



Hot Hearts

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Slater

There isn't a better restaurant in town than The Plate and there isn't a better chef than Brooks Neal but that doesn't mean he'd make a good partner. My life is falling apart and so is my career as a food critic now that everyone knows I've slept with Chef Neal. I'm not sure how to right my faltering ship but I know it's not with him! But he's so hot and he's kind and I can't stay away.

Brooks

I can make any dish perfectly. I know the exact wine pairing for each course. There's no one in the city that makes a superior meal. None of these skills are helping me to lure Slater back to my bed. Her life is unraveling but mine will be completely cooked if I can't win her over. The only thing I can do is turn up the heat until her icy heart melts and I make her mine forever.

Total Pages (Source): 35

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

Chapter One

SLATER

This is probably going to make a bad situation worse, but that still doesn't stop me from ordering a dirty martini. I have never had one before, but in the movies the girls order them when they've had a shit day, and I've had a shit week. Maybe I should have made it extra dirty even though I don't know what that means.

The bartender places the drink down in front of me before moving on to the next patron at the bar. It's not that busy, which is surprising being it's a hotel bar, but there is a decent crowd. I pull out my phone and take a picture of the cocktail.

It's a habit, I suppose. Except I typically review food. There will often be a wine pairing, but I'm not very knowledgeable about wine. No, that is what my now ex specialized in. He's a sommelier and claims to know everything about wine, but he also thinks he knows everything about freaking everything. It's charming at first, but it wears on your nerves after a while.

Once upon a time I would listen to him ramble on or try not to get my feelings hurt when he'd correct what I said. I was so stupid. Naïve, really. I only have myself to blame. I should have known better when he slid into my DMs only to then slide right into my best friend's vagina.

I pick up my martini and take a sip. It burns all the way down.

"That bad?" a man asks, taking the seat next to mine at the bar. When I turn my head,

my heart drops. Not only because the man is beyond handsome, but I know who he is. I've been trying to get into his restaurant back home for a few months now. The Plate is the hottest reservation these days.

I'm a food critic, but I try my best to go to restaurants without them knowing that I'm coming, which can make it harder to get into places. How the hell did I end up at the same hotel and bar as Brooks Neal? Neither of us lives here.

I shamelessly know way too much about the man, but that still isn't a ton. Believe me, I've tried all my usual tactics to learn about the newest top chef, but they haven't panned out. While Brooks is a big deal and everyone knows who he is in the foodie world, he is fairly absent on social media. The only time you can get some details on him is when he does a random article or TV appearance to promote a new restaurant.

Oh, and the occasional gossip you might hear, which I try and pay no mind to. The internet can take a tiny detail and make it bigger than it is. Basically, do anything to create a more compelling narrative and story, and people will eat it up, whether it's all fiction or not.

Damn, it's going to suck when word gets out about my ex and me.

"It's strong," I admit, while taking in every inch of Brooks. He's bigger in person. People generally hate to hear that, but it's not a bad thing when it comes to him. A person should really have no right to be this handsome, and that's not a filter over him either. Every inch of Brooks is all him, from his sun-kissed brown hair to his dark green eyes and lickable physique. I wish he was on the menu for me to try. Wow, Slater, get it under control.

"How about I try it?" he offers as he signals for the bartender to come over. The bartender offers Brooks the wine menu, but he turns it down.

That makes him even hotter. He really is the opposite of my ex in every way. Felipe would have already given you a full rundown about all he knows when it comes to wine and would be in the middle of criticizing the menu to the bartender. I want to kick my own ass for putting up with him for so long.

That was always so embarrassing. My best friend Sara said it was hot how much he knew.

Maybe that should have been a red flag, but I was new-ish to the whole making friends thing when Sara came into my life.

“I’ll have what the lady is having. Thank you,” he says to the bartender. Hot and polite. I would have never guessed. Usually chefs of his caliber tend to be dismissive and rude once they get a taste of success.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I take another sip of my drink, trying not to make a face as I force it down. Next time I’m going to try to stick to one of those girly pink concoctions instead of this.

“Damn, that is rough,” Brooks agrees. “I should stick to cooking with my vodka.”

“Vodka sauce is one of my favorites.”

“Really?” Brooks turns to fully face me.

