bedroom to shower and change, she stood very still, listening.

After several minutes and nothing moved, no one burst out from behind a doorway, Carys could breathe again.

“You’re being silly!” she whispered to herself. Taking a deep breath, she forced her feet to carry her deeper into her apartment. She was cautious, looking around.

“No one is here,” she whispered, still looking around.

She dumped her tote bag on her neatly made bed and...

! Wait. Why was her bed made? Had she done that yesterday morning?

Carys hated making her bed. It was both a rebellion, because her stepmother and

father had forced her to make her bed every morning, grounding her if it wasn't up to her stepmother's very particular standards.

Plus, she simply didn't see the point of making the bed every morning.

Why make the bed when one is just going to mess it up again later?

Nervously turning away from the neatly made bed, she stepped into her bathroom.

Was everything...cleaner than before? Was she losing her mind?

Carys might not make her bed every morning, but she was relatively clean.

Still, she didn't remember her bathroom being this clean. Everything seemed to sparkle!

But...who would break into her apartment to clean? Burglars simply didn't do that! Nothing was missing, everything was just...cleaner than she remembered.

"This is nuts!" she muttered and ignored the oddities. "You're running late for work!"

She jumped into the shower, then dressed. If Carys put more effort into her appearance this morning, it was simply because she felt so good. After being with Rafi last night, she felt...happier than usual. Plus, he'd given her the green light on her marketing ideas. Life was pretty good!

Yeah, she knew that last night with him had been a one night stand. Still, it had been nice.

No, "nice" wasn't a strong enough word. It had been...

! “Wow!” she whispered as she pulled on a pair of black knee high boots to go with her black skirt and pink sweater.

Grinning, she fluffed her hair, checked her lipstick, then grabbed her bag and headed out the door to work. Was there an extra bounce to her step?

Carys chuckled quietly as she headed for the subway. “You’re being silly,” she scolded herself, then stuck her earbuds in to listen to the news on the ride to work.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Thirty minutes later, Carys stepped into the office feeling...

strange. Had she really done all of that with Rafi last night?

Had she truly released her inhibitions and just...

exploded with pleasure? She'd dated her last boyfriend for six months before she'd had sex with him.

And she'd given in only because he'd threatened to break up with her if she didn't.

It hadn't been awful, but her experiences in the past had been nothing like last night. She'd climaxed...five, no six times all told. After they'd fallen asleep the first time, he'd woken her up to make love to her all over again. It had been...shocking on so many levels.

Even now as she walked to her tedious, beige cubicle, her body thrummed with the echoes of last night's sensations.

It was as if...she'd just spent the night in the arms of a man who enjoyed pleasuring a woman.

No, it was more than that. Rafi hadn't just enjoyed pleasuring her.

It was almost as if he'd become obsessed with finding new ways to pleasure her.

She should be exhausted. However, she actually felt more alive, awake, and aware of

the world than she'd ever felt before.

Sitting down at her computer, she sifted through the project she'd started yesterday. But before she could really get started, a female voice interrupted her.

"You're not going to win, you know."

Carys looked up to find Tanya, the assistant director for her department, leaning over the short wall of her cubicle. The woman looked smug and triumphant.

Carys blinked, wondering if she'd missed something while she'd been thinking about Rafi. "I'm sorry? What am I not going to win?"

"Him," she smiled with confidence, tilting her head toward the end of the hallway. "Our new boss." She smirked, sliding a finger along the V collar of her silk blouse. "The man will be mine."

"Who?" Carys asked, genuinely perplexed.

Tanya laughed, shaking her head at Carys's confusion.

Usually, Tanya wore her hair up, with understated makeup.

She normally dressed as the professional she was.

But today, her makeup was heavier, sexier, and her hair was down around her shoulders.

Plus, the silk blouse she'd chosen was tighter and nearly see-through.

Tanya hadn't bothered to fasten the top three buttons.

She looked...extremely sexy and clearly knew it.

Tanya leaned closer, smirking. "I'm going to get our new boss.

" She pushed away from Carys's office "wall", sliding her hands down over her tight skirt pointedly.

"We had dinner last night. So just keep your puppy-love eyes off him." She leaned closer again, her eyes turning angry. "Because he's mine !"

Tanya turned and stalked away, her hips swaying. Carys mentally replayed the conversation, wondering if her supervisor had lost her mind. Had Tanya really just claimed to have gone out to dinner with Rafi last night? That was impossible, because he'd been with Carys.

She nearly laughed out loud, but since some of her co-workers were walking in, settling down at their work stations, Carys suppressed her amusement and focused on her work.

Yesterday, Rafi had mentioned that he'd liked her ideas, so she pulled up the other products that the company manufactured.

She leaned over her sketchbook, her pencil flying over the paper as she fleshed out ideas.

She figured that the concept could be a branding solution for them, with all of their advertising having the same feel, the same subconscious message.

It would take several years and a more cohesive message, but eventually, all of the products would be thought of with the same positive message.

She was thinking along the lines of that sports company's motto of "just do it".

However, her thoughts kept straying to last night.

And this morning. She'd snuck out early this morning while Rafi slept.

That's when she'd gotten a good look at the hotel in which he was staying.

At first, she'd thought it was his home, but when she'd gone down in the elevator, she'd stepped out into a hotel.

One of the hotels in which she and Andi had hoped to come and have cocktails one day.

After they'd saved up enough money to afford the luxurious treat.

Carys was busy working on several new ideas when she suddenly realized that she was famished! She'd skipped lunch yesterday and...well, she and Rafi had dinner but she hadn't eaten much of it. Now Tanya was bragging about how she'd had dinner with Rafi last night, and...!

A giggle escaped before she could stop it, then she quickly slapped a hand over her mouth. She looked around and noticed that several of her co-workers were eyeing her curiously. "Sorry!" she muttered. She lowered her head and forced herself to concentrate on work.

"Ms. Remington?" a voice called out.

Carys turned to discover a delivery guy with a bag in his hands. "Yes, that's me."

The man thrust the bag toward her with a casual smile. "Delivery for you."

Instead of taking the bag, she stared at it for a long moment. The delivery guy, impatient, set the bag down on her desk and walked away. Carys finally stood up and called out, “But I didn’t order anything!”

The guy merely waved, acknowledging that he’d heard her, and kept walking.

Carys sat back down, still staring at the bag. It was just a brown bag, but whatever was inside, smelled delicious! Carefully, Carys opened the bag, half expecting something weird to pop out.

Instead, the scent of sausage and cheese hit her nostrils and Carys nearly moaned.

Peering inside, she found a breakfast sandwich wrapped in paper.

Pulling it out, she inhaled the savory scents, then unwrapped the sandwich to find a sausage, egg, and cheese delight in her hands.

Biting into the breakfast treat, she nearly groaned with the savory sensations hitting her taste buds. “Oh, this is delicious!”

Her cell phone pinged and she looked at the screen. “Unknown Number” revealed that someone had sent her a message. When she opened it, taking another bite, she read the message.

“If you’d stayed until this morning, we could be sharing breakfast right now instead of both of us eating alone. Next time, don’t leave so early.”

Carys grinned, her body tingling in anticipation. “Next time” implied that she was going to see him again. “Next time” meant that he’d enjoyed himself as much as she had!

Carys sent him a winking emoji, then bit into the sandwich as she turned to concentrate on creating new scripts and scenes that were just different enough to showcase a new product, but similar enough that the company's logo would generate brand loyalty.

The day trudged on without any incident. Because she'd had such a delicious breakfast, Carys skipped lunch, not wanting to feel full all day. Still, it was a surprise when she received a text message from Rafi later in the day.

"Do you have plans tonight? I thought that maybe we could try having dinner again tonight."

Carys smiled, then looked furtively around to make sure her co-workers hadn't seen it. She looked down at her black skirt and sweater, deciding that she didn't want to head to a fancy restaurant.

"Dinner sounds good, but how about some place more casual? I know of a great Mexican restaurant with the best margaritas in town."

His reply was almost immediate. "Mexican it is. What time will you be done here?"

She grinned, then looked around again. Thankfully, her coworkers were heading out for the night since it was nearing six o'clock, well past quitting time.

"I'm ready whenever you are."

"Perfect answer! Meet me down in the parking garage in five minutes."

Carys chewed her lip thoughtfully, considering how to respond. Yes, most of her coworkers were already gone, but what if someone saw her getting into his car? She'd be labeled as the slut who was sleeping her way up the promotion ladder.

“I’ll meet you there,” she told him, then texted him the address.

“Are you ashamed to be seen with me?” he texted in response.

“Yep,” she replied without hesitation.

There was silence after that and Carys wondered if she should have come up with a different response. Maybe something that wasn’t so honest.

“Hey, Carys, do you have the sales data from last quarter’s promotions?”

Distracted, Carys tucked her phone into her purse, then turned to email the report. “You have it in your in-box,” she answered.

Alone again, Carys stared at her phone, wondering if she’d said something wrong when she saw no response.

With a heavy sigh, she shut down her computer and left the office. Down in the parking garage, she headed to the subway station.

So, why was she so worried about what she’d texted to Rafi? He had to realize that she wouldn’t want her co-workers knowing about this fling with the boss, right?

Carys arrived at the Mexican restaurant, wondering if she’d completely messed up. Maybe she should call Andi? No, Andi had her own issues. Andi had recently gotten a huge promotion and was now working on a specialized team in...somewhere in the world.

As Carys walked into the restaurant, she wondered if Andi was doing okay. How was the accounting department handling the changes to the running of the company?

She walked in and looked around. No Rafi. Was he ignoring her?

Of course he was! Angrily, Carys walked over to the roughed out bar.

The restaurant was actually just a hole-in-the-wall place but the food was excellent.

It had gotten busier in the past year as more people heard about the “dive”.

But tonight, it was relatively empty, only four tables taken by other customers.

She was just about to leave when Rafi walked in, his eyes locking onto hers as he quickly eliminated the distance between them.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Are you...?” Carys started to ask, but he kissed her before she could finish her question. Her arms were already around his neck by the time he lifted his head to stare down at her.

“Did you have a productive day?” he asked, his voice huskier than usual.

Since he kept his hands on her back, pressing her against his hard, delicious body, Carys didn't bother to remove her hands from his hair, which was softer than it should be on such a hard, muscular man. He should have rough hair, not soft, silky strands.

“It was good,” she admitted, struggling to remember what he'd asked her. “How about yours?”

“Good.” He released his grip on her back, but those hands slid down to her hips. “Until some woman told me that she didn't want to be seen with me.” He looked around, then down at Carys. “Are you sure this place has a license to serve food?”

Carys laughed, ignoring his comment about being seen together. “I promise the food is great. And yes, they have a license.”

He sighed, tilting his head. “Let's grab a table toward the back.”

Carys grinned, her mood lightening now that he was here with her. What was it about this man that made her feel so good?

They ordered margaritas and chips with the best salsa. For dinner, she got the taco

combination while Rafi ordered the fajitas. The steak and veggies came on a sizzling platter and, for a moment, Rafi looked confused as to what to do with the parts of his meal.

“Just put it together the way you like it,” she explained to him, nodding her appreciation when the waiter set down their second round of margaritas.

He looked across the table at her with a dark, raised eyebrow. “You think I don’t know how to eat fajitas?”

She laughed and took a big sip of her drink, enjoying the sweet and sour flavors. “I think you’re a food snob and wouldn’t know excellent flavors unless they were put in front of you at a five hundred dollar a plate establishment.” She was only half kidding.

But he took the bait. With precision, he piled the meat, onions, green peppers, and sour cream on his flour tortilla. Carys watched, thinking to warn him that he was overloading the tortilla. The trick was to have just a few ingredients on the tortilla so that nothing fell out when one took a bite.

Obviously, Rafi hadn’t ever had them like this, so when he lifted his over-stuffed tortilla to his mouth and took a bite, more than half fell out the other end back onto the platter.

Carys snickered, then covered her amusement with her own taco, which was perfectly filled. “You missed a bit,” she told him, chuckling at his frustration.

“You know you’re going to pay for making me look foolish, right?” he warned her, concentrating on rebuilding his fajita again, but with less fillings this time.

“I know you’ve just proven my point.” She lifted her drink and took a long swallow,

enjoying the way the tequila soothed the edges from the day.

“How so?” he asked and took another bite of his fajita.

“You didn’t know how to fill your fajita. You’re a newbie at this.”

He took a chip and dunked it in the spicy salsa. “That doesn’t mean that I’m a food snob.”

“Aren’t you though?” she teased, tilting her head slightly. She narrowed her eyes. “I think you are. You might not realize it yet.” She feigned a frown. “And that’s really sad. It’s tough to not be self-aware.”

He growled something and selected another flour tortilla to start a second fajita. “Oh, you don’t think I’m self-aware?”

“Nope!” she laughed, leaning back in her chair with her margarita in hand. “However, I acknowledge your superior talents in other areas that are equally important.”

His hands froze and he looked across the table at her. One dark eyebrow lifted. “And what’s that area of expertise?”

She knew what he wanted her to say, and her small, triumphant smile warned him that she was going in a different direction. “You’re excellent at motivating the staff at work.”

He growled and stood up. Carys laughed, then quickly downed the rest of her margarita only moments before he threw a bunch of cash onto the table.

It was probably twice the cost of the food, but Carys didn’t have a chance to tell him

that.

He grabbed her hands and pulled her out of her chair.

She was nearly carried out of the restaurant and, laughing hard, was stuffed into the back of the SUV.

The same man was driving but there was a different man in the passenger seat.

Carys barely acknowledged them, continuing to tease Rafi. “Oh, so now you think you can manhandle me?” she joked.

He growled, then slid his hand under her pink sweater. “You don’t think so?”

Carys couldn’t speak. Not with his hand teasing her like that.

Somehow, his fingers worked their way under her bra and located her nipple.

Carys gasped, grabbing his wrist as she glanced warily at the men in the front seat.

They didn’t even look around, but she stilled his hand.

She didn’t like the idea of someone watching what they were doing.

Following her gaze, he pressed a button and a divider came up between the back seat and the men in the front seat.

Carys hadn’t expected the divider, but she couldn’t really think, distracted as she was.

Not with his thumb and forefinger pinching her nipple.

He'd done that last night and she'd come apart. It wasn't much different tonight.

"I can't..." she whispered, desperate to feel the beautiful release, like last night. But not...not in the back of a vehicle where anyone could see them.

"The windows are tinted," he murmured, shifting her around so that her legs were draped over his lap.

He had more freedom in this position and she was nearly lying on her back on the seat.

He spread her legs and pressed his thumb against that nub through her panties.

In the back of her mind, Carys decided to always wear skirts around this man in the future.

His fingers were magic, she thought, her body tightening with every stroke of that thumb. "Rafi!" she gasped, shifting her hips against his hand.

"Show me what I'm doing to you, habibi," he whispered, his tone and thumb urgent now.

With those words and his mysterious endearment, her body exploded. She pressed her hips against his hand, her own hand coming down to guide his. Within moments, her mouth fell open in a silent cry as her body splintered apart.

When she opened her eyes, Rafi was kissing her neck and she was trembling, now straddling his hips.

The SUV came to a stop in the underground parking garage.

It took all of Carys's concentration to stand up and walk beside Rafi, enter the elevator and pretend as if nothing had happened in the back of that SUV.

He chuckled, looking down at her. When she started to lift her hand, self-consciously thinking to fix her hair or...whatever, he pulled her into his arms. Carys leaned against his chest and inhaled the spicy sent of him, reveling in how good he felt like this.

But before she could relax, the elevator doors opened.

The two men stepped out, then held the doors open while Rafi casually led her into the penthouse.

And just like the previous night, she didn't have time to admire the elegant décor.

Rafi took her hand and practically dragged her into the bedroom.

Within seconds of closing the door, he was on his knees, pulling her skirt down.

"I love your boots," he grumbled.

"I didn't know that was your kink," she said, laughing as she balanced with one hand on his head while he stripped off her underwear. When he stood, his hands captured her sweater, tossing that onto the floor with the rest of her clothes.

"It is," he replied, reaching around her to release the catch on her bra. When it was gone, Rafi pushed away so he could feast his eyes on her.

"I'm completely naked and you're still dressed," she whispered, trembling in anticipation of whatever Rafi was going to do to her next.

“You could fix that,” he replied.

Carys smiled, her need increasing. There was no way she was going to resist the opportunity of stripping him down.

“I didn’t get to touch you yesterday,” she whispered, releasing the buttons on his dress shirt, one at a time.

He wasn’t wearing a jacket or tie and every release exposed more tanned skin and the fascinating muscles underneath.

She kissed every inch of him that she exposed, running her fingers over those rippling muscles, fascinated with every part of him.

When she was on her knees, pulling off his boxers, like he’d done to her, his erection was right there.

Carys couldn’t resist and took him into her mouth.

He wasn’t prepared for her warm mouth wrapping around him and hissed, but didn’t push her away.

Rafi’s fingers dove into her hair, and as she licked and sucked at him, his hand hit the wall, trying to steady himself.

He could only take that kind of torturous pleasure for a few moments.

With a growl, he lifted her into his arms and tossed her onto the bed.

He barely waited for Carys to stop bouncing before he spread her legs wide.

He paused for a brief moment to admire the picture she made, appreciating the pink beauty of her folds before he pulled one of her legs over his shoulder, then thrust into her.

She gasped and Rafi froze, praying that he hadn't hurt her.

“Move!” she hissed, rolling her hips as he chuckled at her command. And he obeyed, sliding in and out of her heat. With every thrust, her hips lifted, meeting him, her inner muscles tightening, making his brain fizzle.

All too soon, his body tightened, his thrusts coming faster, harder. He knew that he didn't have much time left, so he pressed his thumb against that nub, helping Carys come right along with him.

He absorbed her cries into his mouth, kissing her deeply as they tumbled over the cliff together, clinging to each other as the shudders slowed, shifting to trembling aftershocks.

When they finally caught their breaths, Rafi pulled Carys into his arms, breathing in her sweet, feminine scents, his mind fracturing as he replayed the past hour in his mind.

“Will you stay until morning?” he asked, whispering in her ear.

Carys was more than half asleep, but she managed to answer, “No.”

Rafi wasn't sure if he should be irritated by her stubbornness, or amused by her honesty. “Why not?”

She sighed, her eyes already closed as her body melted into his. “Men don't stay. I leave first.”

Her response was so unexpected, it woke him up. He looked down at her, but saw she was already asleep. Only the moonlight lit up her lovely, sleeping features. But Carys's response was so revealing, he couldn't stop staring at her.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Hey there, stranger!” Andi called out, wrapping Carys into a warm hug.

It had been over two weeks since she’d seen Andi and...

two weeks that she’d been sleeping with...

or more appropriately, having sex, with Rafi.

She spent nearly every night in his arms and, every morning, Carys braced herself for the words, “It’s over.

” So far, that hadn’t happened and Carys was desperately trying to pretend that her feelings weren’t becoming involved.

Unfortunately, Rafi had flown off to London for a meeting two days ago. He’d told her the details, but as soon as she’d heard the words, “I have to go,” Carys’s heart had dropped. It was almost as if she needed to feel Rafi’s arms around her in order to function properly.

“Are you okay?” Andi asked, peering into Carys’s eyes. “You look...I don’t know.”

Carys hugged her best friend, closing her eyes as she fought back the threatening tears.

“I just missed you! I haven’t had anyone to talk with and tell the office gossip to.

” She pulled back. “I know that you have become an international traveler and I’m

jealous, but you've been gone for too long.

We only had time for a coffee chat during your last break.

So, how are you doing?" This. This was what she needed.

Andi was so down to earth, so logical and sensible. And she was back!

Andi pulled away, but kept her hands on Carys's shoulders. "I'm fine," Andi announced, examining Carys more carefully. "Seriously, are you okay?"

"Yeah," Carys sighed, pulling back but keeping her mouth shut.

"Just busy at work, you know. With the new boss, he's pretty...

demanding." That last word caused her cheeks to burn, so she turned her head away as if looking for a table.

"Why don't you grab that table over there and I'll get our drinks? "

"Sounds good." Five minutes later, Carys sat down, sliding the tea over to Andi while she cradled her coffee in her hands.