“I bet I could drink it faster than this.” I take another sip of the drink. “Though the more you drink it, the easier it gets.”

“Let me test the theory.” Brooks smirks, taking another sip. “I think you’re on to something.” I’m not understanding the rumors of him being cold and robotic. I’m not getting that vibe at all from him. “I’m Brooks.” He holds out his hand.

“I know who you are.” When our hands connect, I suck in a breath at the spark of desire that rushes through me. The way Brooks' brow lifts makes me wonder if he felt it too. “I’m Slater.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Slater.” His thumb drifts back and forth against my wrist, not letting my hand go. My body is reacting to his touch in a way that I can’t explain. “Where are you from?”

“Same place as you.” I wonder why he’s here, but I don’t want to be nosy and ask.

“So it will be easy to see you again.”

“Already shooting for a second date?” I tease. “Not that this is a first date,” I quickly add. Real sly, Slater. This is why I have only had one boyfriend in my whole life, and I’m not sure I can label him that, honestly. He used me, and I see that now. I won’t let that happen again.

“I am,” he says without hesitation. I take another sip of my drink to hide the giant smile that breaks across my face. Brooks takes another drink too.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

Before I know it, we've ordered a few appetizers and had a few more drinks. I'm disappointed when the bartender says it's the last call. How have we been talking for three hours?

"I don't usually do this, but?—"

"Yes," I blurt out before I can think better of it.

"There is a bar in my room."

"You got a fancy suite?"

"Yeah, they gave it to me."

"I'd love to see it." Brooks pays our tab, ignoring my protest to contribute. "Oh, you even have a fancy private elevator?" I tease, stepping in.

"It's convenient. I can avoid people that way."

"Avoiding people and entering the hotel bar usually don't go together."

"I hadn't planned to." He inserts his key into the panel inside the elevator, hitting his floor. "Then I saw you." Not to be cliché, but a million and one butterflies explode inside of me.

"I don't normally do this either," I admit. This is definitely not my style, but why the hell not? I've been saving myself for the right guy, and that may be Brooks, or it may

not be. I do know it wasn't my ex. I wanted my first time to be memorable, and I think this could be that.

"Go to a man's room for a drink?"

"Go to a man's room at all." It must be the alcohol pushing my shyness away, making me bolder. I shift over in front of him. "But we're not really going for a drink, are we?"

"We can do anything you like or nothing at all."

"I'd like you to kiss me." There's something about this man that is bringing out a completely different side of me. I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

Brooks wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me in to him. I suck in a breath when I feel the outline of his hard cock press into my stomach. His other hand comes to cup my cheek, brushing his fingers across it.

"Are you sure about this? If I kiss you?—"

"Yes." I grip the front of his shirt and tug. Brooks doesn't fight it. He lets me pull him down, but his mouth claims mine first.

The second our mouths connect, everything breaks loose. Brooks lifts me off my feet. My legs wrap around his waist as his tongue explores my mouth. His cock grinds against my sex, making my clit throb with a need that I never knew was possible. A steady ache forms between my thighs.

"You taste so damn sweet." Brooks groans when his mouth leaves mine. I feel him moving, but I don't care. I keep kissing him, down his jaw and to his neck. I graze my

teeth against him and smile when his steps falter. I kiss and lick the spot before latching on to suck, knowing it will leave a mark on him. “Fuck.”

My back hits a bed, and we’re both pulling at each other’s clothes. They’ve barely hit the floor before Brooks’ mouth is on me again, only this time it’s between my thighs. I moan at the sensation.

There is no real finesse; it’s just pure, unadulterated need for each other that’s driving us. It’s wild and untamed as he licks and sucks me, burying his face as deep into my sex as he can get. My orgasm hits me hard and fast. I cry out his name.

“Tell me to slow down.” Brooks comes down over me, his cock brushing against my thigh.

“Don’t slow down.” I yank him down for another kiss, tasting myself on his lips. Brooks glides his cock to my opening, the head slipping in. “Yes,” I whimper, lifting my hips, wanting him inside of me. I ache with an emptiness I know only he can fill.

He sinks inside me. The sharp pain takes me by surprise. I knew it would happen, but I was so lost in everything else I didn’t care. I grip his shoulders, my nails sinking in.

“Slater.” Brooks stares down at me with a shocked expression.

“Don’t stop.” I wrap my legs around him.

“I can’t tell you no.” He takes my mouth again, kissing me slowly this time, making my body relax before he starts to move, thrusting in and out of me. “You’re so damn perfect.” The way his eyes watch me, I want to believe him. There is such sincerity there.

Fire sears through me, and this time when I come, Brooks is right there with me as

we both crash into mindless oblivion. I feel his warm release spill inside of me. I find I'm rather enjoying the thought of him leaving his mark on me. My eyes flutter closed, my body humming with bliss. The one thing I know without a doubt is that it was absolutely worth the wait.

I'm not sure how long I was asleep or if I'd even fallen fully asleep when Brooks is reaching for me again, his cock thrusting into me. He flips me so that I'm on top this time, his cock sinking deeper. I sit up, but he keeps a hold on my hips, controlling my movement.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

Brooks works me up and down his cock, thrusting up into me. I brace my hands on his chest, letting him take me to paradise once again before I'm collapsing on top of him.

Both our breathing is heavy. He wraps his arms around me, his cock still inside as I once again let sleep take me.

When I wake up again, I see the light peeking in through the curtains. I smile, not only feeling the tenderness between my legs but also because Brooks is spooning me from behind, his arms wrapped around me, our legs tangled together.

I could lie here forever, but my bladder says otherwise. I slowly work my way out of his arms so as to not wake him up, sleepwalk into the bathroom, and quickly come back to bed. I pause when I see a stack of papers and a folder on a desk next to a laptop.

I shouldn't, but curiosity gets the best of me, and I flip the folder open to see something about a cooking show. My eyes almost pop out of my head when I see what they are offering him. I go to the next page that talks about the show idea and then promotions.

My name with my social media tag is at the top of the list. My stomach drops. He knows who I am. He's known this entire time. I close my eyes as a barrage of emotions overwhelms me.

I did it again. I picked a man who only wanted to use me, but why does this time hurt a million times more than my ex? I hadn't even cried over my ex. No, the only tears I

shed were because my friend betrayed me. That's what I had been so upset about.

I can't even bring myself to wake Brooks up and give him a piece of my mind. I'm ashamed of myself. I'm so naïve. Of course Brooks Neal doesn't truly want me.

I quickly get dressed before slipping from his suite and back to my room, where I shower and pack my things, telling myself I will never see this man again.

I'll ghost him, make him wonder where he'd gone wrong. I hope it eats at him if he even really cares, but I'm guessing if he was willing to use me and knew he could easily bed me, he has an ego that will take a hit.

Fate has other plans, though...ones that show up as two pink lines on a stick.

Chapter Two

BROOKS

THREE MONTHS LATER....

"I know who you are."

That's what she'd said to me, and it didn't register because lust had taken over every thought process the moment she came into my line of vision. I saw her, and I wanted her, and strangely enough, she wanted me back. That was the only thing that mattered that night. Her need was me, and mine was her, and we matched perfectly until I woke up the next morning and she was gone.

As the investigator spreads out the photos he took, it starts to make a little sense. Slater Braxton woke up and found out I was Brooks Neal, chef of The Plate and probably thought I had lured her up to my room under false pretenses.

I was her first, and I'll be her only. It's not going to be easy. She hates me because she thinks I've lied to her. No one likes to be made a fool out of.

My fingers hover over the photos. It's been three months since that night, and I haven't been able to sleep since. I keep replaying the scenes of her naked, wild, moaning, and trembling. My own hand shakes a little as the memory of that night washes over me.

The photos show Slater getting groceries—she has her own recyclable bags; Slater buying yarn—I'll have to keep her away from my friend Dylan who knits because I can't have her liking one of my friends more than me; Slater going to the movies.

"She likes horror films," the investigator shares when he notices my attention lingering on one particular photo of her swiping her phone against a kiosk. She has an excited look on her face, as if she's been anticipating this film for some time.

I can take her to the movies and buy her yarn and carry her groceries. This is going to work.

"She doesn't want to meet you in private."

"But she will meet me." I've spent an ungodly sum tracking her down, and then, when the investigator revealed her name, I spent an ungodly amount of time kicking myself for not realizing I knew her already.