"So, what's been going on while I was in London?" Andi asked.

Carys hesitated. She wasn't ready to tell Andi about Rafi. That was her secret and she felt too...raw...to speak about it. Plus, it was only temporary. Rafi would move on when she irritated him enough. He was getting close to that point already because she refused to stay the whole night.

So instead, she brought up the other issue that had been nagging at her lately. "I think

someone's been in my apartment.”

Andi's hand froze and she stared at Carys over the rim of her paper cup. “Like...a burglar?”

Carys shook her head, trying to say the right words.

“No. Nothing is missing. But it just feels like someone has been in my place. I can't say so for sure, and I've been so busy lately, that I could be wrong.

But it just feels like things have been moved around.

” She glanced at a couple strolling hand in hand, talking and laughing.

She turned away, focusing on her friend.

“This is going to sound really weird, but,” she hesitated, knowing that Andi was going to think Carys was a lunatic, “...everything is cleaner.” When Andi simply listened, Carys relaxed and continued.

“Then there was one day I came home from...work,” she filled in quickly, hoping that her friend hadn't noticed the slight hesitation, “everything was cleaned up. Bed made, bathroom cleaned.” She paused, thinking back to other times.

“Then another time, I came home and there was a strange scent.”

“What kind of scent?” Andi asked, leaning forward. “Like a mildew?”

“No, a perfume or...I don't know.” She sighed, tightening her grip around the coffee cup. “Maybe air freshener? I've never smelled it before, or since, so maybe it was just the maintenance guy coming in.”

Andi's eyes narrowed and she tilted her head slightly. "Does he do that? Come in and clean stuff for you while you're out?"

Carys bit her lip. "In the past, he's always given me twenty-four hours warning when he's needed to come in. And he's always left me a note to let me know that he came through."

"So, it wasn't the maintenance guy," Andi supposed, pursing her lips as she considered the issue. "You think it could be...?" She stopped, unwilling to say the man's name. It was sort of like saying "Voldemort's" name out loud.

Carys's fingers tightened around her cup. "Yeah. I've been getting letters from him too."

"Wait... what?" Andi demanded, leaning in closer. "You never mentioned that!" She paused and Carys saw the hurt in her best friend's eyes. But Andi moved on, focusing on the salient issue. "What did he say?"

Carys shrugged dismissively. "I only opened one letter from him and that was over a month ago." She thought about that day.

It was the afternoon she'd actually met Rafi and the memory made her smile.

"I opened that one, read the first few lines." She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Apparently, he's sad and wants to explain.

"She offered an inelegant snort. "There have been others but I won't even open them anymore.

I just write 'return to sender' on the envelope and send them back.

” Her chin lifted, a defiant movement. “I want nothing to do with him.”

“I don’t blame you,” Andi replied, putting a gentle hand on Carys’s arm. “So...,” she paused, choosing her words carefully, “do you think your dad is breaking into your apartment?”

Carys sighed, her shoulders sagging as she stared into her coffee. “I don’t know.” She lifted her eyes. “Maybe it’s just my imagination.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“You need to get security cameras, Car,” Andi said, leaning forward and touching Carys’s hand. “They aren’t anywhere near as expensive now, and if someone is coming into your personal space, then you need to find out who.”

“You’re right,” Carys replied, then forced a smile. “Enough about my problems. What’s going on with you?”

Andi told her about working in Singapore and London and how exciting it was to finally get to travel.

They talked about their coworkers and the book club coming up.

Neither had had a chance to read the book yet, but they vowed to “get on that”.

There was a new restaurant opening near their office so they made plans to meet up with their friend group for dinner soon.

Otherwise, it was nice to sit and relax together.

However, the whole time, Carys wanted to share her excitement over her time with Rafi, but held back. Telling someone would make the whole thing feel more...real,

somehow. And being real meant that it would end. As long as what she had with Rafi wasn't real, it could go on indefinitely. Right?

Yeah, that rationale didn't make much sense to her either, but she was too tired and overwhelmed to untangle her emotions.

So instead of telling her best friend about one of the most amazing men she'd ever met, Carys hugged Andi and returned to her cold, silent, oddly clean apartment all by herself, wondering what Rafi was doing.

Was he eating? Was he sipping some fabulous vintage of wine without her?

Or even worse, was he with another woman?

Carys dumped her purse on the floor and walked to the fridge, pulling down a bottle of the wine she'd bought at the grocery store over a month ago.

For several seconds, she stared at the label.

There wasn't anything special about it. It had only cost her about twenty-five dollars and she'd enjoyed the same brand in the past. At the time, she'd thought that the wine was extraordinary.

She'd never spent twenty-five dollars on a single bottle of wine before, but she'd had a good day at work and had wanted to celebrate.

"He's not going to ruin wine for me!" she muttered.

With an impatient huff, Carys opened the drawer, looking for the bottle opener, but she didn't see the jumble of cooking utensils.

Instead, all she could see was Rafi's face, relaxed in sleep when she'd left him last time.

Was Rafi with another woman? Was he smiling with this stranger and laughing?

Would he tease her about her hair falling over one eye like he did with her?

And would he then gently push it out of the way?

Like he did for her? With a gentle touch and a smile that made his eyes sparkle?

Was the other woman running her hands over his back? Would she appreciate all of the muscles there? Would she take the time to trace each one, trying to memorize the curves and the indentations because she knew that, eventually, she'd be replaced?

"Stop it!" Carys hissed, breaking the silence.

With a groan of frustration, she flipped through the spoons and spatulas, finding the wine opener.

She poured a generous portion into a glass.

Not a crystal glass. Just a regular wine glass that someone would get from a big-box store.

One that didn't shimmer in the light like a real crystal would.

"You're going to drive yourself nuts!" Carys lectured herself as she carried the glass of wine to the sofa. Grabbing the television remote, she turned it on. It had been a while since she'd watched television.

What would it be like to watch a movie with Rafi?

Would he let her snuggle up against his broad, muscular chest?

Or would he flip through messages on his phone during the movie, irritated with having to endure something so tedious?

Would he run his fingers through her hair?

Or would he fall asleep, bored with whatever movie they'd chosen?

Or was he doing that now? Was he snuggled up with another woman, watching a movie? He was gorgeous enough that he could walk into any bar or club and get any woman he fancied.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Stop it!” Carys told herself, but set the wine aside.

She didn't want to drink it. She shouldn't have tried the wine that first night or any of the nights over the past month.

She shouldn't have experienced that kind of wine-induced bliss.

Because now, everything else was going to be...

disappointing. It was going to take her weeks, possibly months, to get the taste of that wine out of her memory.

It was going to be a very long time before she'd manage to enjoy a glass of wine again!

When her phone buzzed, Carys didn't look at it.

She knew it would be Rafi. And she'd convinced herself that he was wrapped up in some other woman's arms right about now!

A woman who didn't have a miserable past!

A woman who could enjoy a temporary relationship and just...

move on to the next man. Or woman. Or...whatever!

A woman who could love him without reservation. Without fear that...he would

leave her for someone better.

The phone silenced and Carys took a long sip of her wine. It wasn't very good, but she took another sip. Then another, flipping through the channels. Nothing captured her attention.

She was on her third glass of wine and had watched the first fifteen minutes of four different movies when her phone rang again.

Because she hadn't imbibed this much in so long, Carys was just tipsy enough to answer the phone.

When she looked at the caller on her screen, the sneer was already in her tone when she answered.

"Is she worth it?"

There was a long silence. Then she heard, "Carys?"

"Rafi?" she mocked. "Is she good in bed? Does she do that thing with her tongue like I do?"

Another silence. Finally, he asked, "Carys, are you okay?"

She took another sip...or maybe a gulp...of wine.

"Yeah, I'm good. Maybe a little drunk. But that's okay, because I have to get used to bitter wine because some bastard convinced me to experience exceptional wine.

Some bastard decided to tempt me with things I can't have!

Someone, namely you , decided that I should fall for a guy who is just going to...

!” She stopped, unable to finish that sentence.

Instead, she took another sip of her wine and almost ended the call.

What was the point? He’d already moved on to someone else!

“Carys, are you jealous?”

“No!” she gasped, shifting on the sofa. She pulled her knees up to her chest, balancing the cheap glass filled with cheap wine on her knee.

“I’m fine. And I don’t care if you move on to the next woman.

It’s what men do. So, I expected this,” she concluded.

If the last word had to be forced out, then so be it.

“Honey, where are you?”

“Happily ensconced on my sofa. I’m watching a movie.

Something that we never got around to doing.

So, I’m glad that you moved on to another woman.

Now I can catch up on all of the movies that have come out over the past few weeks.

” She took another sip of her wine, then added, “Being with you seriously crimped my movie watching progress.”

He laughed and Carys couldn't stop the shiver of awareness that went down her spine. He'd done that while she'd been curled up against him, his hand stroking her bare back. And he'd made that deep, sexy sound right after she'd screamed his name while her body climaxed around his.

"Carys, turn on your phone's video, love," he ordered softly.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to show you where I am."

"I don't want to see her!"

"Carys!" he growled. It was the warning tone he'd use whenever she was baiting him. She used to love that tone. It meant he was going to do something extra naughty to her and she was going to love it.

"Fine!" she snarled, then pressed the button that turned on her camera. "What?"

Rafi looked at her and Carys's heart ached. He was so damned handsome! Why did he have to be good looking, extraordinary in bed, and such a nice person?

"Here," he said and turned the phone, panning it around the room.

There was a group of men sitting at a table with papers spread everywhere, laptops open, eyeglasses slipping off their noses.

There were three women in the room too, and they were working just as diligently.

Everyone looked a bit frazzled, as if they'd been in that conference room for too long.

And then Rafi's face returned. He looked at her and it was obvious that he was walking out of the room.

"There. You've seen who I'm with and that there are no naked women with me.

Just a bunch of contracts that we're trying to get out of.

"He paused and closed the door, and then dropped his voice a little. "Now, tell me what you're wearing."

Carys's heart ached. "You're not with someone else?" she whispered, her tone too hopeful.

"No, honey. I'm not." He paused, his eyes lighting up. "But I like that you're jealous." He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "You're such a mystery. I never know what you're thinking. You've been so hesitant to define exactly what's going on between us."

"I just...!" she began, then thought better of it and clamped her mouth shut.

His sexy smile made her heart flutter wildly. "You missed me. And are worried because we haven't defined our relationship."

Well. That wasn't what she'd thought he'd say! "You're not going to break up with me because I'm jealous?" she asked, her voice cracking.

His gaze softened. "Honey, is that what you were expecting?"

Carys didn't know what she was trying to ask. Even through the haze of wine, she knew that she was being irrational. "I'm sorry! Just...let's just pretend that I didn't answer this call and...well, I have to get ready for work tomorrow."

He chuckled. “Back to the careful Carys again, eh?” he teased. “Fine. But when I get back to Philly, we’re going to have a long conversation.”

“No!” she gasped, shaking her head. But the wine wasn’t helping her balance and she had to stop. “No need for a conversation. Everything is fine. I’m just...weird.”

He didn’t acknowledge that statement. He looked at her through the cell phone’s camera, his eyes stern. “I’m flying back tonight, Carys. We’ll get things sorted out right after, okay?”

Rafi didn’t wait for a response. He ended the call. For a long moment, Carys continued to stare into the black screen, wondering what she’d just revealed to Rafi.

“No!” she whispered, carefully setting the wine back on her coffee table, which took extra effort since her fingers were trembling so badly. “This is bad!”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys walked into the office the following morning, not sure what to expect.

Her head ached from the wine last night and it occurred to her that the wine she shared with Rafi never left her with a hangover.

She'd have to ask him about that – if she ever decided to face him again.

Going on a jealous rampage was so unlike her.

However, falling for a guy as hard as she'd fallen for Rafi also wasn't anything like her.

She kept her dates at a distance. She never became emotionally involved with the men in her life.

She enjoyed their company, but then left them with a kiss and a wave goodbye.

What was it about Rafi that was so...different? Other than how he was shockingly handsome and dynamic, so powerful and fascinating!

An unexpected noise made her jump, but it was just a co-worker coming in to start the work day. Darn it, she wasn't concentrating.

Suddenly, a meeting request popped up on her screen. She stared at it, her stomach tightening when she realized that it was sent by Rafi's assistant. Apparently, he wanted an update on the progress with the new marketing campaign. And he wanted it in less than ten minutes!

Thankfully, over the past few weeks, Carys had been diligent in formatting the story boards and the scripts, so she was ready to present her ideas to him. Tanya and Dave stopped by her cubicle. “Did you get the meeting request?” Tanya asked snidely.

“Yep,” Carys replied, piling all of her materials into her arms. “Where is this meeting?”

Tanya reached out. “I’ll help you carry everything to the conference room. Looks like you’re weighed down with all of that stuff.”

Carys knew Tanya’s tactics all too well and half turned away.

“That’s okay. I’ve got it.” When her boss frowned at her, Carys explained, “Everything is sort of tied together.” She nodded toward the stack.

“It’s like a Jenga pile. Pull one thing out and everything will topple.

” Or more accurately, the assistant director would take credit for Carys’s work.

“Whatever,” the irritated woman snapped, then turned, heading for the conference room.

Carys noticed that Tanya fluffed her hair and pressed her lips together as she walked, as if she were trying to refresh her lipstick. Had the woman popped open another button on her blouse?

“Are you ready?” Dave demanded in a low hiss.

Tanya sniffed. “That pile of stuff is what she’s been working on, apparently.” Then she walked through the door, her hips swaying a bit more than usual.

With a disgusted shake of her head, Carys followed her bosses into the conference room.

Rafi walked in right after them, carrying a cup of coffee and a leather notebook.

His assistant followed with his tablet. Did the guy ever have anything other than that electronic device?

She doubted it. But the man didn't talk much, just took prolific notes, so Carys wasn't going to be bothered by him.

Then something occurred to her. The rumors about layoffs had died down slightly, but there were still whispers. Was Rafi's assistant evaluating each employee's value to the company? Was he taking notes on that tablet, making lists of possible people to be laid off?

Banishing the thought, she sorted through her story boards and scripts, trying not to look at Rafi.

But the need to see him, to look him in the eyes and find out if he was disgusted by last night's jealous tirade, was too much.

When she finally looked up at him, Carys's cheeks burned since Rafi was staring right at her with a look in his eyes that she recognized.

It was the same look he gave her whenever he was about to tear her clothes off.

Clearing her throat, she stared down at the work she'd done over the past several weeks.

Rafi started the meeting. "Sorry for the short notice. I just returned from London last

night. But I've received word that there are some excellent ideas coming from this group.

"He'd looked at Dave and Tanya during that short speech, but after a moment, he focused his attention on Carys.

"Let's hear them," he said, leaning back in his leather chair at the head of the table.

"I think I have some good ideas," Tanya blurted, drawing everyone's attention.

She opened her sketch pad and started talking.

The idea she presented was a rough outline, without scripts or fleshed out campaign ideas.

Her drawings looked like something she'd slapped together in the past thirty minutes.

There were no graphics, no cohesive message, and even the pictures were badly drawn.

"I know it's rough," she said, with what probably was supposed to be a secret smile, "but I think it has potential." She leaned forward, giving Dave and Rafi an excellent view of her cleavage.

When she finished, there was a stunned, almost awkward, silence while everyone contemplated the truly horrible ideas that the assistant director had presented.

Finally, Rafi turned to Carys. "Okay then. How about if you give me your ideas? I liked the approach you suggested several weeks ago. Let's see what you've put together."

Carys pulled out her storyboards and flipped them around.

She passed out copies of her scripts for the first ad series and went over both the obvious and subconscious attributes of the idea.

Then she went on to demonstrate how this concept could be altered for six other products the company currently had on the market, as well as two more products that were still in production.

“The overall campaign gives the ads more of a cohesive message. It’s sort of a branding effort as well as a message about the product. ”

“I like it,” Rafi replied, nodding in a way that caused the morning sunshine from the window to make his dark hair glimmer.

“That’s exactly the kind of advertising that consumers are responding well to right now.

” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“It’s not an obvious push for the product, but it gets people thinking.

You’re solving a problem they have and giving them a reason to buy the product.

” He turned to Dave and Tanya. “Why aren’t you pulling more of the team members to help flesh out this idea?

I told you several weeks ago that this was the direction I wanted to go. ”

Dave had the grace to look embarrassed, but Tanya straightened, pasting a bright, fake smile on her overly made up face.

“I know that you wanted to go in that direction, Rafi, but what’s the harm in coming up with other options?”

We’re all brainstorming, trying to toss around ideas, just like you asked us to do. ”

“You’re right. I like the idea of collaboration and brain storming, but let’s focus on Carys’s ideas.

I want her in charge of pushing this out.

Get the rest of the team on board so that we can advance her ideas.

I want this same concept developed for every product in our line.

We need to get this idea out for everything so that the production crew can start creating the graphics. ”

With that, he stood up. “Carys, I need to speak to you in my office, please.” And then he walked out of the conference room, his assistant at his heels, like a well-trained puppy.

Carys started gathering up her materials, feeling self-conscious now that she was left alone with Dave and Tanya. Unfortunately, their anger over Rafi’s set down was palpable.

“You undermined my authority,” Dave snapped, then stalked to the door. “I won’t forget this!”

Carys’s heart skipped a beat, and she frowned at the empty door, feeling unfairly attacked. Tanya came around the table, towering over Carys in her spike heels.

“Back off!” Tanya spat.

“What?” Carys gasped.

“Don’t you dare play the innocent ingenue with me!” she snapped. “Rafi is mine . We’re seeing each other after hours, every night. No, I’m not sleeping with him to get ahead. We’re falling for each other and I’m not going to let you ruin this for me. The man wants me , so just back off!”

Carys clenched her teeth. Maybe if she’d gotten a bit more sleep last night, her temper wouldn’t be so short. But Carys was sick and tired of Tanya playing the queen bee around the office.

“I don’t know what kind of relationship you think you have with our new boss, but keep me out of it.

I’m here to get the job done with as much creativity as possible.

” Oh, that felt good! So good, that Carys kept going.

“You and Dave have fostered an atmosphere here where we can’t share ideas for fear of you or Dave stealing credit for our work.

Everyone keeps their ideas to themselves instead of collaborating, which is why I wouldn’t even let you carry my work into the meeting!

” Carys paused, shocked that she’d said it aloud.

While Tanya’s fury boiled, Carys breathed in, slowly regaining control.

She was shocked that she’d said as much as she had, but it felt really good.

In a calmer voice, she added, “If you don’t like my work, then fire me.

Otherwise,” Carys leaned forward, “ you back off!”

And with that, she turned and walked off to Rafi’s office, her boards and materials tucked under her arm.

As soon as she stepped into Rafi’s office, he said, “Close the door.”

Carys looked around at the huge office with the impressive view of the city and the Delaware river in the distance as she followed his direction and closed the door.

“Put your stuff down.”

She looked into his dark eyes and, instantly, those heated, needy feelings stirred to life. She forgot about the confrontation with Tanya as well as Dave’s harsh words. This moment was all about Rafi.

With a shiver of awareness, she backed up slightly. “I think I should hold onto my stuff,” she argued.

He came around his desk, his eyes heating up with the challenge she’d tossed out.

“I haven’t seen you in several days. I’m going to kiss the hell out of you and I don’t care if those story boards get ruined in the process.

But you clearly put a lot of work into them and I’d hate for you to have to redo everything.

” His voice dropped into a growl as he stalked toward her.

“So, it would be wise to put them down.”

She saw the determined, heated look in his eyes and swallowed hard. Rafi looked like a predator and she was his prey. Suddenly, she knew that it would be better to dump her stuff before he reached her. Fast!

She'd just freed her arms when Rafi pulled her into his arms. “You were jealous last night,” he said in a deep, husky voice.

“I wasn't,” she lied, but felt as if she needed to defend herself.

“You were.” He paused, his dark eyes moving over her expression.

“I liked it.” He bent his head and nuzzled her neck.

“I liked it a lot! It turned me on.” He nipped at her earlobe, causing her to melt against him.