"Yes. She laid out these conditions. A public place, middle of the day, with no one else. Specifically, she said no lawyers. Oh, and not at The Plate." The investigator tacks on that last detail.

Too bad because that was my first thought.

“How about One Cup, Tea Cup?” I suggest. It’s a popular coffeehouse not too far from The Plate, and it’s always busy.

The investigator’s eyebrows shoot up. “She recommended the same place.”

“We’ll meet tomorrow at ten.” I stand up, but at the door, I turn back. “How did you get caught?”

The investigator’s cheeks turn a dull red under his tan. “One of my men was following her at the deli, and someone recognized that his glasses had a camera in the frame. He tried to run away, but other customers tackled him. When they reviewed the footage, they saw she was the target. I had to step in and bail him out. The police forced me to tell her who my client was.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“I don’t feel like I should have to say this, but I will so there’s no misunderstanding. You’re fired.”

“I figured. I’ll send you a final bill?—”

“The hell you will.”

I’m not good with people. It’s what I told the showrunners who pitched me a cooking show competition, wanting me to participate. I said no because it’s fan-voted and I know myself well enough to recognize my flaws. I’m a great chef with terrible people skills. If I ran the front of house, we would have only a handful of customers who stubbornly returned despite my temper and bad service. But that night Slater and I fit perfectly. We belong together even if she thinks we don’t.

The problem is that I don’t know shit about romance, shit about wooing someone. I’ve got the social skills of a toddler isolated from human contact. I’m the king of my domain, and I hate being told I’m wrong and that I can’t have things. I’ve got a million and ten flaws, and Slater running away from me was probably some inner preservation instinct, but it doesn’t matter.

I have to have her.

Slater Braxton is the food critic. According to the stats sheet that was provided to me by the showrunners of Plated, the cooking variety streaming show they were pitching, she has over a million followers. A recommendation by Slater boosts bookings by over one hundred percent. She could catapult an unknown and struggling business into fame. Conversely, a bad experience would basically mean you need to shut your

doors. She primarily seeks out small establishments, eschewing chains and fine dining, which is why I've never seen her at The Plate. Mine is a Michelin restaurant, not because I set out to be, but I like to take ingredients and make them extraordinary. The Michelin people came to me, and once you have a star, it sets you on a certain course with a certain clientele.

Slater would call my food pretentious and not worth the wait to get in, the prices, or the fanfare around the whole concept of molecular gastronomy. She'd be right, too, but the prices mean that even the dishwashers at The Plate can afford to support a family, and the wait means job security for everyone. I don't regret that. The fanfare? I could live without it.

But I get that everything The Plate, and by extension me, is something that Slater dislikes. Unfortunately, she needs to get over that because now that I've had a taste, I'm not letting her go.

Chapter Three

SLATER

This is the last thing I need right now. Why is he even here? I'm starting to get a bit freaked out. I blocked my ex and my best friend on social media, my phone, and everything and anything else I could think of. I wanted a clean break from it all and the drama that surrounded it.

I even changed the entry code to my building. Not because I ever gave it to Felipe, but I had given it to my friend. Based on the extent of her betrayal, it seems Felipe can get her to do anything, so her giving him my building code wouldn't shock me. That somehow hasn't stopped him, though, from now being outside my door.

"Slater, baby, I know you're in there."

Baby? When the hell did that man ever call me baby? I check the time on my phone. If I don't leave soon, I'll be late. Normally I wouldn't give a shit if I was late to see Brooks, but things have now majorly changed, and I don't want him to think I'm going to be petty about all of this. Not when we're about to be stuck in each other's lives forever—unless he decides he wants no part of it.

It stings thinking that it should make me happy, but this isn't about me anymore. My hand comes to my stomach. How cliché am I? To get pregnant the first time I had sex?

“Slater!” Felipe is now shouting and banging on the door, making me jump away from it.

Oh, there you are, Felipe, that mask you enjoy wearing slipping so easily.

He is quiet for a long moment. I'm sure he's fixing his mask. I'm proved right when he speaks again. "I need to talk to you. I miss you. Please, baby, hear me out." I can't even begin to tell you how sick of men I am.

Now I want to vomit. I take a deep breath. I already threw up twice this morning and a few times last night. Morning sickness, my ass. It kicks in whenever it likes. I never imagined it could be this bad. The direction of the wind could change and I'm ready to hurl because of it.

I check the time again. Shit. He's not going to leave. I'm an adult. I can totally face my ex; the thing is, I don't want to. It's pointless and stupid, and the man will try to talk me in circles. I already have to deal with Brooks today.

Fuck it. I take a deep breath and ready myself for whatever it is this jerkface wants. There's no avoiding him. I flick the locks and jerk the door open. Felipe stands up straighter. He's in his normal suit that always ranges from grays to blues, but his tie is

normally a loud color and annoying, with its matching stupid handkerchief thingy in his pocket.

Which you're not allowed to use even if your nose is bleeding. A thing that happens to me when I become stressed, something my doctor told me I need to be very careful about.

High blood pressure runs in my family. Mine is typically well controlled, but it's hereditary. There is only so much I can do, but I was made aware that it will be closely monitored with my pregnancy.

"Babe." He pastes a smile on his face. "I've missed you." I roll my eyes so hard I think I might have sprained them.

"What do you want, Felipe?" There's no time for his bullcrap. I make a big show of checking the time on my phone. Felipe's eyes roam up and down me.

"Are you headed somewhere?"

"Yes." Felipe lets the silence grow, thinking I'm going to get uncomfortable and fill in more information. I am not.

"A date?" The audacity of this idiot to think he is owed some sort of explanation by me. I shouldn't be shocked; it's par for the course when it comes to him and the way he treated me throughout our relationship.

"That's not really any of your business."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“Well, I think it’s really clear what you’re up to. You’re all dressed up.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk.”

“I don’t have time right now.” I grab my purse sitting on the table next to the front door.

“Then we can meet up later.”

“There is no reason to meet up.” I close the door behind me, then lock it. "We're not a thing anymore."

"We were barely a thing, only dating. I didn't know we were exclusive." Felipe follows me as I make my way to the elevator.

"That's not the point." I push the elevator button over and over, knowing it doesn't help speed up its availability, but it feels nice to jam it hard repeatedly.

"What's the point?" Felipe's expression turns to one of bewilderment.

"You fucked my best friend. That should be off the table even if we weren't exclusive." Is my perspective unreasonable? I know I'm not big into the dating scene, and I stumbled into whatever it is you want to label what Felipe and I had going on, but I think anyone would call that crossing the line.

"It didn't mean anything. I have needs, and you're, well, ah—" I hurry into the elevator when the doors open. Sadly, Felipe does the same.

"What am I?" I cock my head, waiting to hear this.

"Cold."

That might be true. It was awkward with Felipe when he'd try to hold my hand or do anything affectionate. I chalked it up to me not being okay with PDA, but Brooks tossed that theory out the window with our elevator makeout session, which I'm sure cameras caught.

"You're right," I agree. I see a spark of surprise and maybe hope that I'm about to cave and give us another chance. That will never happen. "We don't connect. There is no spark. We should both walk away."

"I want to talk about this first. I've been thinking a lot about us." I haven't been. I only thought about it when people on TikTok asked about Felipe and where he was.

I never showed him in my videos, but he'd always tag me on TikTok and Instagram when he'd go try a restaurant with me. Since he wouldn't answer them, they are now asking me what's going on.

"Felipe, there is nothing to talk about." This conversation is getting old real quick.

"I'm serious, Slater; I've come to a conclusion on what is wrong with you." The elevator doors slide open, but I turn to fully face Felipe.

"What's wrong with me?" I can't wait to hear this.

"You're asexual. That has to be it."

"Because I didn't fall into your bed?" It takes everything I have in me not to burst into laughter. I keep myself in check because it will only piss him off, and this conversation will stretch on.

"It's fine that you are, and that's why you're still a virgin, but we can come up with a plan. I can go do my thing discreetly, and we can still be together." He's lost his mind. "We're good together. We work. I miss us working together."

There it really is.

"We don't work together." Felipe enjoyed the places I could get into, and he wanted to go with me so he could do his own postings, trying to build up his own following. He loves the attention. I'm in it for the food. What can I say? A girl's got to eat.

"Slater—" I can see he's getting pissed off now.