“You're always so cool and controlled, until I take you into my arms. And every damn morning, you are gone by the time I open my eyes.

” He nibbled on her neck. “Until last night, I had no idea how you felt about me.” He stared down at her.

“Do you have any idea how much I liked your jealousy? It showed me that you care more than you've let on. ”

“Well, I'm about to be fired,” she sighed, letting her head fall back as he kissed his way down her throat.

“Why's that?” he asked, obviously unconcerned.

Carys laughed when his teeth found a sensitive spot behind her ear. When she pulled back, with a shiver, she said, “Because Tanya just confronted me. She’s determined to have you all to herself and warned me to stay away from you.”

Suddenly, Rafi lifted his head, looking confused. “I have zero interest in Tanya. She’s...not my type.”

Relieved, Carys put her hands on his chest and pushed away. She leaned against the small conference table in his office. When she looked back at him, Carys observed, “She looks like your type considering your past mistresses.”

He chuckled, pinning her against the table with a hand on either side. “You looked me up on the internet.” He kissed her lips. “I did the same for you. But you don’t have a social media presence.” He looked at her curiously now. “Why is that?”

Carys curled her fingers into fists, trying to resist the urge to wrap her arms around his neck. She was in heeled boots today and the extra few inches brought her up high enough that she could almost reach his chin.

Instead of telling him what Dave and Tanya had just threatened, she slipped out of his arms. Or tried to. Rafi pulled her right back.

“Carys, what happened after I left the conference room?”

She knew him well enough now to know he wouldn’t let this go. “Tanya told me, again, how you two are having an affair and that I should back off. She claimed that she’s been spending a great deal of time with you after hours.”

“And you didn’t believe her?” he asked, tilting his head slightly, his dark eyes watching her curiously.

Carys snorted. “Since the nights she claimed to have been with you were the same nights that you and I were together,” she explained with an eyeroll. “Well, I knew that she was lying.”

This time, his hands fell away and Rafi stepped back. “So, the only reason you didn’t believe her was because you had proof.”

“Yes,” she replied, blinking at him curiously. Was he mad? Because she wasn’t jealous? This wasn’t making sense. “Why are you angry with me for not believing her?”

He sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I guess because I was hoping you wouldn’t believe another person’s lies because you trust me.”

Trust? That wasn’t a word she used often. Carys crossed her arms over her chest and backed up. “We...this...trust isn’t...!” She wasn’t sure what she was trying to say. “We don’t really have...!”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi's lips pressed together and he leaned back against his desk.

He started to say something, but a knock sounded on the door before he could.

He started to say something to the person interrupting, probably along the lines of "Go to hell!" but before he could, the door opened.

And there she stood. Tanya. The whole reason for why he and Carys hadn't just been caught in an unprofessional embrace.

He eyed her carefully, sensing something odd about her demeanor.

"What is it?" he demanded sharply.

He watched as Tanya glanced at him, then at Carys. The relief on her face was clear. She was glad that the two of them were on opposite sides of the office. He also noticed that the woman had unbuttoned her blouse so her bra was visible.

Rafi was all for women embracing their sexuality. But this was unprofessional. Thankfully, he didn't need to address her attire while firing her.

"Carys told me that you mentioned that you and I have been spending a lot of time together."

Tanya's glossy lips fell open. Her eyes darted from him to Carys, then back again, her mouth opening and closing as if she were trying to figure out a reply that would save her.

Before Tanya could offer any explanation, Carys leaned down and grabbed her materials.

“I’ll get those reports to you immediately, sir,” she muttered, then scurried out of his office.

He watched her go, his hunger tamped by his anger and disappointment.

Why didn’t she trust him? What had he done to violate her trust?

He’d work that out later. Right now, Rafi suspected that he’d found a major reason why the marketing department wasn’t working collaboratively.

Tanya stepped deeper into his office, a fake smile on her glossy lips. “I don’t know what that...woman told you, Rafi, but she’s lying.”

“Is that so?” he asked leaning back against the table and crossing his legs at the ankles, watching her carefully. “What do you think of her campaign idea?”

Another tough question and she shifted slightly. The woman actually thought she was on safer ground, so she crossed her arms, which lifted her breasts higher, revealing a little more of her lacy bra. “It’s very subtle,” she finally answered.

His eyes took in her figure draped in a crimson skirt, matching heels, and black silk blouse. “And you don’t like subtle.” It wasn’t a question. “Tell me, how many of the past ad campaigns were your idea?”

She shrugged, tilting her hips so that she could place a hand on her waist. The pose illustrated her slim figure perfectly.

“All of them. I take pride in coming up with new and innovative ideas.” She must

have recognized the anger in his eyes because she backtracked.

Slightly. “The whole team had a hand in helping develop my ideas though. And several members of the team added a great deal of value.”

“The ideas were miserable,” Rafi snapped, irritated with her lies.

He’d already spoken with the rest of the team.

They were terrified of Tanya. She had to go.

Dave needed to be let go as well, but for laziness.

The man simply didn’t do anything of value.

He came to the office and sat around, playing games on his computer.

Occasionally, he would bellow if someone passed by his office.

Rafi had observed the game-playing personally and the man had absolutely no idea what was happening with his team members.

Yep, the number one and the number two people in the marketing department were the problem.

He’d have to find a new marketing director, one who was more collaborative and creative.

Carys immediately popped into his head, but he didn’t want her as the marketing director.

He actually had a different position in mind for her.

Sighing, he focused on Tanya. She was saying something about...was the woman actually defending her horrible ideas? The ideas that had sunk the products to the point that sales were a crisis now?

She flipped her blond hair over her shoulder and offered a teasing smile. "So, you have to understand, it's not my fault."

Rafi's patience snapped. "You're telling me that, as the assistant marketing director, you didn't have enough authority to create an effective ad campaign that produced sales?"

Her smile faltered and the painful flush crawled up her throat to her face. "Well, yes."

He called for his assistant. The man immediately appeared in the open doorway, but he turned back to the woman.

"Tanya, I don't think that this position is a good fit for you.

Why don't you speak with Margaret in Human Resources?

She has several job openings that might suit you better.

" He looked at his assistant. "Could you escort Tanya to Margaret's office?

Then let me know which position Tanya chooses.

" He looked at the woman who was frantically trying to come up with an argument for why she shouldn't lose her job.

“Thanks for your help, Tanya. We’ll take it from here. ”

Rafi’s efficient assistant had already arranged for the maintenance guys to pack up Tanya’s personal belongings in her office.

His hope was that Tanya would resign rather than take one of the lower job openings within the company.

But if she chose to stay, maybe Tanya could become productive.

She’d been an excellent employee in the past. He wasn’t sure what had changed over the last five years.

“You can’t fire me!” Tanya gasped.

Rafi shook his head, his tone soft and conciliatory as he explained, “I’m not firing you, Tanya. I’ve decided that this job as assistant marketing director isn’t the best fit for your skills.” He paused, letting his words sink in.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys had made her way back to her cubicle, mentally reviewing the conversation she'd just had in Rafi's office. Why had he looked so hurt? What had she said that had wounded him so deeply?

That's when she noticed the whispers. When she looked up, she realized that everyone was gawking at something. So, Carys stood up, peering over the short walls of her cubicle. There were four men with boxes in Tanya's office, packing everything up!

"What's going on?" she asked one of her coworkers.

"I think Tanya just got fired!" the other woman whispered back.

There was delight on every face, which was sad, but understandable. Tanya had ruled this department with maliciousness for years. Everyone was delighted to be free of her...if that was really what was going on.

Carys was horrified. Unfortunately, she didn't have a chance to speak with Rafi about Tanya's departure that day. Nor did he call her that night. She got a text from him around five o'clock, letting her know that he had to fly out of town again. He would be back in a few days.

Carys left work that day feeling rejected.

And terrified. Had she ruined their relationship because of her jealousy?

What had he said moments before Tanya had burst into the office?

Something about how Carys only disbelieved Tanya's claims about an affair because Carys had personal proof of his fidelity.

Because she'd been with Rafi during the times Tanya claimed to have been with him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“What are you doing right now?”

Carys looked at the text message, sitting up straighter on her sofa.

She looked around self-consciously, noticing how messy her apartment had become as well as the fact that she’d immediately pulled on sweat pants and a sweatshirt upon arriving home.

And done nothing else but watch television.

She wasn’t even sure what she’d been watching since she hadn’t really been paying attention.

Carys picked up her phone, her heart pounding against her ribs as she typed, “Thinking about you.” But she didn’t send it. Instead, she deleted the words and tried again, “Having a lazy night.” That was the truth, although not the whole truth.

“What’s going on in your mind?” he texted right back.

“Not much.” Another lie. “What’s going on in your world?”

“Missing you,” he replied right back.

Darn it! Carys felt like a coward. She remembered how sweet he’d been after she’d been so jealous.

And how hurt he’d been that she didn’t trust him.

So here she was, her heart pounding practically out of her chest as she considered her next words, her next revelation.

Would he accept what she was about to say? Or would he laugh at her?

Carys thought about the way she'd felt over the past few days without him, knowing that she'd wounded him with her words. So here she was, about to attempt to trust him.

But before she could type out the words that she missed him too, he texted back, "I know that you miss me, but you're too scared to admit it. That's okay. Eventually, you'll trust me with your heart."

Carys's eyes welled up as she stared at the message. He was so...confident and amazing! Why couldn't she just...trust him?

"I do miss you," she typed out, then pressed send before she lost her courage.

Then she tossed her phone down on the couch beside her.

Before she could berate herself for opening herself up to being hurt by his rejection, the phone rang.

For a long moment, she stared at it, not daring to answer because she knew it was him.

But the thought of missing his call, not hearing his voice, was too painful. So she grabbed her phone and answered it.

"Was that so hard?" his deep, sexy voice asked.

She hesitated, closing her eyes and tilting her head back. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Then your words means all the more,” was his deep, velvety response. For the next few minutes, he asked her what she’d done today and she learned that he’d flown to Rome for meetings. In the end, he sighed. “I have to get back to work. Will you have dinner with me when I get back to Philadelphia?”

“Of course,” she replied without hesitation. “When is that going to happen?”

He groaned. “I’m flying out to California tomorrow, then New York the following day. So...in three days? Maybe four?”

She grinned, snuggling deeper into the sofa cushions. “Make it three, Rafi,” she whispered to him. Then ended the call before he could.

Carys jumped up and rushed to her bedroom, almost as if she were trying to run away. But before her feet hit the carpeting in her bedroom, her phone pinged with another message. “Three Days. Be Naked!”

Carys laughed as she padded barefoot into her bathroom, preparing for bed. It was after ten o’clock and it was nice to anticipate a full night’s sleep. Not that she wouldn’t love having Rafi’s arms around her, she thought as she reached for her toothbrush.

It wasn’t there!

Carys stared at the spot where her toothbrush usually stood in the cup.

She never put her toothbrush anywhere else.

In fact, she’d been rushing this morning and tossed her toothbrush into the cup too

hard.

The cup had toppled over. Carys vividly remembered straightening the toothbrush holder this morning, even muttering to herself about how she needed to move to a building with a bigger bathroom.

So, she knew her toothbrush had been there this morning.

Looking around, Carys noticed a few other things out of place.

Her bed was made again. The pillows on her bed were out of order.

When Carys took the time to make it, she preferred the flowered pillows to sit in front of the plaid ones.

And she always placed the pillow that she'd embroidered in front of the rest.

As she frowned at the pillows on her bed, she noticed the embroidered pillow was on one side with the flowered pillows, peeking out from behind the plaid ones.

Someone had been in her bedroom. And her bathroom!

But...why? Why would a burglar steal someone's toothbrush and rearrange pillows?

Her television, the only thing in her apartment that had any value, was still sitting in her living room.

Were items missing from her kitchen? Carys hadn't bothered to cook recently, so it was possible someone had stolen her pots and pans, but nothing else in her home was worth much.

“This is so weird!” she whispered, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

A moment later, she jumped up and walked through the apartment, checking the locks on her doors and windows.

Her windows were all locked and she’d connected the chain to her front door.

The only other way in was through the balcony door and Carys always put one of those wooden bars in the way, so the sliding glass door couldn’t open.

Everything was in place. Still, she’d feel better once the camera she’d ordered arrived because it would be nice to know what kind of person was coming into her home and cleaning stuff.

Or even weirder, who the hell would steal a toothbrush!

That was Goldilocks meets “get out” level creepiness, in Carys’s opinion.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Laith walked into his brother's home office and eyed his twin. Rafi was staring out the window, looking...odd.

“What’s going on?” Laith demanded. Grimacing, then sighing with resignation when Aida jumped up from the floor by Rafi’s feet, Laith reached down and scratched behind the fluffy non-guard dog’s ears.

“You’re an idiot. You know that, don’t you?”

” he asked the dog. Aida merely grinned his doggy smile, happy that someone was petting him. He had simple needs, that one.

At the sound of his brother’s voice, Rafi swung around, offering his brother a smile as Laith brushed the fur from his hands.

“Not much,” Rafi replied, referring to his twin’s first question while ignoring the others.

He walked back to his desk, shifting some papers around while Laith threw himself down in the leather chair in front of Rafi’s desk.

“You look lovelorn.” Aidi’s big head rested on Laith’s thigh, his tail thumping cheerfully against the carpet.

Rafi rolled his eyes and gave up trying to find the contract that he didn’t really care about. He stared at his brother, contemplating telling him about Carys. He and Laith hadn’t ever kept secrets from each other. They had kept many secrets from the rest of

the family, but never from each other.

And yet, for some reason, Rafi was hesitant to tell Laith about the woman who had rocked his world.

“I’m fine,” he finally replied.

“Yeah, that’s a lie.” Laith crossed his legs, his ankle resting on his knee while he continued to scratch the dog’s ears. “Are there problems in Rome?”

Rafi sighed, leaning back in his chair. “No, I was able to sort everything out there, although I think that we should close the factory in Cambodia. If we move operations to Vietnam, we’d have better shipping options. Plus, the—”

“Stop it,” Laith ordered firmly, then leaned forward, ignoring the attention-hound’s whine.

“I have a team working through the financial details. The company was in worse shape than we realized, but with our combined efforts, the sales have already started to turn around. I love the ad campaign ideas you sent me. They are brilliant.” He paused, looking at Rafi’s features.

“But you’re not worried about business issues.

” He tilted his head slightly. “What’s really going on? ”

Rafi stared at his brother, noticing he wore a blue dress shirt and charcoal slacks.

Rafi had donned a blue shirt in a slightly darker shade and similar charcoal slacks.

No, they hadn’t coordinated their outfits.

They were so alike, it was spooky sometimes.

And that's why he recognized the signs of frustration in his brother's eyes.

He understood and, oddly, was relieved that his twin was experiencing romantic challenges too.

He blurted, "You've met someone and you're struggling to convince her that things can work out."

There was a long silence while both brothers silently appreciated their deep connection. The silence was broken by Aida who sighed dramatically and wandered out of the room in search of more productive hands.

Slowly, Laith nodded, a frown forming. "Yeah," he replied, leaning back again. "So what? Andi's beautiful, intelligent, and absolutely amazing. She'll eventually allow our relationship to go public. Only, I'm her boss and she has...concerns."

Rafi grinned, happy for his brother. "Andi, huh?"

"Andrea, actually," he replied with a frustrated tone. Then he perked up, leaning forward. "She's...gorgeous!" Laith replied, smiling softly. "And funny and sexy and...everything. She's the whole package."

Rafi's grin slowly faded to a thoughtful frown as he thought about Carys. She was all of that and so much more. The way she touched him, her smile, and...just every damn thing about her.

He rubbed a hand over his face, then sighed heavily. "I've met someone too." He leaned back, resting his head on the back of his chair as he looked up at the ceiling. "She's amazing. So creative and hot and...just a good person."

“Congratulations!” Laith replied and Rafi didn’t hear even a hint of jealousy in his brother’s tone. “What’s the problem?”

Rafi shrugged. “I don’t know, exactly.”

“That sounds mysterious.”

Rafi thought about the situation for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah. It’s mysterious. Something happened in Carys’s past and she’s...wary. But she’s sweet and kind and...just so amazing that I can’t fathom who could have hurt her so deeply.”

“Everyone has a past,” his brother pointed out.

“Yeah, but some people are more hurt by their past than others.”

Laith’s eyes narrowed. “This is more than just a fling?”

After a pause, Rafi nodded. “Yeah,” he replied, nodding his head for emphasis. “I like her. She’s just...!” He tried to think of a single word to describe Carys. “Special,” came to mind.

“I get that,” Laith replied. “So, what are you going to do about it? We’re neck deep in this company’s mess right now. The financials are a catastrophe, the marketing...well, you’ve got that under control. Employee morale is in the dumps and the executive staff are fighting us every step of the way.”

Rafi’s frown lightened into a grin. “So, we have a few problems. The products are exceptionally good. You and your lady are rooting out the embezzlers, finding the corrupt vendors, and fixing the factory issues. I’ve been working with the legal team to renegotiate the most egregious contracts.

” It was a relief to think about business instead of wondering what to do about Carys.

Laith agreed. “It’s still going to take at least a year to get things back on track. Two years to see a profit.”

“When have we ever turned away from a challenge?” he teased.

Laith laughed. “Never. So, what are you going to do about your lady?”

There was a pause, then Rafi grinned. “Figure her out,” he replied with a shrug. “It’s the only thing I can do. Because I can’t give her up.”

Laith poured himself a scotch, then filled his brother’s glass. “I guess we’re in the same boat.”

The brothers clinked glasses, laughed at the absurdity of their lives mirroring each other’s yet again, then got back to work.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“What’s wrong?” Andi whispered, leaning closer to Carys while the rest of the lunch table continued to discuss the latest gripes about work, boyfriends, and the cost of living. It was a ritual that their group practiced every few months when the stars aligned, allowing all eight of them to meet up.

“Nothing,” Carys replied, but she couldn’t look at her friend.

“Something is definitely wrong. Margo just admitted to dumping Martin for the fifth time and you didn’t say anything.”

Carys perked up slightly, looking around, but she didn’t bother to tune into the conversation. She didn’t have the energy.

“She’ll figure it out, eventually.”

Andi eyed Carys speculatively, then took a sip of her coffee. “My guy is out of town too.”

Carys sighed, wondering where Rafi was. Had he made it to New York yet? Or was he somewhere else in the world? “Yeah. It’s tough when they leave us alone.”

Andi toasted Carys with her coffee in silent agreement.

Finally, someone announced that she needed to get back to her kids.

Carys was so relieved, she nearly jumped out of her chair.

Andi chuckled and waved to the others. “We’re off too,” she announced, then looped her arm through Carys’s as they headed out of the diner.

The pair walked along the path toward their office building, each lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, Andi leaned in and hugged Carys. “It will get better,” she announced.

“Promise?” Carys sighed, hugging her friend back just as tightly. “Because this really sucks.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen him?”

“Seven days. He’d tried to get back four days ago, but something came up.”

Andi sighed and there was a lot of understanding in that sigh.

“It’s been two days since I left my guy and I’m already a mess.

” She smiled. “At least they caught the freak that was bothering me, and the weirdo cleaning your apartment has stopped, so that’s something.

” They’d reached their office buildings, but since she and Carys worked in different buildings, Andi headed for the stairs while Carys walked across the street to the building where her office was located.

“Good luck!” Andi called back over her shoulder.

Carys grimaced, thinking about the small items in her apartment that had vanished.

Andi thought that Carys’s mystery “cleaner” had stopped, but that wasn’t true.

As she pressed the elevator call button, she thought about mentioning the other odd happenings around her apartment.

Carys watched Andi reach the doorway to the stairs and sighed, deciding to keep it to herself.

Andi had a lot of work to do and Carys...yeah, she had some stuff to accomplish before she could finish for the day too.

Besides, she'd replaced the missing toothbrush.

But she'd also discovered that her pot holders had been taken. Who steals pot holders!? And why?

This was really getting creepy and she should probably talk to the police, but what would she say? "Hey, someone is breaking into my house and cleaning for me. Oh, and they've stolen a toothbrush and pot holders." She would be laughed out of the police station.