"I have to go." I pause before I step out of the elevator. "Let your followers know we're not together."

"You don't want me to do that." There is a clear threat in his tone.

"I promise you, I do." With that, I turn to leave, and thankfully, he doesn't follow me.

One man down, and now a baby daddy to go.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

Chapter Four

BROOKS

One Cup, Tea Cup is predictably busy. There's only one table open, and that's because it has a reserved sign on it. I had called in a favor. The owner, Carrie, had not wanted to help me until I told her I would be engaged in public groveling. She immediately changed her mind and asked if she could set up a live feed.

I think she was kidding.

She rushes toward me when I enter, a gleeful smile on her face.

"You don't have to look so happy," I grunt when she reaches me.

"No. I do. The mighty Brooks Neal is being felled today. If only Culinary School Carrie had known this would happen, she wouldn't have felt so defeated back then."

"I didn't think I was that bad of a classmate." You'd think I sabotaged one of her dishes by the glee she's exhibiting over my situation.

"You were impossible. Your prep was always perfect. Your knife skills impeccable. Your dishes always turned out right even when you took risks. The teacher thought that you could do no wrong."

I stare at her blankly because these don't seem like legitimate complaints. "You wanted me to burn the roux?"

“Yes, that would have made me feel better, but since your roux was always perfect, that’s why I’m so happy to host you today. Finally, Chef Brooks has a flaw.” She claps her hands together and then trots back to the counter before I can reply.

I don’t have a response anyway because I was the best chef there. I don’t feel like apologizing for that, unlike how I know I need to bend the knee for Slater. I sit down and rehearse what I’m going to say. I’m sorry I had you followed. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you who I was. Genuinely, I thought you knew. I’m sorry I didn’t know who you were. I don’t spend that much time on the internet or social media. I never would’ve slept with you if I knew you were a critic—actually I can’t say that because it’s not true. I would have had her if she was a bride at the altar preparing to be with another man. I wanted her—still want her—that much. What’s also true is that now that we have slept together, she needs to move in with me. The plan is sound. I apologize and then explain how we navigate our future.

A commotion at the door grabs my attention. I catch a glimpse of Slater before she’s swallowed by a mob of people that rush her with their phones out. Everyone is in selfie mode. Some are even asking for autographs. At the counter, Carrie’s head swivels from Slater to me and then back to Slater. Somehow she makes the connection and starts laughing, folding in half.

Since Slater’s being mobbed, I get up and retrieve her. As I’m pushing people out of the way, I hear a few people say my name. Graham once was the internet main character of the day and said it sucked, but since I’m never on social media, I didn’t think it would bother me. Slater, on the other hand, makes a living off of being an internet celebrity. I hesitate when I reach her, wondering if being connected to me will hurt her reputation, but her eyes widen in relief at the sight of me. Her hand is around her stomach, protecting herself. Irritation rises in me. I throw my arm around her and sweep her out of the café.

Several people follow us. I start to turn around, to tell them off, but Slater tugs me

back. “Don’t make it worse,” she says quietly. She puts on a smile and gives the gawkers a little wave. A kid with a camera steps toward us. I growl.

Slater slides a hand over my mouth. “Do you have a car?”

I nod and press the remote starter. The Mercedes purrs to life. As I’m pulling away from the curb, I ask, “That happen to you a lot?”

“More now, but it’s okay. I’m able to do what I do because of followers. If it weren’t for them, I’d be in a call center trying to get cable customers not to cancel their service.”

“Is that what you did before?”

“Yeah. It was terrible. We had these quotas and got rewards for how many people we convinced not to cancel their service, but it was hard, and people got mad at you, which they were perfectly right to do. I always remind myself of that whenever someone comes up to me in public and asks for a photo.”

“Not so different from the restaurant business. We are nothing without our diners.” We’re perfect for each other. I wonder if she sees that. “Where to?”

“Somewhere private but not completely private.”

Meaning not my house or hers. “How about The Plate? It’s not open yet, but there is staff around.”

“That’s fine.”

My restaurant is not far away, and I pull into the back parking lot only a few minutes later. Her hand falls to the door latch.

“Don’t touch it,” I bark. Confusion falls over her face. “It’s just a rule I have,” I say with what I hope is a softer tone. “Opening doors is my job.”