Besides, no one had broken in over the past week.

Plus, she'd gotten two new security cameras.

One that watched the front door and another that surveilled her balcony door.

Not that she suspected anyone would come in through her balcony.

She lived on the third floor, in a garden-style apartment, but anyone climbing the balcony would be pretty obvious to her neighbors.

Unless the intruder crossed over from her next door neighbor's balcony, she suddenly

thought. Could they? Would they? Would that be difficult to do?

Carys thought about her neighborhood, feeling the paranoia sinking its claws into her again. Every person she thought about, each of her neighbors, was starting to look like a pot-holder thief. It was creepy.

At least work was going well. A new marketing director started yesterday.

The new woman had held a staff meeting and told everyone that they were going to be more collaborative going forward.

The new director had divided up the responsibility of building the ad campaign so that not everything fell on Carys's shoulders.

So...things were okay. Her life was...fine.

Unfortunately, she missed Rafi. A lot! Every day that he wasn't close by, the ache in her chest intensified. She missed him both physically and emotionally, and that scared the bejeezus out of her.

Carys thought about the evenings over the past month when she'd been discouraged about work issues.

They'd been regular problems, such as when Tanya had blasted Carys for a made-up reason or Dave telling her she'd forgotten to do something related to the campaign, which he'd never asked her to do in the first place.

It had been Rafi who had recognized that suppressed frustration.

On those nights, he'd taken her into his arms and just held her for as long as it took.

That's all she'd needed, just his strong arms around her and his breath in her hair.

She'd felt one hundred percent better after those moments.

"You have work to do!" Carys whispered to herself, then smiled at one of her co-workers who paused outside of her cubicle.

Sitting down, Carys started working through the next ad script and graphics.

Grabbing her pencils, she started sketching, forgetting her problems as her creativity took her to another world.

Several hours later, Carys suddenly noticed that she was the only person left in the office, so she sighed and started packing up for the night, carefully filing her work progress into the cabinets.

She wasn't bringing any work home with her tonight.

She was going to head back to her apartment and...

and what? She didn't have a specific activity in mind.

Maybe she'd do laundry and clean. The world always felt better after a thorough cleaning.

Just stepping out of the building and into the chilly, night air helped to ease her tension.

Because she was lost in thought, making a mental list of the tasks she wanted to accomplish when she got home, Carys didn't see the man approaching her.

“Carys!” the man called out.

Carys turned, careful to keep her expression polite. But her jaw dropped as she watched her father approach, nearly running to catch up with her.

Frederick Remington had changed a lot since she’d seen him last. He’d lost most of his hair and had gained about fifty pounds, not to mention the deep creases around his eyes and sagging jowls.

She remembered the last time she’d seen him.

Even though it had been years, Carys still hadn’t fully recovered from that miserable confrontation.

She remembered the day like it was yesterday.

They’d been in court about ten years ago when he’d sued her.

She’d been eighteen and about to graduate from high school.

Because she’d graduated from a high school with over three thousand students, each family was given only four tickets to the graduation ceremony.

At the time, she’d given a ticket to her mother, grandmother, and grandfather.

Her father had sued her, demanding that last ticket.

She’d lost the case. The judge had ordered her to give him the ticket. So she had. However, she hadn’t told her father that she wasn’t going to walk in the graduation ceremony. Carys’s mother and grandparents had celebrated her high school graduation with her privately.

The rage that she harbored for this man swelled up within her. Instead of speaking to him, she turned and hurried toward the subway station. She refused to talk to him. She'd made that perfectly clear already.

“Carys!” he called out again, running to get in front of her. “I just want to talk! I want to explain!”

“No, thank you,” she replied as politely as her clenched jaw would allow. “No explanation needed.”

Her father huffed right behind her and she could feel his anger building.

“Obviously, explanations are necessary! You won't let me in your life!

You won't even accept my letters! How am I supposed to explain my side of the story if you won't even talk to me or read my letters?

” He rushed ahead again, then stopped right in front of her.

Carys barely paused, emotions filling her throat. She wouldn't even look up at him as she stepped around him. “I don't need your explanations.”

“Yes, you do!” he snapped, keeping up with her. “I have a right to tell you my side!”

She tried to sidestep him again, but he blocked her. “Carys, I'm your father! I have a right to be in your life.”

Carys didn't agree. Not after what he'd done to her all those years ago. So she kept walking. “Please leave me alone!” she hissed, still trying to get around him. He blocked her again. No matter how quickly she moved, he moved faster.

Finally, his frustration erupted and he grabbed her upper arms, holding her still. “Carys, you need to listen to me! I’m not the evil villain, regardless of what you think!”

Carys cringed, trying to pull away, but he was stronger than he looked. “Let me go!” she cried out, feeling bruises forming under his grip.

“Not until you listen to me!” he insisted. “Just one meal. I’ll buy you dinner and we’ll talk. Just...stop fighting me! I won’t let you go! It’s my right as your father!”

Carys was just about to knee him in the groin when his hands were suddenly ripped away from her arms. She looked around and saw Rafi had one of her father’s hands in his and was twisting it. Her father dropped to his knees as his face contorted with pain.

Rafi’s voice was a low, menacing growl as he said, “The lady said no. That should be the end of the conversation.” Rafi twisted a little harder and Carys’s father let out a yelp, his head nearly touching the concrete.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi stared down at the man in disgust, contemplating ripping his arm out of his socket for daring to touch his woman. In the end, he let the bastard go, wanting to reassure Carys more than he needed to hurt the pathetic excuse of a man at his feet.

Turning, he offered a hand to Carys. “Are you okay?” he asked, moving closer and wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

He was gentle, shifting so she couldn’t watch as his bodyguards dragged her father down the block.

They would probably dump him in an alley somewhere.

Rafi didn’t care what they did to him. Carys was his only concern.

“Let’s go,” he urged, guiding Carys to the waiting SUV.

He got her settled inside and sat beside her, holding her closely as the car started to move.

She was white faced and shaking, and he gently tightened his arms around her, hoping to share his strength with her.

He’d noticed several pedestrians passing along, literally walking around the altercation.

Why? Why would anyone walk by someone who was obviously being harassed and not stop to offer help?

Everyone was so busy these days, so focused on getting home to their own tasks that they forgot to be compassionate human beings.

“Thank you,” she whispered. He heard a little sniff then despite the fact that she was still trembling, Carys pulled away from him. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, then turned away, trying to hide her face.

For a moment, Rafi felt as if he’d been slapped. Carys was pulling away from him? Why? She carefully moved to the seat, her hands lacing together in a white knuckled grip.

“Will you tell me about him?”

Carys stared out through the window, but he could still see her profile. Another tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it angrily away.

“Thank you for your help,” she whispered, her tone tortured.

“Let’s have a drink,” Rafi suggested. “Then you can tell me all about him or not. We can just sit in silence if that’s what you need.”

It was a relief when Carys nodded. The SUV came to a halt outside of a pub-style restaurant. It wasn’t somewhere he would have chosen himself, but when his driver had heard the “drink” offer, he’d gone to the first restaurant he saw.

Once they were seated at a small table, he ordered her a martini and a scotch for himself.

She didn’t really touch the martini. Oh, she sipped it a bit, but Rafi suspected that the sip was more to appease him.

In a small way, Rafi supposed that her desire not to hurt his feelings was a good sign.

She wasn't rejecting him. But he could see that she was still struggling.

"Who was that?"

"My father," she replied, the second word cracking in the middle.

Rafi knew that she wasn't going to relax with the alcohol. So more serious measures needed to be taken. He pointed to an item on the menu and the waitress nodded with a smile of understanding after a glance at Carys, promising that it would be out quickly.

Rafi waited in silence, wanting Carys to tell him in her own time. He didn't want to pressure her. Still, it wasn't until the waitress slid a piping hot platter of "loaded" fries between them, that Carys actually showed a smidge of interest.

With careful fingers, she pulled a fry from the mass of melted cheese, bacon, sour cream, and chives from the pile and bit into it.

Rafi knew that he'd gotten it right when Carys closed her eyes and sighed.

He wasn't sure if that sigh was due to the comfort food or some other reason, but he didn't care.

After four more cheesy fries, Carys's shoulders slowly started to relax.

"Thank you," she finally whispered as she took another fry.

"Want to tell me about him?" he asked, taking his own fry and popping it into his mouth.

But scotch wasn't an appropriate drink for cheesy fries, so he downed his drink and ordered two beers.

Carys laughed a little and the sound seemed to lighten the mood just a bit.

When the waitress slid the two beers onto the table, Carys eyed her martini.

And because she understood the value of a martini, she downed the drink in a few gulps, then let out an audible "Ahhh!" as she delicately set the glass back down, then pulled one of the beers closer.

There was another long silence as Rafi watched her. She nibbled thoughtfully on the fries, and he could almost see her inner gears whirling. He let her think, hoping that she would tell him what had happened. But for the moment, he was just relieved that he was with her again.

"My father is an ass," she blurted suddenly, concentrating on extracting another fry and loading it with melted cheese and a dollop of sour cream.

"What did he do to make you hate him?"

She popped the fry into her mouth and chewed, then delicately wiped her mouth with the napkin.

"He left."

There was a long silence after that bombshell. Rafi stared as Carys chose another fry and popped it into her mouth.

"How old were you?"

“I was twelve when he left me and my mom and moved in with his mistress.” She chose another fry. “I was thirteen when he divorced my mom. But even then, I still had a relationship with him, although it was strained.”

“Was your mother hurt?”

Carys laughed flatly. “She was devastated. But she never said anything bad about my dad. She kept it together during the day, but I could hear her crying at night.” She stole a perfect fry, pushing his hand out of the way when Rafi tried to snag it first. He let her because he wanted to hear the rest of the story more than he wanted the perfect fry.

“So, then what happened? Did your father leave completely?”

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Not initially.” She stared blankly out the window for a moment.

“We used to go camping together. Just the two of us. We’d hike and fish and roast marshmallows. And we’d talk.” She frowned sadly at the memories. “My friends used to complain about their dads, but I always thought my father was the best in the world. I could tell him anything.”

There was another long silence and, this time, Rafi didn’t prompt her. She ate several more fries, but didn’t concentrate on loading them as carefully as before. When she started talking again, his gut clenched.

“After my dad left us, he left me too. At first, after he moved in with his mistress, the camping trips turned into weekly dinners out. Then even the dinners with my dad slowed down to once a month, and then stopped, without explanation.” She grimaced and heaved a heavy sigh.

“My stepmother, Beth, got pregnant quickly and by then, my dad stopped coming around completely. At first, my mom made excuses for his absence, explaining how difficult it was to have a newborn. She said that the first year is really rough.” Carys stared out through the window again.

“So, I tried to be patient. But, the good times with my dad never started up again.” Her mouth twisted slightly before she continued.

“I saw pictures online with him and his new family, going out to various places. Just innocent family events like picnics or pizza out.” Rafi watched as Carys rubbed her eyes.

The unspoken words were that her father never invited Carys out to those picnics or pizza nights.

Finally, she took a deep breath and continued.

“But after Beth went back to work, she got a promotion.” Carys squeezed her eyes shut briefly, fighting back the tears.

“The promotion meant that they had to move across the country to Arizona.”

“Oh no, that must have really hurt!”

Her chin trembled, but she inhaled deeply, clenched her teeth and let it out slowly. “He stopped calling after he moved. Eventually, I saw Beth posting pictures of my dad taking my half-sister camping. They had a great time.”

Rafi understood. His voice was raspy when he said, “Doing all the things that you used to do with him.”

Carys continued. “He didn’t call. He didn’t even bother sending me a card for my birthday by that point. It was as if this new family was everything he needed and I was...well, unnecessary.”

“That’s awful, Carys,” he hissed. Rafi wanted to reach out and touch her, but something warned him that she needed space right now. So, he kept his hands wrapped around his beer mug. Neither of them were interested in the cheesy fries anymore.

“It was. It still is.”

“So, why is he here now?” he asked.

She offered him a half smile. “He and his wife moved back to Philly. The letters started about a year ago. I read the first one. He said that he was back in town and wanted to get together for dinner whenever I had time.”

He looked into her eyes, noticing the sheen of tears.

She looked out the window. “After sixteen years of being gone, he wants to get together for dinner. He wants to be my dad again.” She was angry now, shaking her head. “He doesn’t get to ignore me for years, then come back into my life and pretend like nothing happened!”

“I agree,” he replied, relieved by the anger. Her pale cheeks warmed with her roiling emotions.

Suddenly, she lifted her head and straightened her shoulders.

“Finally, I just started rejecting the letters, sending them back unopened. Then the phone calls started. And I blocked him. Then my stepmother cornered me at the

grocery store. She said that she knew that my mother had passed away and that I needed a mother figure in my life again. Beth explained how she was here, ready to be that mother figure for me.”

“That’s...odd.”

Carys sighed, sliding her fingers into her hair as she gripped her head.

“Yeah, it was creepy. Beth is like a Stepford wife. She doesn’t work anymore and bakes bread, then posts images of her perfectly baked bread online.

” Carys looked up at Rafi incredulously.

“Bread. Just bread! If you look at her social media, she has probably a hundred pictures of bread all styled and rustic looking or...whatever! It’s really weird. ”

That sounded...absolutely insane! “Different kinds of bread?”

She shrugged and there was a hint of amusement in her eyes. “I don’t know. I’m not a baker so I’m not sure. I stopped looking a while ago.”

He nodded his head, taking in that bit of information. “So, what happened earlier?”

Carys sighed and toyed with her beer, staring down into the golden depths.

“That was my father. He’s angry that I keep returning his letters unopened and that I won’t respond to his email messages.

” She half-grinned. “I set up my email to automatically send his messages to the trash, so I have no idea how many emails he’s actually sent me.

” She took another deep breath and leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand, which was covering the top of her mug.

“He thinks that he has a right to be in my life and so he’s forcing confrontations.

However, I have no desire to have him in my life.

He rejected me. He didn’t want me in his life, so I’m merely accepting his terms.”

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

She groaned, running her hands through her hair again.

“Yeah, well someone needs to explain that to him. He thinks I’m being too emotional.

” Her eyes hardened. “I was very emotional when I was twelve and he left me and my mom. I was nearly hysterical when he announced that he was moving across the country because his new family had a better job opportunity. I begged him not to go. I begged him to take me with him. And then I sobbed over the phone with him, pleading to visit him in Arizona.” She was silent, then added, “He always said no, that it wasn’t the right time for a visit.

Then it wasn’t the right time for him to come see me.

Then he didn’t have the time for phone calls.

And when my mother passed away in a car accident, he didn’t even call to see if I was okay or needed help.

” She shrugged, lifting her chin higher.

“I’m no longer emotional about him. My emotions for him burned out a long time ago. I’ve learned to live without a father.”

She took a sip of her beer, but it was warm now, so she pushed it away, wrinkling her nose.

“What now?”

Carys thought about that for a moment. “Now,” she paused again, looking at him without any expression in her eyes. “Now, I would like you to do naughty things to my body and make me forget I ever saw him tonight.” She tilted her head again. “What do you think?”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi knew that something was wrong with her request, but he couldn't quite figure out what.

Also, the term “naughty things” instead of making love bothered him.

He wanted to understand her and tonight had given him insight into what had helped shape her into who she is.

Still, holding her in his arms wasn't something he could reject.

He was irritated when she tossed two twenty dollar bills down onto the table and hopped down from her bar stool. “If you're not interested after hearing about my messed up childhood, I understand.”

She was already swinging her leather tote bag over her shoulder by the time he realized what she was doing. Carys thought that he was going to reject her?

Not a chance!

“You're coming with me,” he grumbled and put his arm around her waist, pulling her as close as possible while still walking. He helped her into the waiting SUV, holding her hand as they drove back to his hotel. Once inside, she started taking off her clothes as she headed toward the bedroom.

Rafi couldn't hide his body's response, but he still felt as if something wasn't quite right.

When he closed the bedroom door, blocking out the rest of the world, Rafi took her hands, holding them out to the sides so she couldn't unbuckle his belt.

Instead of telling her to slow down, he kissed her.

He let his lips explain that tonight wasn't going to be about "naughty things".

He was going to make love to her. Because Rafi finally understood what was wrong.

He loved Carys and she was waiting for him to reject her.

She was waiting for him to realize she wasn't loveable.

He would show her that she was intensely loveable!

So instead of naughty things, he slowed down.

He kissed her until she was moaning, pressing her body against his.

And then, very slowly, with absolute reverence for the woman he suddenly knew that he was madly in love with, he kissed every inch of her, demonstrating his adoration for both her body as well as her needs.

He kissed her breasts, enjoying the way her fingers tangled in his hair and her hips rolled hungrily against his.

He worshiped her stomach, nuzzling the spot to the right that made her gasp every time.

He licked and sucked at her beautiful, pink folds until she cried out and exploded with pleasure. But he wasn't finished yet.

Then he moved over her, sliding ever so slowly into her tight, hot sheath. He looked down at her as he sank into her, showing her with his actions that she was the woman he wanted in his life forever.

Only when she cried out with another climax did he relax his control enough to find his own pleasure. And afterwards, he held her close, playing with her hair while he listened to her soft breathing, trying to think of more ways he could show her how much he adored her.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys hurried from her apartment building, a niggling sensation bothering her. She paused beside a parked car, trying to remember what she'd forgotten. She had her phone, her wallet, her keys, and...? Carys sighed in frustration.

Rafi's lovemaking over the past few days was messing with her head.

She was frazzled to the point of distraction!

He still traveled a lot. But lately, he had started asking her to come with him.

Since she couldn't do her job from a distance, Carys kept telling him no.

But as soon as he returned, he took her into his arms and made love to her.

It wasn't sex; it was so much more. Every time he touched her, every beautiful orgasm they shared, was like he was reaching into her soul and telling her... something.

Carys didn't like it. In fact, she hated it! She hated the way he looked at her now. She hated the fact that she felt only half alive when he was gone. She hated that she could barely sleep when she couldn't feel his warmth against her.

"This has to stop!"

Now she turned, heading for the subway station two blocks away. She was nearly stomping, so angry and irritated and...lost.

If she'd been thinking more clearly, Carys might have noticed the woman sooner. But Tanya was nearly on top of her when she looked up and...Tanya's shoulder slammed into hers.

"What...?" Carys gasped, spinning around, wondering if she'd been seeing things. Tanya? From the office? Why in the world was Tanya jogging down her street? That didn't make any sense! Tanya didn't live in this part of the city, did she? Carys hadn't ever seen Tanya around this neighborhood before.

Sure enough, Tanya continued jogging down the block, but turned to wave at Carys. "What in the world?" she whispered.

With a shrug, Carys turned and headed toward the subway station.

It occurred to her that maybe Tanya was the one breaking into her apartment.

And the shoulder-slam was more evidence that Tanya was trying to irritate Carys.

But why? Carys hadn't had anything to do with Tanya being demoted.

The woman had been a terror in the office for years!

Taking her out of the assistant director's role was Rafi's choice. Not hers!

Moving quickly, she hurried down the street. Carys had to run to catch the subway, slipping through the doors just as they began to close. Carys's imagination was working overtime, trying to figure out why Tanya would be in her neighborhood. Should she mention it to Rafi?

No, Rafi would just fire Tanya. Right now, the other woman was working in the human resources office.

Besides, Rafi had mentioned going away together for the weekend.

So, if Tanya was looking to cause problems over the next few days, it wouldn't work.

Carys would be out of town with a gorgeous man, escaping the city for a while.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi walked into the family dining room, irritated and confused. Unfortunately, Laith hadn't arrived yet. So he stomped over to the bar and poured himself a scotch, then downed it in one gulp, hissing as the burn traveled down his throat.

"Getting drunk won't help," a female voice announced.

Rafi turned to find his cousin, Angela, walking into the room.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked teasingly.

His angry mood melted away as he hugged Angela.

She was followed by her husband, Sheik Tiro of Ginisia.

Before Angela had tamed the bastard, Sheik Tiro had been one of Lativa's enemies.

Now...well, Rafi was starting to respect the guy.

"Why are you here?"

Angela went to the bar and set out two more glasses, then poured more scotch into all three. "Sip this one," she warned, giving Rafi a mock-irritated glare. "This is the good stuff. Uncle Khal might shoot you if he catches you downing it like you just did."

Rafi chuckled and shrugged. "Fair enough."

Laith walked in right then, so Angela poured another glass. "Hey there, cuz," she

called out, handing him a glass while also hugging him with her other arm.

“Hello, Oh Irritating One,” Laith replied, hugging Angela back while also glaring playfully at Tiro over her head. “Is he still treating you right?”

Angela laughed, glancing over her shoulder at her husband, who rolled his eyes, amused. “Definitely!” she replied.

Laith and Rafi both groaned when they saw the heat in Tiro’s eyes as he smiled at his wife.

“Stop that!” Laith grumbled, turning away.

He settled onto one of the comfortable sofas, one that was more comfortable than the silk covered, hard as hell monstrosities that decorated the public rooms of the palace.

“So, what has my brother so irritated?” Laith asked the room while staring at Rafi.

Rafi lifted an eyebrow, but before he could respond, Zayn, their other cousin, and next in line to the throne, barged into the room.

“He’s hard up for a woman,” Zayn announced.

“Poor bastard.” He poured himself a double portion of scotch, then took a hefty swallow, baring his teeth as the burn sizzled down his throat.

He dropped down onto the sofa next to Angela.

“So is Laith, for that matter. It’s such a pity that they have no idea how to romance a woman properly. ”

“And you do?” Laith grumbled, shifting slightly. Angela stood up and moved over to sit on her husband’s lap, wrapping her arm around his neck as she leaned into him.

“I haven’t had a problem so far,” Zayn responded with a smug expression.

“Don’t worry,” Rafi replied, lifting his glass in mock salute. “You’ll fall as hard as the rest of us.”

“So we’re all aware that Laith is struggling with his love life,” Angela said, turning to look at Rafi. “What’s up with you?”

“He’s in love with a woman in the marketing department,” Laith blurted.

“That’s great!” Angela gasped. “What’s her name? Why isn’t she here to meet all of us?”

Rafi frowned at his twin for a moment, then turned to Angela. “She’s not here because she had to work.”

“What did you do to mess it up?” Zayn asked pointedly, sipping his scotch.

“Nothing!” Rafi growled, then stood up to pace. “She told me about her past. Her father walked out on her for another woman. Then the ass remarried and basically abandoned Carys.”

“So what are you doing to show her that you won’t abandon her?” Angela asked, her tone softer now.

Rafi ran a hand through his short, dark hair.

“I took her to a cabin in Colorado, but she wouldn’t let me buy her anything, which

irritated the hell out of me.

” He turned and walked toward the windows fronting a dramatic courtyard.

“She’s becoming a wine expert and we explored the city.

Although we have a great time, every time we’re together, it feels like she’s pulling away.

It’s so frustrating! I don’t know how to get through to her! ”

“Have you considered talking to her?” Laith asked.

Rafi turned, glaring at his brother. “Do you think I haven’t tried?

” He sighed, running a hand through his hair again.

“Every time I try, she just...,” he paused, not wanting to admit to his brother and cousins that, every time he tried to talk to her, Carys distracted him with kisses.

Unfortunately, he wanted her so much that it worked every time.

She just had to kiss him or, hell, simply smile at him, and Rafi was so turned on he could barely think straight.

Hell, he couldn’t count the number of times that he’d forgotten to use protection because he was just too hot for Carys.

And that thought made him freeze. No protection. Carys...they hadn’t used protection about half the time when they’d made love!

Even more startling, Rafi couldn't remember the last time Carys had had her period! Every time he'd come to her, she'd been more than welcoming. In his experience, women didn't like having sex while they were menstruating. In the past, he hadn't cared.

But...Carys was different! He'd never walk out on her.

Hell, if she'd been on her period, Rafi knew that he would have been perfectly fine just holding her for the night.

He would have gotten her chocolate or a heating pad or whatever the hell women needed while on their periods!

Rafi had no idea what women needed since he'd just vacate the area whenever the woman he'd been seeing had been indisposed.

He hadn't cared enough to learn how to support women on their periods.

But with Carys, he cared! He cared a hell of a lot!

"Oh hell!" he grumbled, then set his crystal glass down on the low coffee table, nearly running in his haste to grab his phone.

Laith stared at the doorway through which his brother had just disappeared. "What just happened?"

Tiro snorted. "I think your brother just realized that his woman might be pregnant."

Laith stared at him for a long moment, then he swallowed hard. A split second later, he stood up and bolted from the room.

Angela laughed, then snuggled against her husband. “I guess the family history has a way of repeating itself!”

Zayn grumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “No way am I sticking around for the show,” and he walked out.

“And now, we’re alone!” Tiro announced with a familiar light in his eyes.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys couldn't believe how badly she missed Rafi.

The big, tall, sometimes grumpy, sometimes charming man had gotten under her defenses and wiggled into her heart.

She smiled faintly at that imagery as she walked down the street to her usual coffee shop to meet Andi.

When her phone buzzed, she glanced at the caller and saw that it was Rafi.

Answering it, she paused and looked around, admiring the view of the river. It had rained the previous night, so the current was murky and faster than usual as the runoff came down from the hills surrounding the city.

"What's up?" Carys asked, smiling and feeling a bubble of happiness rising in her chest.

"I just landed. Are you available for dinner tonight?"

Carys's smile widened. "Just dinner?" she teased.

Rafi groaned. "Everything is on the table!"

"Figuratively? Or literally?"

He laughed. "You know that I'm going to have to do you on the table tonight now that you've put that image in my head."

Carys laughed and spun around, leaning her hip against the metal railing that separated pedestrians from the rushing river below. “Oh, I doubt that. You’re a possessive man.”

“I am. And you’re going to wear those black boots with the heels,” he commanded, his voice turning husky. “But what does that have to do with me taking you on the dining room table? Maybe with a bit of melted chocolate that I’ll have to clean off with my tongue.”

Carys gasped, closing her eyes at the thought of him licking chocolate off of her. And her returning the favor. Good grief, his imagination had no limits.

“Rafi!” she gasped, turning so that others wouldn’t see the blush warming her cheeks. “Don’t say things like that.”

He chuckled knowingly. “You started it, habibi . Tell me where you are. I want to see you right now. I don’t think I can wait until tonight.”

Carys groaned, closing her eyes as she leaned her head back slightly. “I’m meeting someone for coffee.”

“Your friend?”

“Yeah.” She glanced at her watch. “Actually, I’d better hurry or I’ll be late. I’ll see you later?”

“When? What time? Tell me where you are now and I’ll come pick you up after you finish having coffee.”

She smiled, charmed by his eagerness. “I don’t know how long I’ll be. How about if I text you after?”

“Deal. I’ll see you soon, habibi .”

Carys still had no idea what that term meant, but it sounded like an endearment so she was going to take it as one. After tucking her phone back into her purse, Carys headed down the pathway, excited to tell Andi about Rafi.

She’d just rounded a bend in the pathway when she spotted Andi. But her friend wasn’t looking in her direction. Carys lifted her hand, about to try to get Andi’s attention when a tall, muscular man walked into her line of sight.

Rafi? Why was Rafi here? Wasn’t he at the airport? Hadn’t he just landed? How had he...?

Carys froze with horror when Rafi hurried to Andi and lifted her into his arms. A moment later, he kissed her in a way that...

other people were turning their heads away as the passionate kiss continued.

And Andi, her best friend in the whole world, was kissing Rafi back!

Rafi’s hands moved down Andi’s back and...

and then he cupped her butt, bringing Andi’s hips into closer contact with his groin!

Carys knew that move! Carys had been the recipient of just such a move several times in the past! She’d loved it when Rafi had been so ravenous for her that he’d picked her up just like that!

But now...now...Carys stared in horror, feeling her body go numb. Andi...and Rafi? How...how was that possible? Her best friend and the man she loved? No, this couldn’t be happening!

But it was. Rafi was kissing her best friend and Andi was clearly enjoying it. Andi seemed to know Rafi. Intimately from the way her hands were diving into his hair.

What dimension of hell was this? How could her friend betray Carys in such a vile way?

However, Carys hadn't ever told Andi who she'd been seeing. Andi had mentioned seeing a guy, but she'd been so secretive about her relationship. Carys had never considered the possibility that Andi was seeing the same man as Carys!

After several minutes of the intense make-out session, the couple stopped, but they didn't pull apart.

Andi looked so right, so comfortable in Rafi's arms. Her best friend...

well, former best friend...looked happy and in love.

And Rafi seemed to be equally engaged. Andi leaned against Rafi, her fingers twirling in Rafi's hair while his hands rested on the small of her back.

The two of them looked like a scene out of a romantic movie. Rafi was so tall and muscular while Andi was shorter, beautiful with her dark hair and warm smile.

They were in love, she suddenly realized. Rafi and Andi were obviously madly in love!

But just a few minutes ago, Carys would have sworn Rafi was in love with her. Just five minutes ago, Carys would have declared her feelings for Rafi with absolute confidence that he felt the same way.

Her confidence had clearly been misplaced, she thought and turned away from the

happy couple. The happy couple that was currently shattering her heart.

Only moments ago, she'd felt a bubbling, happy sensation in her chest. Now she felt as if someone had placed a fifty pound weight on her shoulders.

It was difficult to get her feet to cooperate.

She struggled to walk as the heaviness permeated her very bones.

This...this was a pain unlike any she'd experienced before.

It was worse than the day her father had walked out of her childhood kitchen after calmly explaining that he was moving with his new wife to Arizona.

It was similar to the day she'd had to bury her mother.

Those moments in her life hadn't been her fault.

This...trusting Rafi, believing that he was worthy of her trust...

made everything so much worse. Because she knew better.

Carys knew not to trust men because they always left.

They wouldn't stay around for the long haul, when things got tough or when other opportunities presented themselves.

Carys slowly walked back to her apartment, not bothering with the subway.

She didn't want to go into the bowels of the city.

She worried she'd be smothered if she had to go underground.

Not just in these feelings of anger and betrayal, but because of how stupid she felt. Stupid and gullible and...manipulated!

When Carys let herself into her apartment, there was a hint of a scent that she didn't recognize. But instead of looking for the source of the aroma, she walked into her bedroom, laid down in her bed and pulled the covers over herself.

For a long time, she didn't move. The tears didn't come, but the image of Rafi walking toward her friend kept replaying in her head. Rafi pulling her best friend into his arms and kissing her. Rafi laughing at whatever Andi had said and Andi looking up at Rafi with a worshipful smile.

She hated Andi at this moment. Yeah, Carys knew that it wasn't fair to blame her.

Her best friend couldn't have known what was going on with Carys.

Andi had been so excited to tell Carys about the new guy she'd been dating.

But Andi had kept the man's name a secret, something about how they were working together.

Carys understood now, since they worked for the same company, but in different departments and different offices.

Her company owned four different buildings around the Philadelphia area.

She just hadn't known that Rafi was traveling between all four of them.

For some stupid reason, she'd assumed that he was mainly working out of the office

she was located in.

Damn it, she'd made too many assumptions!

She'd assumed Rafi was only interested in her.

She'd assumed that he was working out of her office.

She'd assumed that the trips he'd made around the world had been business related – not for visits to see his other girlfriend.

She'd assumed that he cared for her. She'd assumed that... that...!

The tears finally came. They burned hot and salty over her cheeks, stinging her skin like acid.

They started silently, but eventually, as the pain of Rafi's betrayal, his lies, and his cheating ways hit her, the tears morphed into racking sobs that tore at her throat.

She hugged a pillow against her chest, trying to stop the sobbing but unable to suppress her heartbreak.

At some point, she fell asleep. Carys wasn't sure how long she'd slept, but woke up when she heard an unexpected sound.

Was that a knock on her door? Carys paused, listening hard.

She wasn't going to answer the door, but she wanted to know if the person would knock again.

She didn't have a plan, but if she did, it would be something along the lines of

remaining very still so that the person didn't realize that she was here.

But there was only silence. Just like in her heart.

Carys fell asleep again. It was Saturday and she didn't care what was happening in the world because right now, her world had ended. She pulled the blanket tighter over her and let sleep take over.

At some point, she woke up in the middle of the night. Peeking out from the mound of blankets and pillows, she looked around. It felt as if...! Was someone in her apartment?

No! That was impossible! She must have imagined the sound of the door closing.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Still, she pushed the blankets off and padded barefoot into the kitchen.

After crying so hard, she was thirsty. But when she looked in her kitchen cabinet, there were only five glasses on the shelf.

Carys looked around. She didn't bother putting anything in the dishwasher because she lived alone.

Running the dishwasher for one person seemed unnecessary, so Carys preferred to hand wash her dishes.

However, there were no glasses in the drying rack.

Nor had she left the missing glass elsewhere in her apartment.

The apartment consisted of a living room, kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom.

There was a small, stacked washer and dryer in the closet, but there wasn't any other place where one might leave a glass.

Since Carys had bought a set of six glasses when she'd moved into this apartment, and she hadn't broken any, her only conclusion was that someone had to have been in her apartment.

She hesitated, looking around and listening hard. But there were no sounds. Nothing moved. The only sounds she heard were her breathing and her pounding heart.

But there was no movement. Carys remembered earlier that someone had knocked on her door and she'd kept quiet and still. Had someone else hidden themselves in her apartment, remaining perfectly still, while she slept?

A shiver of fear ripped through her and Carys looked around, trying to find a place to hide.

But her apartment was so small and there weren't many places to hide.

Her living room was only large enough for a sofa and television.

There was a small, low coffee table, but it wasn't big enough to hide anyone.

The coat closet was barely large enough for a few coats. Could someone be in her bathroom?

Carys crept to the bathroom, trying not to make any sound or move too fast. If someone was in her apartment, she didn't want to startle them.

The thought occurred to her that, if she did find someone in her place, what was her plan?

Confront the culprit with...her frazzled hair?

After spending the last twelve hours under the covers, it was a pretty good bet that her hair looked like she'd stuck her finger in a wall socket.

But, when she looked, no one was in the bathroom.

That's when she remembered the cameras! She'd bought two security cameras!

With trembling fingers, she reached for her phone. But before she could check the security app, she found there were more than twenty missed calls from Rafi. Carys remembered seeing Rafi, the man she'd thought she loved, kissing her best friend.

Almost immediately, she slumped down onto her bed, the phone dangling from her fingertips. She should call him back, tell him that he was a bastard and she hated him for betraying her like this.

But Rafi didn't know that Andi was Carys's best friend. That's when she remembered that she was supposed to meet Andi for coffee. Andi must have been going to introduce Carys to her new boyfriend.

Who just happened to also be Carys's boyfriend.

This wasn't Andi's fault. Her friend had no idea that they were dating the same guy.

Carys suddenly realized that she needed to tell Andi about how they'd been with the same guy.

Their lives had been pretty chaotic lately.

Andi had started a new job that took her all over the world while Carys was busy launching new ad campaigns with a new supervisor.

No, that wasn't right. Carys had been seeing Rafi for a couple of months now.

While Andi had only met her guy a few weeks ago.

Yes, that was right. Andi had only mentioned a new guy in her life two, maybe three, weeks ago.

Had it been longer? Had it actually been four weeks?

Or longer? Maybe Andi just hadn't mentioned anything to Carys about her new love life.

Carys fell backward across her bed, ignoring the mess of blankets underneath her as the tears flowed again. What had happened between her and Rafi three or four weeks ago? What had she done or said that would have pushed him into the arms of another woman?

Carys wiped angrily at a tear with the back of her hand, sniffing and trying to breathe.

But the pain was overwhelming. She rolled onto her side, curling into a ball as she thought back over the past couple of months.

Being with Rafi had seemed so...effortless.

They talked and laughed easily together.

The sex was phenomenal! Of course, she hadn't slept with many men so her sample size was pretty small, but Carys instinctively knew that sex wasn't usually as incredible as it was between her and Rafi.

It simply wasn't! Most of the women in her friend group complained about sex with their significant others.

Some of her friends were relieved when they got their periods, because it meant that they had a whole week "off" from having to smile and respond to their significant other's sexual advances.

And she also knew that...!

Carys froze, the tears subsiding for a long moment as that last sentence registered. Her friends “enjoyed” a weeklong reprieve from sex with their significant others while they were on their periods!

That hadn’t happened over the past few months! Carys hadn’t abstained from sex because of her cycle in...ever! Not with Rafi, at least. She went cold. She hadn’t had a period in...well over a month!

Her hand moved unconsciously to her stomach. Could she be...? Was it possible that she might...?

“No!” she whispered, the tears streaming down her cheeks again as she thought about having a baby all by herself.

In the past, she and Andi had laughed about how they could be “aunts” to each other’s children.

They’d always assumed that they would remain close no matter what happened in their lives. They had been closer than some sisters!

But no more! Carys couldn’t be friends while Andi was with Rafi. It would be impossible. The agony of watching the man she loved with her friend would be too intense. So no, Carys couldn’t remain friends with Andi.

Especially if she was pregnant!

How cruel could the universe be if she truly was pregnant? That would be...beyond horrible. And wonderful, she thought as she contemplated the possibility of having Rafi’s baby. They hadn’t talked about kids. Hell, whenever Rafi brought up the

future, Carys changed the subject.

Apparently, for good reason, she thought as she rolled over, pulling a pillow to her chest. Pregnant and alone. Carys blinked back the tears, her eyes burning. It was time to stop crying, she admonished. Then wiped more tears away.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes, trying to stop the pain. But the tears kept falling. Carys had no idea what time it was, but she was tired. Bone-deep exhausted. She might have slept most of the day and night, but every part of her ached.

Especially her heart.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Where the hell is she?” Rafi hissed, glaring at the head of his security team. “She didn’t call me when she finished her coffee date with her friend. We were supposed to meet up after I got through the airport!”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness,” the man bowed, shaking his head. “We haven’t found her yet. I’ve stationed two men to watch her apartment. She hasn’t entered or left her apartment since I stationed someone there.”

“Did you go into her apartment?” Rafi demanded, wondering if Carys was hurt and couldn’t call for help. Was she lying helplessly on the floor of her apartment? Wounded and scared?

“No, Your Highness. But if you are authorizing us to enter, we’ll do so immediately.”

Rafi ran a hand through his hair, frustration driving him crazy. He was worried now. The sun was just coming up. There were glimmers of light shimmering on the horizon and the day promised to be beautiful.

But not without Carys. Every minute of not knowing if Carys was okay felt like a year. His Carys was hurt. He could feel it in his bones. She wasn’t answering her cell phone, hadn’t responded to his text messages, and she wasn’t in her apartment.

“Start interviewing her friends,” Rafi demanded.

“Find out if anyone has seen her. Check into the office security system and find out if she worked today. I know it’s Saturday,” he paused and sighed.

“I guess it’s Sunday actually.” He clenched his teeth for a moment, then ran his hand through his hair again.

He spun around, glaring at his lead bodyguard.

“She might be carrying my child. And if that’s the case, then she could be in danger.”

He couldn’t consider the possibility that Carys had already been taken by someone hoping to harm him or his family. The thought of Carys, tied up and scared, maybe being tortured, was more than he could handle.

Rafi thought about all the times he’d made love to Carys over the past few months, and the number of times he hadn’t remembered to use protection.

Had he done that on purpose? Had he subconsciously understood that Carys would run from him?

Had he unconsciously manipulated the situation so that she had to stay in his life forever?

No, he didn’t think so. The passion between them had been too hot, too fast and furious.

Still, that was no excuse for not protecting his woman.

He should have been smarter, slower, and more careful.

But there was just something about Carys that drove him wild.

She was...his life! She was everything to him. And he wasn’t ashamed to say it.

Hell, he should have mentioned that to his bodyguards before now.

He should have ordered them to organize protection for Carys sooner.

He'd known early on in their relationship that she was significant to him.

Rafi had known that Carys was it for him.

He remembered his mother and father talking about how they'd found each other again after almost a year.