“It’s the 21st century,” she says as I help her out of the car.

“Dad would say good manners should exist in every generation, not just the first ones.” I notice her hand is around her stomach again. “You not feeling well?” I slap my palm over her forehead. She does feel hot.

“No, I’m fine.”

I turn us around toward the car, but she resists. I cock my head. “What’s the problem?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“I don’t want to—I think we should manage our business in a mutual place.”

Impatient, I shake my head. “But why? You’re moving in. You might as well see my place now.”

“I’m not moving in,” she replies with an incredulous laugh.

“Of course you are.”

“No. I’m not.”

I heave a sigh. “Look, I thought it might be inappropriate to bring this up, but you were a virgin, so you were obviously waiting for someone, and that was me. You gave yourself to me, so you’re mine now.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“No, that’s exactly how it works.”

Chapter Five

SLATER

The man has lost his freaking mind. “You think because you popped my cherry that I’m yours?”

“Yes.” He says it without hesitation and as if this is one hundred percent logical. I’ve

heard that Brooks struggles with social skills, leading some to perceive him as cold and unapproachable. I'm wondering if there is more to that.

"That's insane; with that logic, why aren't you living with whoever took your virginity?" Brooks starts to speak, but I hold my hand out to stop him. "Let me guess: It's different for men." I roll my eyes. I guess I can add sexist to the list of cons for Brooks, which I'm happy about. The list is pretty short, and I need to start growing it to keep my resolve.

"That is what I am trying to do."

"Huh?" I'm confused, and I am starting to feel overheated.

"You took my virginity." Brooks' expression remains the same.

"Right." I laugh, but he doesn't join me. "Brooks, seriously." His face still doesn't budge.

"I am very serious." Oh my God. The realization that he's telling the truth that I was his first makes me a bit dizzy. I press my hands to my cheeks.

"I need to sit down."

"Come inside. You're a bit pale. Are you eating enough red meat?"

"I eat whatever I can keep down."

"So you are sick." Brooks' hand goes to the small of my back, leading me toward the building. When we enter, he guides me over to an elevator, inserting a key to be able to hit the button for the top floor. It's not until the doors are closing that I realize I have no clue where we are going.

“I’m not sick, and where are we going? The Plate is on the bottom floor.”

“And I live on the top floor.”

“Of this building?” I thought it was all offices above.

“Yes. I had it converted to a condo. It makes it easier for work.”

I don’t want to think about what it costs to own or even rent a whole floor in this building to live in. I’m guessing based on the offer I saw in the folder that night in the hotel, it’s a drop in the bucket for Brooks.

“You must be freaking loaded.”

“I do well, and Graham gave me a deal.”

“Graham Dassault?” Everyone knows who Graham Dassault is. He and his family own half the buildings in the city. He has so much money that he once bought his one-year-old nephew a brand new luxury car for his birthday. He caught a lot of social media flack for that stunt.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“Yes, and he is getting married.”

“Why did that just feel like an accusation?”

“Only informing you.”

“Okay.”

“I bet him in a poker game, and the top floor was in the pot.” I can only blink, trying to process that.

“You gamble whole buildings?”

“Not the whole building. I only have the bottom floor where The Plate is and the top.”

“Right, that makes way more sense and is understandable. I mean, you guys are basically paupers.” I blow out a breath.

The elevator doors slide open to reveal an entryway with two double doors directly in front of us. There is a white, boxy bench on one side that would hurt your ass if you sat on it for more than a few minutes. On the other side, there is a giant painting. This is fancy and no place for a little one. My hand goes to my stomach.

“Maybe we should talk out here.” My eyes go back to the bench. My butt and back ache just thinking about sitting there to have this conversation with Brooks. Based on how things have gone so far, I highly doubt Brooks is going to let me tell him he’s

my baby daddy and leave a few minutes later.

“You need water and food.”

“Are you going to make something?” I could maybe eat. I might want to punch Brooks in the face for using me, but why can’t I use him right back and get food out of it? I have been itching to get into his restaurant.

“I will.” He opens one of the doors. I step inside, peering around because who isn’t going to be nosy when you’re in a rich person’s house? I’ll just be sure not to touch anything.