Was history repeating itself? Rafi smiled at the thought of Carys carrying his child, but the smile vanished at the possibility of Carys being pregnant and kidnapped. The kidnappers would hurt her. They might even harm her unborn child, especially if Carys didn't even realize she was pregnant.

"Damn it!" he muttered, pressing his palms to his temples, trying to alleviate the pain in his head and chest. But the pain didn't go away. Rafi knew the pain couldn't go away until he had Carys back, safe and sound.

Rafi wondered what it would be like to have a child.

To be a father. He loved his twin brother and all of his younger cousins.

Granted, Rafi wasn't as close to Rylan, Ramzi, Nahla, or Saif as he was to his brother, Angela, and Zayn.

There had been a large gap between the older four and the younger four grandkids.

Still, he'd been old enough to appreciate how cute his baby cousins had been.

Rafi considered calling his brother. He and Laith always shared every part of their lives, but something held him back.

Instead, he stared out the window, watching as the city of Philadelphia slowly woke up. What would it be like to wake up slowly with Carys in his arms? To see her stretch and smile at him, to feel her stomach round and ripe with their child?

The thought sent a jolt of lust through his body.

He wanted that reality. He wanted that future with Carys.

Now that she'd explained her past, about the way her father had abandoned her when she was only twelve years old, at the height of her impressionable years, Rafi finally understood.

He got why she'd been pulling away from him over the past few weeks.

He understood that, any sort of true attention to Carys would result in her pulling back, not being able to trust the joy in her life.

Because her bastard of a father had stomped on her trust, destroyed the safety of her childhood. Those kinds of wounds were difficult to heal.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys woke the following morning and looked out the window.

The sun was bright without a cloud in the sky, making the world look happy and vibrant.

Meanwhile, Carys felt hungover. She knew that it was caused by dehydration after her night of crying, but that knowledge still didn't ease the pain throbbing at her temples.

She pushed the blankets away and stood up, surprised to find she was still wearing yesterday's clothes.

"Water," she croaked and walked into her kitchen. She glared at the five water glasses, then grabbed one and filled it up. She downed a couple ibuprofen tablets, then headed into her bathroom. After showering and dressing in clean clothes, Carys felt a little more human.

"Walk," she commanded herself. Carys pulled on her running shoes and a jacket with a baseball cap, then headed out of her apartment.

She didn't want to talk to anyone. So, she put on a pair of sunglasses and walked out the back door of her building.

The nosy neighbor who always wanted to chat about marketing ideas was walking into the building with two bags of groceries, so Carys ducked her head and darted to the left around the building's dumpsters.

“Carys? Is that you?” Marylynn called out.

Because Carys couldn't deal with human interaction right now, she didn't respond.

Instead, she walked quickly between the landscaped bushes to the sidewalk.

This path would take her through a small, wooded area where, hopefully, Carys could disappear.

She was nearly to the edge of the apartment building's parking lot when she spotted a familiar car.

Her eyes narrowed as she eyed the minivan parked in the lot behind her apartment building.

Why was Beth's car here? The silver minivan idled, the engine spewing toxic smoke out the back end while Beth filed her nails in the driver's seat.

Carys remembered the sounds that had woken her up last night, the sensation that someone had been in her home...and the scent the other night when she'd come home...the vanilla scent. Her father's wife, Beth, wore a vanilla-based perfume! Had Beth been here last night?

Carys snorted at the idea. Beth was the consummate stay-at-home mother these days.

She'd given up her career after daughter number three was born.

She had four daughters now, all of whom were in either high school or middle school.

Carys knew from Andi's online stalking that all four girls were involved in gymnastics, band, piano, and soccer, not to mention almost-monthly camping trips

with their dad.

So, why was Beth parked here in downtown Philly? Why wasn't she at home whipping up an amazing Sunday brunch? Or more likely, why wasn't Beth in church?

"Just leave!" Carys muttered under her breath as she hurried on, following the path that would take her away from her apartment building and the woman sitting in her minivan.

It was bad enough that her father was harassing her, but now Beth?

This was getting ridiculous. Maybe she should get a restraining order against her father and stepmother.

Would a judge grant her one? They weren't hurting her.

They were just...stalking her, she thought as she shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, keeping her head down as she headed along the path.

For several minutes, she worked out the potential for a restraining order, wondering if she'd need to hire a lawyer. Carys didn't really have the money to hire a lawyer. She barely had the money for her coffee shop visits with friends and...!

Her heart ached at the thought of Andi. They met for coffee more often than the entire friend group, but those cozy, face-to-face chats would never happen again. How was Carys going to get through life without Andi? They'd been best friends since college! They shared everything with each other!

"Not everything," she muttered and turned onto another street.

Carys had no idea where she was going, but the fresh air felt good.

After two hours of meandering through the city, Carys found a coffee shop and ordered a cappuccino.

It was more expensive than her usual black coffee, but she needed the pick-me-up today.

Carys sat on a bench and watched the river float by while she sipped her treat. The weather was warm and she could see boats cruising along. The river was calm so there weren't any whitecaps, but she watched leaves flow quickly downstream.

And then the tears started again. Carys sipped her coffee, watched the boats float by while she ignored her phone and tried to tamp down on the pain in her chest.

What was Rafi doing right now? Was he with Andi?

Were they having coffee and laughing together?

Or was he at the office, working on something that she might not understand?

Rafi understood contract negotiations better than anyone she had ever known.

It was fascinating talking to him about the various language he would add to a contract to better protect the interests of the company.

“Well, that's over,” she whispered to herself and gulped down the last of her coffee.

Standing, she tossed the empty coffee cup into a garbage can, then headed down to the weekend markets.

Carys wasn't in the mood to go home and be alone.

She'd reveled in her own misery enough yesterday. It was time to start getting over Rafi.

And the loss of her best friend.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi walked into the office the following morning, furious and terrified.

His security team hadn't found any trace of Carys.

They'd even gone into her apartment and looked around.

There was evidence that she'd been there at some point during the weekend, but when they'd picked the lock on her door Sunday afternoon, she hadn't been home.

Nor had they seen her come back that evening.

Was she in the office over the weekend? Was she working today?

There hadn't been any news of her calling in sick, but her new boss, what's her name, wouldn't think to inform Rafi that one of her staff members called out sick.

Nor had there been any ransom demand, no chatter about her being kidnapped and no other indication that Carys was in danger.

"Carys, where the hell are you?" he grumbled under his breath and returned to his own office. His office was at the end of the window-lined hallway, but Rafi didn't notice the incredible views of the city. He could only think and worry about.

Unfortunately, the fact that there hadn't been a ransom demand didn't prove she hadn't been taken.

Everyone assumed that the only criminal elements were the mafia and the gangs from

Central America.

What the average citizen didn't know was that business leaders were more corrupt, more brutal, and more willing to participate in illegal activities if it gave them a business advantage.

Competitors weren't just pushed out of business through illegal price gouging schemes.

Their loved ones were threatened, businesses brutalized, shipments stolen, and blackmail rampantly used.

There were also the illegal price fixing schemes or the way businesses mined social media, health data, and personal emails for clues as to how to sell products.

The world was terrified of what the rulers of foreign countries would do with a citizen's personal data. But what they should be scared of is what corporations were currently doing with personal data.

And that's why he was terrified. He hadn't protected Carys. Not her health nor her personal safety. Rafi had known for a while that Carys was the woman he wanted by his side forever. And yet, he'd moved slowly, keeping his identity a secret so she wouldn't run from him.

Run? He stopped pacing, his head unconsciously tilting slightly as he considered the possibility that Carys had hidden herself away for some reason. That thought hadn't occurred to him before now but... had Carys run away?

The relief was short lived. No, Carys wouldn't run away. Her father had run like a pathetic puppy to Arizona, leaving behind a terrified preteen daughter. Carys wouldn't do the same. She would stay and fight.

Which brought his fears right back to the forefront of his thoughts.

“Sir?” his assistant spoke from the doorway.

Rafi turned, hopeful that there was news of Carys’s whereabouts.

“Have they found her?”

His assistant smiled and nodded. “She’s in the conference room, sir.”

Rafi was already in motion, his mind filled with questions. “Why the hell is she in there?” he growled, ready to pick her up and spank her adorable ass for putting him through hell over the past two days!

“You have a meeting with the marketing department, sir,” his assistant replied, rushing to keep up with Rafi’s longer strides. “A progress meeting you set up two weeks ago.”

Rafi didn’t give a damn about the marketing campaign progress.

All he cared about was finding Carys and demanding to know where she’s been since Saturday morning!

On the phone, she’d promised to meet him after she’d had coffee with her friend.

Where the hell had she been all weekend?

Why hadn’t she let him know she was okay?

That she wasn’t going to meet him for dinner!

Would a simple call be too much?

His fury ignited with the news that Carys was sitting in a conference room, pretty as a peach, while he'd been worried sick about her! Rafi had thought she'd been kidnapped or worse!

And Rafi also knew that he would have given up everything in order to ensure her safety!

When he stepped into the room, it wasn't to find Carys sitting smugly at the table. In fact, there were about twenty people packed into the room. As soon as he appeared, everyone quickly found their seats.

"Sir, it's a pleasure to present our final marketing campaign ideas," his new director began with a professional smile that included every team member present.

"We have been working diligently to get this campaign ready for launch and we're excited to present our final ideas to you before we send the graphics off to the printer and digital marketing team. "

It took several seconds for Rafi to calm his temper enough to sit down. Every instinct within him screamed to scoop Carys up in his arms and carry her off somewhere more private!

Instead, he took a breath and carefully, slowly, sat down in the chair at the head of the table.

As soon as Rafi was settled, the new director, he really needed to learn her name, turned and nodded to Carys. Something inside of him relaxed slightly when the director acknowledged Carys. That was good. Progress was finally being made.

That's when Rafi looked at Carys, really looked at her.

Why was she so pale? Had she been sick? Was that why she hadn't answered his calls over the weekend?

For the next few minutes, Rafi berated himself for being angry with her.

He should have known that Carys wouldn't have ignored him on purpose. Something was very wrong.

Carys stood up and pulled out the story boards. Rafi noticed that her fingers shook with the effort and wondered why. Again, he suspected that she was sick and he dug his nails into the arms of his chair to keep himself from going to her side.

Instead, he listened to her speak, describing the various marketing concepts and how they would be implemented in television and social media.

The longer she spoke, the more her voice cracked. And as she stood at the opposite end of the table, he noticed that she looked about ready to faint.

"Why don't you sit down while you explain?" he suggested.

Carys lifted her chin stubbornly as she pressed her lips together. "It's better if I explain while standing so that the rest of the team can see," she argued, then continued.

He had to admit the ideas were brilliant.

Not just the concept, but the application of the concept was different than anything done before.

It was simple, and yet just a little outrageous.

The colors on the story board started off subtle, only to intensify as the product came into focus.

By the end of the explanation, even Rafi was ready to buy them.

This new campaign was going to be a raging success. He would need to revise his quarterly estimates upwards, possibly by about twenty or twenty-five percent, just because of the marketing ideas.

When the rest of the team finished explaining, Rafi nodded, smiling his approval.

“It’s incredible,” he announced, his look incorporating everyone on the marketing team, and lingering on Carys.

“It’s truly a brilliant concept and I appreciate the way that everyone on the team helped bring the idea to fruition so quickly. ”

He stood up and everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “Carys, could I speak to you privately?”

Rafi turned, not bothering to wait for her agreement. He walked out of the conference room and into his private office, then turned, leaning against his desk as he waited for Carys to follow.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys stormed into Rafi's office, her temper rising. She didn't pause when she stepped through the doorway, but dumped her files onto the table, then slammed his office door shut.

"Did you break into my apartment this weekend?"

Rafi's face dropped. His relaxed pose tensed and Carys knew she was right.

"I did not," he snapped.

He drew in a breath to continue, but she didn't want to hear it.

Carys stepped closer, but not too close.

She stabbed the air in his direction, her temper igniting at the terror he'd caused her.

"Don't quibble over the details, Rafi! If you didn't, then one of your bodyguards did.

Am I right?" His expression answered her question and she kept going.

"How could you?" She spun around on the heel of her leather boot.

"How could you terrify me like that? And why? Was humiliating me not enough? You had to add breaking and entering to the mix just to make sure that I was appropriately scared of you?"

"Why would you think I wanted to terrify you? And how did I humiliate you?" He

came around so that he was standing in front of her again, needing to see her expression.

She snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. “Don’t even try it, Rafi!

I saw you! You’re a lying bastard who would...

” she stopped when her voice cracked. But at the softening of his expression, she stepped backward.

“Don’t!” she hissed, lifting a hand, palm out.

“Don’t you dare come closer. I knew someone had been in my place but I hadn’t thought that you would do that to me.

I never considered that you would violate my privacy like that!

” She paused but before he could defend himself, she shook her head.

“Stop breaking into my apartment, Rafi. You made your choice. Leave me alone.” She turned on her heel and grabbed her files.

She thought about resigning, but Carys didn’t have another job waiting to go to.

And she had rent to pay. She couldn’t afford to quit her current job until she had a new one.

She walked over to the door but before she opened it, she turned. “It would be really nice if you or your goon squad could return my stuff. I don’t know what excuse you’ll offer for the thefts, nor do I understand why you would do something so irritating, but it has to stop!”

Before he could respond, Carys jerked the door open and walked out. She offered a tight smile to the man sitting at the desk outside, refusing to laugh at the young man's shocked expression.

Carys returned to her cubicle, wondering why Rafi, or his bodyguards, felt the need to break into her apartment at all.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi stared at the empty doorway, wondering how Carys would react if he caught up with her. They needed to hash this out. He'd been so worried about her this morning, then so relieved that she was at work, apparently safe and sound, that he hadn't remembered to ask her about her possible pregnancy.

Was she? Pregnant, that is? Was his precious, if furious, Carys pregnant with their first child? And yes, he knew that there would be more. Carys was too sweet and loveable to stop at one. He was so relieved that Carys was safe and unharmed that he couldn't hold onto his anger, which melted away.

But, he did need get to the bottom of her absence this weekend. What had she said? She was angry that someone had broken into her apartment?

Rafi rubbed the back of his neck. He'd done that. He'd ordered his bodyguards to slip into her apartment to make sure that she wasn't alone and hurt, needing help and unable to call for it.

Then what had she said? To be honest, after that comment, she'd turned and walked away.

Rafi had allowed his eyes to stray down over her delectably curvy figure and...

he'd noticed that she wore his favorite leather boots.

They were the same boots she'd been wearing the first time he'd seen her and his mind had blanked.

If he'd been more on his game, Rafi would have listened more intently. But the boots...

Thefts!

Yeah, that's what she'd said. Something about thefts in her apartment.

She'd accused his bodyguards of stealing from her apartment?

Why? His bodyguards were extremely well paid.

They worked long hours in difficult situations, were highly trained, and were loyal to a fault. He appreciated every damn one of them.

They wouldn't steal. And they definitely wouldn't steal minor items from Carys's apartment. So what the hell had she meant by that statement?

"Amir!" he called out.

His head of security immediately stepped into Rafi's office.

The guard didn't respond with the usual "Yes, Your Highness" because he'd forbidden the use of his title when they weren't on official business outside of Lativa.

It wasn't a secret that he and his brother were princes.

It's just that he and his family didn't advertise the fact that they were members of the royal family when it wasn't necessary.

"Yes, sir?" Amir inquired, his body language alert and ready for anything.

“You put a guard on Carys during the work day, correct?” Rafi asked, which was the question at the top of his mind.

“Yes, sir,” Amir replied. “She’s currently in her cubicle, working on the computer.” The man’s features softened. “She’s pretty angry, apparently.”

Rafi grunted acknowledgement. He didn’t care that Carys was angry. He was just so relieved that she was safe. However, the mystery of the thefts was an interesting question.

“Carys mentioned that someone had been in her apartment this weekend.”

“Yes, sir,” Amir replied with a slight nod of his head. “We picked the locks and took a look around, just as you requested. She wasn’t home, sir.”

Rafi fisted his hands on his hips. “She told me to stop stealing from her.”

The bodyguard tensed. “We took nothing from her apartment, sir.”

“I know,” Rafi replied, waving his hand in the air. “But Carys seemed certain that someone had stolen from her.”

The man’s eyes sharpened. “The only item of any value in her apartment is a television. But even that isn’t particularly valuable. It’s small and old.”

Rafi’s eyes narrowed as he considered that.

“She mentioned that the stolen items weren’t important but whatever had been taken was irritating.

Or annoying.” He sighed and sliced his hand through the air.

“I can’t remember her exact words.” Because he’d noticed her damn leather boots.

He pushed her leather boots, and how sexy they made her appear, out of his mind.

“Can you look into that? I can’t quite put my finger on why, but her comment worries me. ”

The man was nodding before Rafi even finished. “I’m on it, sir,” he agreed, and spun around on his heel. Rafi heard him muttering into a microphone in Arabic. His voice was low but demanding and Rafi turned, looking out the window again. Amir would get to the bottom of the odd thefts.

Then his mind returned to his favorite subject. What was Carys doing right now?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Hey, this came for you last Friday, but you’d already headed out for the day,” Bobby, the mail room guy, announced, handing an envelope to Carys. “I thought I’d deliver it to you earlier than the normal mail since it’s marked private and personal.”

Carys stared at the envelope. This one was typed and, in the upper left hand corner, the return address was from “William Bescer, Esquire” along with a posh, Philadelphia address.

Carys didn’t have the stomach to open the envelope now.

Besides, this was a personal issue. She’d open it on her lunch break which was in... now!

Carys grabbed her tote bag and left the office, ignoring the group of co-workers who were gathered in the staff kitchen, reveling and laughing about the success of the morning’s meeting. Yeah, the campaign was going to be great. Unfortunately, she didn’t feel like celebrating.

Walking out of the building, Carys headed for the cozy, tree-lined, brick courtyard that had been created between this building and the next.

The two buildings were probably owned by the same management company because they were similar in style.

She sat down underneath one of the colorful trees, then pulled the letter out.

For several moments, Carys simply stared at the letter, wondering what the letter was

about.

It had to be bad news. Nothing that came from a lawyer's office was good news.

Her stomach tightened as she thought about Tanya.

The woman had been jogging by her apartment a few days ago.

And had Carys seen her other times? There had been a flash of a dark haired woman walking away from Carys's building that had looked vaguely familiar.

Had that been Tanya? Had her former boss taken to stalking Carys to exact some sort of revenge plot?

Carys thought about tearing open the envelope and reading the message inside.

But something warned her that she wasn't going to like what she found.

So instead, she stuffed it back into her bag and looked around.

She needed food. She hadn't eaten since yesterday when she'd had the cappuccino while watching the boats on the river.

But now it was time for some real food. After the confrontation with Rafi, she was starving.

What was it about one's temper that aroused an appetite?

Carys walked down the sidewalk to one of the downtown delis.

She was in the mood for a sandwich with cheese and some sort of bad-for-you, salt-

laden meat that tasted wonderful but probably caused cancer.

Automatically, Carys reached into her tote bag for her phone, intending to call Andi and ask if she was in the mood for a deli sandwich as well.

But then she remembered that Andi had kissed Rafi on Saturday morning. Andi had been like a sister to Carys, but no more. Andi's relationship to the cheating bastard meant that Carys would have to find a new best friend.

And that tore at her heart. Andi didn't know that they were dating the same guy.

Andi wouldn't know why Carys had ignored her friend's calls and texts for the past two days.

So Carys pulled her phone out and pulled up the texting app.

She read through the last message from Andi, sniffing as tears threatened yet again.

No! There had to be some way that Carys could get over Rafi. Maybe eventually, she could handle seeing Andi and Rafi together. Or maybe...just maybe...Rafi would get tired of Andi and move on!

No, that was a terrible idea. Carys remembered how happy Andi had looked on Saturday. She'd been glowing as she'd leaned her head back to look up at Rafi. And he'd been happy as well. Damn it! This was all too much to handle!

She glanced into the window of the deli and...

froze. Quickly, she looked away, but Carys definitely recognized the man following her.

She'd only seen a quick glimpse of his reflection in the deli's window, but she knew him.

Unfortunately, Carys couldn't remember where she'd seen him before.

Had he been at the office? That would make sense since they were only two blocks from where she worked.

But Carys was relatively sure that he didn't work for the same company.

Maybe he worked in one of the nearby offices?

Carys casually slipped into the deli, waiting to see what her "shadow" would do next. If the man strolled on by, Carys would laugh and tell herself that she was being paranoid. But if the man...oh no, he did ! The guy followed her into the deli, standing in line behind two other customers!

Okay, so he was following her. But why? Her thoughts flashed back to Beth's minivan in the parking lot of her building, her father confronting her in front of her office, Tanya shoulder-checking her several days ago...and the letter from the law office! The mysterious letter in her bag.

Or...was this man the creep who had been breaking into her apartment and stealing random stuff?

Trying to appear normal, Carys stood in line, nibbling on her thumb as she tried to figure out a way to get away from the man.

But as she stood in line behind four other people, Carys turned slightly, using her peripheral vision to see if he was still there.

He was!

“Next!”

Carys jumped, looking around. The customers in front of her had already given the clerk their lunch orders and had moved down the counter.

It was her turn to order. Carys wasn't sure what she wanted, so she ordered something simple.

“Just a ham and Swiss on pumpernickel,” she told the guy, not sure why she was whispering.

She checked over her shoulder at the man at the end of the line. He was trying to appear casual, but she caught him glancing at her.

“Damn it!” she whispered, moving down the counter. She paid for her sandwich, declined a soda, then took the bag handed to her.

“Bathrooms?” she asked, still whispering while trying to avoid looking at the man again.

“In the back, last door on your right,” a tired woman answered, then looked over Carys's shoulder to the next customer.

Carys mumbled a thank you and turned down the hall.

Her nerves were rattling and her heart rate picked up.

If she kept this up, she was going to have a heart attack!

Carys crept down the hallway. There was a door with a red bar across it that announced that alarms would sound if she went through it.

Deciding that an alarm would give away her plan, she pushed through the “employees only” door and found herself in a storage room.

“Now what?” she whispered, looking around.

Before she could decide, a deli employee, hauling a bag of trash, rushed through the storage area.

He didn’t notice her, but Carys followed him.

Just as she’d hoped, he led her to the back door of the deli, which led to the alley.

No alarms went off and no one noticed her as she slipped past the guy.

While the deli employee hefted the trash bag into the dumpster, Carys ran down the alley.

Should she go back to the office? Maybe she could tell Rafi, ask him for help. No, that was a bad idea. But maybe she could speak to one of the guards? He had all of those bodyguards to protect him. Surely, one of them could give her advice. Or maybe she should just go to the police?

“And tell them what?” she muttered, ignoring startled glances as she hurried down the street.

But seriously, if she went to the police, they would laugh her out of the station.

The only thing she could tell the police is that someone might be following her and

someone might be breaking into her apartment to steal random things like potholders or a single drinking glass or her toothbrush or... whatever!

Carys's phone rang. Again. She pulled it out of her bag and nearly burst into tears when she saw Rafi's number on the screen. Closing her eyes, she silenced her phone. She couldn't talk to Rafi. Not now. Not when it felt as if her whole world was...what? Being stolen from her bit by bit?

A tear trailed down her cheek and she wiped it away. She was done crying! It was time to figure out what the hell was going on! The only problem was...how!

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi braced his weight on his fisted hands, frowning at the bodyguard.

“Are you telling me that a five foot, four inch woman in high heeled leather boots, who has no training at evasion, and a tote bag that probably weighs twenty pounds, managed to give a tactically trained bodyguard the slip? A bodyguard who was literally trained to surveil and protect?”

The guard shuffled his feet uncomfortably, staring at the carpet. “Yes, sir,” he muttered.

“So, the woman who might be carrying my baby, my heir, is out on the street, entirely unprotected?” His voice had dropped to a hiss as his terror over Carys’s safety threatened to consume him.

“I’m sorry, sir. She went into a bathroom at the deli and I made the decision not to follow her. She’d already made me in line. I didn’t want to look like a creep by following her to the bathroom. That would have definitely spooked her and I was trying not to do that.”

“I think you failed!” Rafi whispered, fury in every syllable. “Get out!”

The man turned and nearly ran from the office. Rafi turned to Amir who also looked uncomfortable.

“We’re tracking her phone now, sir. We’ll have her location in just a...!”

“I’ve got her,” another guard called out, bursting into the office. “She’s heading back

to her apartment. I lost her when she went into the subway, but I'm certain she's heading home."

Before Rafi could issue new orders, Laith walked into his office. "What the hell is going on? My security team is frantic about someone escaping." He looked at Amir, then at Rafi. "Who is in danger?"

"Carys," Rafi groaned.

His twin brother rolled his eyes. "You lost her again ? I thought you found her and she was okay this morning."

"I did. She was!" Rafi snapped, throwing his hands into the air with exasperation. He rubbed a frustrated hand over his face, then blinked at his brother. "What are you doing here? I thought we were meeting for dinner tonight?"

Before Laith could respond, a small, terrified voice came from the doorway. "Laith, am I losing my mind?"

Rafi turned and found a very pretty brunette, looking from Rafi to Laith, then back again. She looked pale and confused.

"What's...?" she whispered.

Laith immediately stepped forward, taking the woman's hands. "Andi, don't freak out," he said in a low, urgent voice. "I told you that I have a brother," he continued, squeezing her hands. "I just forgot to mention that we were twins."

The pretty woman kept glancing between Laith and Rafi, so both men stood very still. After thirty-three years as identical twins, they understood how disconcerting their similarities could be.

“You’re...twins?”

Rafi relaxed, then grinned in greeting. Stepping forward, he extended a hand. “Yes. I’m Rafi. And yeah, we’re identical. So often the only way people can tell us apart is if we tell them who we are.”

“And sometimes, we lie,” Laith teased, pulling the woman closer. He tucked her against his side, but Rafi knew that the shock wasn’t completely over.

“This is...weird,” she whispered, then laughed, tilting her head back and looking up at Laith. “But there is something different about you.”

Laith’s dark eyebrow lifted. “What’s that?”

Her eyes narrowed and she continued to glance between the two men. “I can’t quite put my finger on it,” she finally replied. “But there is a subtle difference.”

Rafi chuckled, but Amir stepped into the doorway, distracting him. He nodded, then turned to Laith and Andi. “I’m so sorry, but my future fiancée is missing and I need to find her.”

“What did you do to Carys this time?” Laith teased.

“Carys?” Andi blurted, her eyes wide. She stared at Rafi. “How do you know Carys?”

Rafi tensed. “You know Carys? Carys Remington?”

“Yeah, Carys is my best friend,” Andi replied. “What’s going on with Carys?”

“I don’t know!” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m worried that something has happened to her. She keeps disappearing.”

“She’s not here?” Andi asked, looking around as if Carys might be hiding in a corner. “But... she worked in this building. We went to college together and both applied to work here right after.”

Rafi sighed, and Laith kissed the top of her head. “My brother was supposed to meet up with her on Saturday, but she didn’t show. She’s been missing all weekend, but showed up at work this morning. Apparently, she then she left for lunch and hasn’t been seen since.”

Andi stiffened, looking between her fiancé and his brother. “Carys was supposed to meet me for coffee on Saturday morning but she didn’t show up.” She looked up at Laith. “ You were there, but Carys didn’t sh...!” Her mouth formed an “O” and she turned to look at Rafi again. “Oh no!” she whispered.

Rafi stepped forward and even Amir looked worried.

“What?” Rafi demanded, his eyes sharpening. “What do you know? Is Carys okay? Is she in trouble?”

Andi shook her head, placing a hand on Laith’s arm.

“No, I don’t think she’s in trouble.” Then she paused, her brows furrowing.

“Correction, something weird is going on with her, but I don’t know if she’s in trouble.

” When she looked up at Rafi, she explained more patiently this time, “I was supposed to meet up with Carys for coffee on Saturday morning.” She looked at Laith.

“At the exact moment you found me on the pathway.” She looked at Rafi now.

“I was standing in front of the coffee shop when Laith walked up and kissed me.”

There was silence in the room now. Then Rafi put the puzzle pieces together.

“She saw you kissing Laith and thought it was me!” Rafi turned, muttering several curses under his breath.

When he turned back to Andi and his brother, he said, “You said that something weird has been going on. What did you mean by that?” He waved Amir forward.

The security guy moved to face Andi now.

“Someone has been breaking into her apartment and stealing odd things. Just weird things like a missing toothbrush.” She paused, letting that information sink in. “And even more bizarre, whoever is breaking into her place, that person is cleaning stuff. It’s fairly alarming.”

“When?”

Andi shrugged. “She doesn’t know. It’s been happening for a while now. At first, Carys thought she was just misplacing stuff. But it seems as if the thefts have become more obvious.”

He frowned at her, then at his head of security. “Why the hell would someone try and steal something small? What are they going to do with a person’s toothbrush?”

“Oh, and a single water glass.” Everyone turned to look at Andi. She shrugged again, then her eyes brightened. “Um..., and all of her potholders.”

Rafi frowned, stunned and confused. “That’s bizarre.”

“Carys has been having a hard time lately. I don’t know why she didn’t tell you about this.” She turned to Laith. “I definitely would have told you if a weirdo was stealing random stuff from my apartment.”

Laith leaned in, kissing her forehead. “And I’d tear apart the bastard who tried to scare you, love.”

Rafi sighed. “I know why she didn’t come to me,” he muttered.

“She doesn’t trust me.” When Laith lifted an inquiring eyebrow, Rafi continued.

“After her father’s disappearing act, Carys thinks men aren’t reliable.

She also doesn’t think she’s worthy of love because her father abandoned her for his new family.

So, she tries to be independent and figure everything out on her own.”

One side of Andi’s full mouth went up and she nodded. “Yeah, that’s Carys. She thought about changing her last name to her mother’s maiden name, just so she could sever any connection with her father.”

Rafi stopped for a moment. “She didn’t even want to be a Remington?”

“Exactly,” Andi confirmed.

“I have to find her,” he growled, feeling like a caged animal. His woman was in pain, she must have seen Laith kissing his fiancée and thought Rafi was cheating on her. That had to be why she’d looked so pale this morning.

Andi pulled her phone out of her purse. “Let me call her. She hasn’t answered my

calls this weekend, but maybe she'll answer now."

"I'm willing to try anything at this point," Rafi replied, watching as Andi dialed a number. Seconds later, the call was answered.

"Carys? Are you okay?" Andi demanded.

There was a long, tense moment while Andi listened. Andi nodded slowly and Rafi fought against the dread twisting his stomach in knots. "Is she okay?"

Andi lifted a finger, nodding but indicating that he needed to wait a moment.

"Okay, stay there. I'm on my way."

"Tell her to stay on the line," Amir ordered, leading the way out of the office.

"Carys, I'm about to get into an elevator and I might lose you, but hang on. I'm on my way. We're going to figure this out together."

Sure enough, as soon as the elevator doors closed, the line died. Andi took that moment to explain.

"She's in her apartment, but someone has obviously been there.

She didn't go into details, but someone broke into her apartment again this morning.

"She looked at Laith, then at Rafi. "I can't tell if she's angry or scared.

Someone ransacked her apartment. Apparently, they sliced her furniture to shreds."

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys stared at the remnants of her sofa, stunned and...horrified? Scared? Furious?

All of the above! "Why?" she muttered.

That's when she remembered the security cameras that she'd installed. Rushing over to them, she picked one up, relieved to find they were still working. But the videos weren't stored in the camera. The images were sent to her email.

Quickly, she pulled her phone out, wondering how long it would be until Andi arrived. Her best friend might be dating the man she'd fallen in love with, but that wasn't Andi's fault. Plus, Andi would be here when she needed help.

She pulled up the app on her phone, fast forwarding through the video of herself getting home from work. She scrolled to the next video. A woman slipped into the apartment only fifteen minutes after Carys left for work. The image made her stomach churn. What if Carys had been running late?

That's when she remembered having seen Beth sitting in her minivan in the parking lot yesterday.

Beth must have been parked there again this morning, waiting for Carys to leave.

So, she hit the play button, watching as Beth systematically went through every item in her apartment, slicing through the pillows, the sofa cushions, dragging the tip of the knife across her coffee table and the end table.

She took the handle of the knife and smashed the light bulbs in her lamps.

Then she went off camera, but the noises indicated that Beth had gone into the kitchen and thrown all of her bowls, plates and glasses onto the floor.

Beth briefly re-entered the camera's range as she headed for Carys's bedroom.

Carys wasn't aware of the tears streaming down her cheeks.

But she was aware of a rage unlike anything she'd ever felt before and that emotion overwhelmed her sadness.

Before, Carys hadn't wanted to go to the police because she didn't think she'd be taken seriously.

But this was breaking and entering as well as vandalism.

The "earth mom" who had seemed so demure and sweet, baking bread and bragging about the crunchy crust, had destroyed everything she owned.

The woman had to pay! The police would definitely take Carys seriously now!

Carefully, she saved the video to her phone, then emailed a copy of the video to her personal email account, just in case. This was definitely a file she didn't want to lose.

She was just turning around when she heard a sound behind her. Spinning, she faced the intruder and...!

Screamed!

Rafi was walking into her apartment followed closely by another man that looked exactly like him. Carys screamed again, too devastated by the chaos of her ransacked apartment to process the fact that there were two identical men coming toward her.

“Carys!” Rafi said, reaching for her. “He’s my brother. We’re twins! You knew I have a brother.”

Carys stopped screaming, but her thoughts were spinning too quickly to settle. Two men. Identical men.

No, that couldn’t be right. She looked at one man, then the other. Then her eyes landed on Andi. Her former best friend.

“Identical twins, Carys,” Andi said in a soft voice. “You saw me kissing Laith on Saturday, didn’t you?”

Carys looked at Rafi and...yes, she could tell the man closest to her was Rafi. There was just something...different about him, although Carys couldn’t name specifics about their differences. Her senses just knew that this one was Rafi.

“You’re...?” she whispered, still glancing back and forth between the two men.

Rafi moved closer, shaking his head. “No, Carys, I didn’t kiss your best friend on Saturday.” He moved even closer, taking the phone from her and tossing it onto the destroyed sofa. “I would never do that to you.” He pulled her closer and Carys whimpered, her hands clutching at his.

“You didn’t...?” she asked, her eyes pleading with him to explain.

“No, Carys. I haven’t kissed anyone. I want only you,” he told her. “I love you. I want to marry you and prove to you that I will never leave you.” He kissed her softly. “I want only you,” he whispered, kissing her again.

Carys’s head spun with everything that had happened over the past few days. Her world had been shattered, then ripped open, and now...this man that she adored to

distraction wanted her! Rafi hadn't cheated on her! He hadn't kissed Andi!

"I...I don't know what to say!" she sobbed, allowing Rafi to enfold her in a hug.

With his strong arms wrapped around her, Carys burst into tears.

"I fell in love with you, you big jerk!" she said, punching his arm, but since he had her pressed against his chest, there was no force behind her jab.

Rafi only kissed her forehead again as Carys pressed herself harder against him. "I don't want to love you!"

"Too late," he said and Carys heard the smile in his tone.

She pulled back to glare at him. "It's not too late," she snapped. "I don't have to love you!"

He grinned. The bastard actually grinned! When she tried to pull away, Rafi merely tightened his grip. "Accept it, Carys," he said with a grin. "You love me and you're going to marry me."

He glanced over his shoulder at the other couple.

Laith knew exactly what was coming next.

But instead of slipping away and giving him and Carys some privacy, Laith grinned, leaning a shoulder against the wall.

"Hey, I wanted to see how an expert gives her the news. Because trust me, just blurting it out wasn't the best way to go."

Carys looked at the other man, then at Andi's eye roll. Her friend even huffed as if she were put out by something. Finally, Carys turned back to look at Rafi.

"Okay, I've had a few issues rock my world," she said with a tone of exasperation.

"My father's wife trashed my apartment, I thought I'd lost the man of my dreams and my best friend, thought someone was stalking me and...

!" she paused, looking at the two men who were looking similarly confused.

She looked up at Rafi. "Okay, I'm ready for whatever comes next.

" She braced herself. "Tell me what? What are you hiding from me now?"

Rafi glanced around at the room, finally noticing the torn cushions. "Your...step mother did this?"

"Yeah. I think she's insane." She rubbed a hand over the bridge of her nose. "But I have her on surveillance video, so...at least I've figured out one mystery." She looked up at him. "So hit me with it."

Rafi pulled his eyes away from the destruction, taking both of her hands in his. He tightened his grip when she tried to pull away, chuckling at her stubborn expression.

"Now, don't get angry with me. But this next bit of news is going to be almost as difficult to explain as the twin thing." He took her hands in his, almost as if he needed to keep her steady.

Carys's shoulders stiffened. "The 'twin thing'?" she snapped back. "You say that like it's just a funny issue when, in reality, it nearly ruined my life!"

Rafi's smile widened at that piece of news. "Well, that's...uh...good to hear." He laughed when she smacked his shoulder.

"I'm a prince."

Carys stared at him without a word.

"A royal prince."

Carys shrugged. "Okay."

"After we marry, you will become a royal princess. And our children," he rested a hand against her stomach, "hopefully very soon, will be princes and princesses."

Carys's hand dropped to cover his. "I don't understand."

"I'm Prince Rafi Al-Sintra of Lativa." He jerked his head toward his brother.

"That's Prince Laith Al-Sintra. My father is Prince Joran Al-Sintra.

My uncle is Sheik Khal Al-Sintra, ruler of Lativa.

I have several cousins, and one of them is Crown Prince Zayn Al-Sintra of Lativa, heir to the throne. "

"So...you're...?"

"A prince. And when we marry," his gaze turned stern, "which will happen soon, by the way, you will become Princess Carys Al-Sintra."

There was a long silence, but she vaguely heard the door to her apartment close. All

she could say was, “Oh!” in a small, timid voice that annoyed her.

“But...” Carys licked her lips. “Do you...actually care for me?” she asked.

His gaze softened, and so did his grip on her wrist. His touch was softer, sweeter now.

“Carys, you have rocked my world from the first moment I saw you. I love you more than I’d thought it possible to love a human being.

” He kissed her softly. “When you didn’t show up on Saturday, I was out of my mind, worrying about you.

” He kissed her again. “Then you slipped away from your security detail this morning and I was ready to kill someone.”

Carys had been kissing him back, eager for more. But at the words “your security detail”, she pulled back, blinking at him. “What do you mean? What security detail?”

He paused only long enough to turn to his brother.

“Go away,” he muttered, ignoring Laith’s good humored chuckle.

When they were finally alone, albeit surrounded by the shredded mess of her apartment, he pulled Carys closer.

“I was so concerned when my bodyguards couldn’t find you over the weekend that I asked my lead bodyguard to assign someone to watch out for you.

I knew something was going on, but I didn’t know what that could be.

I just...needed to know that you were safe. ”

Her eyes narrowed, her temper starting to sizzle. “Was it the man following me to the deli during my lunch break?” she hissed, pressing against his shoulders.

Rafi nodded, grinning down at her. He didn’t let her push him back.

Instead, he gripped her wrists and pinned her arms over her head against the wall behind her.

“Yes. You gave your security detail the slip.” He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“And you have to promise never to do that again. As a future princess and a member of a very powerful family, you will be guarded every moment of your life.”

Carys moaned, the sweet kisses making her mind turn to mush. “What if I don’t want that?”

“Too bad!” he snarled, then reached down to lift her into his arms. “In exchange for the best sex of your entire life, you’ll also have to deal with the downside of becoming my wife.” He nibbled at her neck until she moaned and he tossed her onto the destroyed bed.

Rafi kissed and teased her neck until her fingers tightened in his hair and she moaned in delight.

But that wasn’t enough for him. After days apart, he needed to feel her explode around him.

He needed Carys to know that he was the only man for her.

He needed her to need him as much as he needed her!

So he kissed her, licked her skin, found every pulse point as he slowly stripped her clothes away. When she was naked, he stood up and stripped off his clothes, staring down at her soft, beautiful curves. “You’re my fantasy, Carys,” he admitted.

When he came down to her, he lifted her legs, tossing one over his shoulder and wrapping the other around his waist so she was open and vulnerable.

“You’re everything to me. I can’t breathe without you.

” He kissed her inner thigh. “You make me smile,” he kissed her hip, smiling at her frustration.

“And you make me ache to hold you in my arms.”

When she tried to wiggle away from him, he held her still. It would be a challenge to get away because the mattress was sliced and all of her blankets and sheets had been cut in half. But this was Carys. When he made love to her, the rest of the world didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but Carys.

“Rafi!” she screamed when his tongue flicked against that sensitive nub.

“Hold still!” he ordered, then chuckled when she lifted her head to glare at him.

She tried to pull away, but he was stronger and had the high ground.

He held her in place and he shifted, sucking on that nub while he slid a finger into her heat.

Carys writhed underneath him, groaning with delight and frustration.

“Don’t tease me, Rafi,” she begged. “Not today.”

He smiled, but ignored her, sucking harder, but right before she was going to climax, he pulled away. “You are absolutely delicious.”

Carys rolled her eyes and, out of frustration, she wiggled away from him.

When he started to reach for her, she grabbed his hands and pushed him back.

“No, today, I need to be in control.” She swung a leg over his hips, straddling him, still holding his wrists.

“Today, you’re mine.” And with careful determination, she sank down on top of him, taking all of him into her body.

Together they groaned with the rush of sensations, and Carys sighed with happiness.

Then she guided his hands, placing one on each breast, shifting his fingers, silently demanding that he tease her nipples.

When he understood, his fingers went to work, stroking over her hardened tips, pinching then soothing, then pinching again until Carys was nearly crazy.

She rode him, sliding up and down along his shaft, rolling her hips so that the nub he’d so recently teased would rub against his abdomen exactly how she needed it.

She started to object when he took one of his hands away from her breast, but he only pinched the other nipple, silencing her protest. Carys had no objections when his thumb reached down, pressing against that nub, helping her over the top.

Moments later, she was screaming out his name, shifting against him as her pleasure

swept her away.

Then, Rafi flipped their positions, taking control. Carys didn't mind as she held onto his broad, muscular shoulders, laughing when she felt another ripple of pleasure hit her just at the same moment that he groaned with his own orgasm.

Afterwards, he pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. Their bodies were at an odd angle on the bed since the sheets and blankets were shredded, but neither complained.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Rafi stood patiently on the stoop. He could hear yelling inside the house. There were several female voices, all them raised, and a dog barking. Then footsteps. Someone was running to the door.

When the door finally opened, a cute little girl around the age of ten or eleven answered the door, staring all the way up at Rafi. “Is your father home?” he asked.

The girl remained still and silent, staring at him with an open mouth.

“Janey? Who’s at the door?” another female voice called out.

“A big, scary man, mamma!” the little girl replied, still gripping the doorknob.

Rafi didn’t react, but he continued to stare down at the little girl. She looked oddly similar to Carys. Was this what Carys had looked like when her father had abandoned her?

Before he could ponder that question, a woman walked up behind the girl, drying her hands on a towel. “Hello? Can I help you?”

Rafi pulled his eyes away from the girl to stare into the eyes of a woman that he’d seen on a video just days before. “You must be Beth Remington,” Rafi replied.

The woman blushed and extended her hand. “That’s me. How can I help you?”

Rafi ignored her outstretched hand. “I need to speak with Philip Remington.”

Beth clearly didn't like that. She retracted her hand, obviously feeling awkward. She rested both of her hands and the dish towel on the girl's shoulders. "That's my husband. What do you want with him?"

"I don't think—"

"Philip is my husband!" she snapped. The little girl winced as her mother's grip tightened on her shoulders. "What do you want?"

"My business with Mr. Remington is personal. But expect a visit from the police, Ms. Remington."

"The police?" she gasped, pulling back. Thankfully, her surprise eased the tension in her hands and the girl pulled away, escaping into the back of the house. "Why?"

"You will be arrested for breaking and entering and theft."

The woman's jaw dropped. "I did no such thing!" she hissed, then furtively looked over her shoulder. "Who the hell are you? How dare you come to my home and accuse me of such things!"

Rafi refrained from rolling his eyes. "You were caught on a security camera breaking into Carys Remington's apartment.

Your fingerprints are everywhere and the police are getting a warrant to search your house.

You will be charged with breaking and entering as well as stalking, vandalism, and petty theft.

" Rafi took a breath, letting his words sink in.

“However, I’m not here because of your misdeeds.

I’m here to speak with your husband. I understand he’s here. I will speak with him.”

“You can’t!” she hissed and tried to close the front door. But Rafi put a hand on the door and pushed it open, stepping into her home without permission. “Get out of my house! You can’t just barge in here like this!”

“Beth?” a male voice called, coming from a room just off the foyer. “What’s going on?” he asked, then noticed Rafi in the doorway and froze. “What do you want? Who are you?”

“I am here to discuss Carys, Mr. Remington.”

Beth made an inelegant snort, crossing her arms over her chest. “Is this about that stupid girl?” She snorted again and moved to stand by her husband. “That ungrateful bitch has no place in our home!”

Rafi restrained himself, but it took more effort than he wished.

He glared at her until she couldn’t hold his gaze any longer. When she finally shifted uncomfortably and looked at the floor, Rafi turned to the man. “I need to speak to you privately, sir.”

Philip must have grasped the severity of the situation because he nodded slowly and gestured to a door behind him.

“We can talk in my office.” He brightened slightly.

“If this is about Carys, then I can’t wait to hear what you have to say.

I've been trying to get back into her life for the past several months.

I just..." he sighed dramatically. "I just want to get to know my oldest daughter again." He led the way into his office and waited until Rafi was inside before closing the door on his wife's objections.

"Have a seat," Philip offered, gesturing to an old wingback chair that had seen better days.

He chuckled and waited, rubbing his hands together.

"So, Carys sent an intermediary, eh?" He chuckled as he moved to the sofa, jerking his slacks up as he lowered himself to the cushions.

"I understand. Women are so emotional, right? I mean, she could have just come to speak with me herself. It's not as if I haven't given her enough openings!

" He sighed, rubbing a hand over his thigh.

"But that's women for ya, right? They just can't get over their wounded feelings. But if this is her way of telling me—"

"Shut up," Rafi snapped, losing patience with the pompous man as he dropped the heavy envelope on the low coffee table.

After a startled moment, Phillip demanded, "Excuse me?"

"I told you to shut up," Rafi replied, completely calm now. Negotiating was his thing. He enjoyed setting the terms so that they were beneficial to him. And Carys.

The man opened his mouth, ready to speak, but Rafi wasn't going to listen. He started

first. “First of all, your daughter hates you and is considering changing her name to remove the last association she has with you.”

The man waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, that’s just silly.

She only wants to change her name to show me that her feelings were hurt because I remarried.

” He shook his head as if his thoughts were once more demeaning women.

“But once she and I talk, she’ll get over it.

That’s just...she’s just a silly girl, you know? ”

Rafi mentally rolled his eyes. “Actually, she’s a woman.

Your daughters are girls. Carys is a twenty-eight year old woman who is intelligent, creative, and beautiful.

” Rafi stared at the man, daring him to say otherwise.

“And Carys will never speak to you again. She has chosen to cut you out of her life. And that is her right.”

“That’s just...she’s being silly. I just need to talk to her.

That’s what I’ve been trying to do for months now.

It’s why I hired a lawyer to assist me in getting her to talk to me.

” He offered a patronizing sigh as he gestured to the manilla envelope.

“As soon as I talk to her and explain my side of things, I can make her see reason.”  
He shook his head again. “She’s being irrational.”

“So you decided to sue her? You’re using the judicial system to force a conversation with your daughter?”

” Rafi asked, then shook his head, stunned by the man’s stupidity and arrogance.

“Actually, you will never speak to her again. And she’s not being irrational.

” Rafi moved to stand in front of Philip.

“You see, my fiancée has created a shield around herself that she’s developed to protect herself from men who will hurt her.

Like you did when you rejected and abandoned her. ”

Philip stood up and huffed. “But that’s just it! I didn’t abandon her!”

“Did you have an affair while still married to her mother?”

The man’s mouth opened and closed, but eventually, he admitted the truth. “Well, yes, but that’s all ancient history.”

“Did you then divorce your wife and marry your mistress?”

Philip rolled his eyes and huffed slightly. “Yes, but I had to follow my heart!”

“Yes, I see that you were a highly impulsive man who didn’t give a damn about the tender heart of a young girl who needed her father.”

Philip's mouth pressed into a thin line, revealing that he was offended by that interpretation. Then he blurted out, "See? That's exactly what I'm trying to do now! I want back in her life."

"After marrying your mistress, did you then move across the country because your new wife had a better job opportunity thousands of miles away?"

Philip threw his arms in the air with exasperation. "Yes, but that's just economics. Carys has to understand that."

"No, she doesn't need to understand your side of the story.

You moved to another state and left Carys all alone.

You abandoned her. Despite your stupidity and callous actions, Carys has grown into an intelligent, beautiful woman.

And she wants nothing to do with you. It doesn't matter how many frivolous lawsuits you throw at her. She won't let you back into her life."

The man's bushy eyebrows lowered over his blue eyes. "She'll change her mind if I could just talk to her!"

Rafi shook his head. "Did you seriously think that a lawsuit would force her to have that conversation?"

Phillip sighed. "Yes. I couldn't get her to talk to me. So, I hired a lawyer. He thinks the courts will force Carys to sit down and listen to my side of the story."

"That won't happen," Rafi stated firmly. "The lawyer you retained is a scam artist and nothing more. But by all means, keep on convincing yourself that forcing your

daughter into a court ordered conversation will end all of the hatred Carys holds for you.”

“Now see here!” the man sputtered.

Rafi waved him into silence. “You need to focus on your family, Philip. Your wife is about to be arrested for breaking and entering and theft. Your home will be searched by the police. She’s probably going to be charged with more crimes too.

” Rafi shoved his hands into his pockets.

“I’m going to ask the district attorney personally to charge your wife with every possible crime she thinks will stick.

” Rafi leaned forward, using an almost conspiratorial tone.

“I’m very good at getting people to do what I want, Philip. ”

“But...Beth didn’t...!”

“She did. Her break-in was captured on video. So, you need to get a good lawyer.” He tilted his head slightly. “Oh, right. You already have a lawyer.”

Phillip looked panicked now. “It’s just—”

“You wanted to drag Carys through the courts because she refused to listen to your pathetic, sad, miserable excuses about how your treatment of her isn’t your fault.”

Phillip shook his head. “That’s not how it is!”

Rafi was beyond disgusted. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to focus

on your family. I'm going to marry Carys. The wedding will be in the news because Carys is going to become my wife, which will make her a princess."

"Huh?"

"That's right, Mr. Remington. I'm Prince Rafi Al-Sintra of Lativa.

And Carys will be a royal princess. She's going to be my wife.

"His voice dropped. "And if you, or any member of your family, give even a hint of an interview to any reporter, if you say one bad thing about my fiancée, ever, for the rest of your life, then I will ensure that you lose your house, your job, and everything you hold dear." He moved closer.

"I will sue you for slander and I will use all the power and resources of the Lativa publicity department, an incredibly well-funded agency, to ensure that you and your wife are portrayed as the very epitome of a horrible family. I will ruin your reputation in this country and any other country in which you try to escape." He was almost whispering now.

"So you're going to drop the lawsuit you just sent to my fiancée a few days ago.

You're going to stay completely silent on your relationship with Carys.

You're never going to speak a word to her or about her.

You're going to forget that you have a daughter named Carys. "

"But I'm her father!" he gasped. "I have a right to be in her life."

"No, Philip. You gave up that right when you abandoned your daughter in order to be

with your mistress. And now Carys doesn't want you in her life.

"Rafi pulled back, looking into the man's terrified eyes.

"Don't worry. I have aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews that are all eager to welcome her into their lives.

She will have a real family." Rafi looked around at the drab office.

"She'll have a family that is warm and caring.

Not a pathetic little man who is too fickle and insecure to see reality.

"Rafi walked over to the doorway just as the doorbell rang.

"That will be the police with the search warrant. You're going to be very busy for a while, Mr. Remington.

Too busy to stalk and harass Carys. Take care of the family you have.

They're going to need you in the next twelve to fifteen months.

And however long your wife is in prison."

Rafi walked out, nodding to the police detective who was conducting the search.

Twenty minutes later, standing on the front stoop of the obnoxious woman's townhome, Rafi could barely control his irritation with Tanya.

His former marketing assistant director was wearing a barely-there silk negligee.

He sighed impatiently, wishing he hadn't had his assistant call ahead to ask for a moment of her time.

"Tanya, when I asked to speak to you, it wasn't for a seduction scene."

"But, Rafi," she teased, running a hand down over the lace barely covering one breast, "why not?"

He stepped back, making more space on the stoop.

"I just came by to let you know that your assault on Carys was sent to the police," he informed her, noticing that her fingers froze while her face turned an unflattering shade of white.

"Turns out, there were several businesses with video cameras that caught you knocking into Carys several weeks ago."

"I was just going for a run," she claimed, shifting her hip.

"You parked your car two blocks away, waited for Carys to come out, then started running." He watched her carefully. "You altered your running path specifically so that you could run into her, shoulder-checking her in a move that any hockey player would be proud of."

"No, I was just...!"

"You assaulted a co-worker, Tanya. And I'm personally terminating your employment.

Your office has been emptied of all personal items. Your security badge has been deactivated.

If you enter the building, you will be arrested immediately for trespassing.

” He shoved his hands into his pockets, watching her features shift from smug confidence to horror. “Do I make myself clear?”

Tanya’s glossy lips went slack, but the woman rallied quickly. She pulled the sides of her silk robe closer. “Perfectly clear, sir.”

Rafi didn’t say anything more. If he was reading the woman correctly, Tanya wouldn’t cause any more trouble. But if she did, Rafi would follow through on his threat. Carys would never have to deal with that kind of bitchiness again!

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

Carys walked into the private suite of their new apartment, smiling as she watched Rafi unbutton his jacket, tossing it over the back of a chair.

“How do you feel, my wife?” he asked, drinking in the vision of her wedding gown made of silver satin and shimmering pearls.

Carys beamed, tilting her head to the side. “I feel...married. Happy! Like I’m in some sort of dream,” she confessed.

Rafi laughed, moving closer and placing his hand on her slightly round belly. “Wedding just now. Baby in a few months. Are things happening too fast?”

She grinned, shaking her head. “Not at all,” she assured him, sliding her arms up over his dress shirt. “In fact, I love that you were so eager to marry me.”

He started swaying to the music in his head. “I had to. You’re a flight risk.”

Carys froze, then burst out laughing. “I am not !”

“You are,” he teased, lowering his head to nuzzle her neck. “I’m waiting for the day when you’ll run away from me.”

Carys shook her head, a smile lingering on her lips. “Never. You’re stuck with me forever.”

He nipped at her earlobe. “Then you’ve got me forever too,” he vowed. “I love you.”

“I love you too!” she whispered, more touched by his words than she thought possible. “Forever.”

A moment later, Rafi discovered that his lovely, amazing wife...was wearing thigh high, white leather, spike-heeled boots underneath her wedding dress!

He backed up a step, eyes wide as he took in those boots. “I knew I married a woman with dangerous curves, but I didn’t think they came with weapons attached.”

Carys grinned. “Welcome to forever, husband. Try to keep up.”

A note from Elizabeth

Okay – last month, you got to know Laith. What did you think of Rafi’s story? There was some overlap, so I had to hide some details. Was everything explained?

If Rafi and Carys made you smile, or possibly yell “just kiss her already!” at your book/device, I’d be honored if you left a quick review. It helps other readers find these stories—and it lets me know I’m not the only one who fell head over heels for these two.

Thank you for coming along on this ride with me!

Remember Zayn? The guy who mocked Laith and Rafi for not knowing how to win a woman? Keep scrolling for a sneak peek at Zayn’s story!

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:20 am*

“Where the hell is she?” Zayn demanded, turning to glare at his guards.

They stood behind him, several of them spread out around the house.

He’d flown here to Chicago to find Azlyn and find out if the tiny babe in the scarf last night was his child.

Assuming she’d gone home after visiting the crash site, Zayn had ordered his guards to drive him here to her address. But she wasn’t answering the door.

“Break it down,” he ordered. “Or just...,” he wiggled his fingers towards the doorknob. “Does someone know how to pick a lock?”

Immediately, one of his bodyguards moved forward, already pulling a lock-picking kit out of one of the numerous pockets on his cargo pants.

They were in full tactical gear at the moment.

Usually, Zayn’s guards were more circumspect, but no less armed.

But at the moment, until the paternity of the baby he saw on the video last night was established, Zayn wanted everyone to be ready for anything.

Danger wouldn’t just come from his enemies or those of his father, the current ruler of Lativa.

There was apparently a very real danger to Azlyn.

What would Zayn do if Azlyn wouldn't come with him?

He knew that he couldn't leave her alone.

Not with the new knowledge his security team had gathered about the "accident" last night.

The hit and run hadn't been an accident, they'd determined.

Azlyn's boss had been executed. They didn't know who had hired the assassin though. That was still a mystery.

Zayn stepped back from the doorway, impatient while one of his guards did some sort of wiggling with a couple of wire-like tools. Seconds later, the lock was opened. But the door didn't budge.

"What's wrong?" Zayn demanded.

Two guards shoved again, gently this time. But the door wouldn't move.

"Stop!" a voice inside the small house called out. "Just stop!"

The guards were instantly more alert. One even pulled out a weapon.

"No!" Zayn ordered. "Holster your weapon." He knew that voice. Azlyn was inside and...before he could process anything else, the sound of an infant's wail came to their ears.

"Don't you dare come through that door!" Azlyn called out. "I have a gun and I'll shoot anyone who comes into my house!"

Zayn looked at his bodyguards, all of them were on high alert.

“Azlyn!” Zayn yelled. “Put the gun away. I’m coming in. I’m here to protect you.”

There was a moment of silence, then a flicker of a curtain beside the door.

He saw her eyes poke out through the filmy material.

Then the door flung open and Azlyn was there, in his arms. But Zayn couldn’t pull her in close enough because of the screaming, now terrified baby still nestled against her stomach and chest. She was still wearing that greyish-blue scarf, using it like a hammock tied around her body.

“Azlyn!” he groaned, his hands framing her face. “We have to go, love. You are in danger. I need to get you to safety.”

Azlyn stared up at him, tears in her beautiful blue eyes. Not even the dark circles and tension in her expression couldn’t dim the beauty of her face. She was still his Azlyn, although she looked...exhausted now.

“I can’t...I just...!”

“Now, Azlyn. We have to go now!” He urged her to leave even as his hands moved from her face to her upper arms. “The hit and run last night was deliberate. My security team has found information that someone was hired to kill your boss.”

“Not my boss,” Azlyn replied, but she looked confused. “But...what do you know?”

“We’ll discuss this when you’re safe, okay?”

Azlyn looked around, finally noticing the armed guards in full tactical gear. Thankfully, they didn’t scare her, but she still pulled back, patting at the baby in the fabric sling. “I need to get stuff for Griffin.”

The mention of a male name was too much for Zayn now. He gripped her arms, nearly pulling her up to his eye level. “I don’t give a damn about your boyfriend, Azlyn. He can go to hell. I’m only here to protect you!”

Azlyn’s soft fingers touched his cheek, easing his anger. Slightly. He was still livid, furious that she’d not come with him last year when he’d wanted her to stay with him.

“Griffin isn’t my boyfriend, Zayn,” she whispered.

Then her touch was gone. Even her blue eyes were gone from his view as Azlyn looked down.

Zayn forced his eyes to follow hers. That’s when he saw the wiggling baby nestled amidst the odd looking scarf around her body.

Finally, the crying infant sounds also registered.

Zayn had been so determined to get Azlyn to safety that he hadn’t even realized that she was still holding the baby against her body.

“Griffin is our son.”