“Must have been a hell of a poker game,” I mutter, venturing in more to an open living room.

You have to step down into it. A giant sofa wraps around it; I’m guessing it’s custom. No way it would fit that perfectly otherwise. It faces a beautiful fireplace. That is not what catches my eye, though. It’s the giant floor-to-ceiling windows that give you a view of the city and out to the ocean.

“We typically have it once a week.”

“Right.” I shake my head. “This view is wonderful.”

“There is a patio off the kitchen with a small garden.”

“Of course there is.” I let him lead me to the kitchen because I definitely want to see that, and I’m not disappointed. “Holy crap. This kitchen is insane.” It might as well be industrial, from the giant refrigerator that is all glass and you can walk into to the stove that might be the size of my whole kitchen.

A sudden thought hits me. Brooks is rich; hell, maybe even wealthy. It's obvious at least one of his friends is, and they are powerful. What if he tries to take my baby from me? My eyes fill with tears. Fuck me and these hormones. I try to fight it, to tell myself to be rational, but once I've started down this path, there's no reasoning with me. Not even by myself.

"Are you about to cry?" Brooks's expression turns to one of pure panic. "If you hate it, we can move somewhere else or redo the place. We can gut the whole thing."

"It's not that." I try to fan my face with my hands.

"Sit." I don't know why or how, but part of the bottom of the giant kitchen island slides up, disappearing while revealing stools. Great, he's not only rich but from the future.

I drop down into a seat. Brooks hurries to get me water, or waters. He sets down three glasses.

"Mineral, tap but filtered, and sparkling." I go for the tap, gulping it down. "I'll see about calling a doctor." Brooks pulls his phone out.

"Don't." I try to stop him, but he's already got his phone to his ear. "Brooks," I hiss.

"Yes, this is Brooks Neal. I need to have Dr. Kincaid come to my residence immediately."

"Stop." I tug on his arm. "I'm not sick."

"The doctor will check you over. It won't take them long, and you can sit right there."

“Brooks!” I growl. “I’m not sick. I’m freaking pregnant!” I shout the last part accidentally. It just flooded out of me. Brooks's eyes widen. “I’m going to throw up,” I say before rushing over to the sink, losing whatever food I had managed to keep down this morning.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

This was not how this was supposed to go, but that is becoming a running theme with Brooks—my baby daddy.

Chapter Six

BROOKS

I keep the appointment with the doctor and call Graham next. “Tell me about the marriage thing,” I bark into the phone. Slater is in the bedroom, tucked under my covers with the blackout shades down and an empty bowl on the nightstand in case she upchucks again. I wanted to stay with her, but her sad, sickly moans that she needed to be alone convinced me to leave. I didn’t go far, though, just outside the door, where I pace as I wait for Graham’s answer.

“I’m not married yet, but I assume it’s great.”

“No, not the state of your marriage but how you get it done. Do I need a judge? Is there other paperwork involved?”

“You have to request a marriage license and then have an officiant sign off on it. There’s also a two-day waiting period.”

“Waiting period? What do I need that for?”

“In case someone changes their mind? I don’t know. Why all these questions?”

“Slater is pregnant.”

“Is the baby yours?”

“Of course it’s mine!” I shout into the phone and then, with a guilty look toward the bedroom door, I lower my voice. “Yes, I know it’s mine. No question.”

He gets it. “Congratulations. As you know, I usually give cars out as baby presents, so please let me know which kind of car you think your kid will want.”

“We’ll take a Mercedes,” I reply immediately.

“You’re actually supposed to answer ‘No, Graham, that’s just too generous.’” He says the last bit in a high falsetto that makes me frown.

“First, I don’t sound like a castrated calf, and second, why would I give that answer? You’re the one who offered.”

“It’s manners, Brooks. Someone makes an offer to make themselves look good but it’s not genuine. Your response is to glaze them by saying, ‘You’re the greatest ever, but I’m too morally upright to accept such a big gift.’”

I don’t respond because it’s such a dumb statement. Graham eventually sighs. “Text me what color.”

“Where do I find all the information regarding the marriage stuff? Like the license and shit?”

“Hell if I know. My assistant did it.”

“I’ll trade the Mercedes for your assistant.”

Graham’s reply is to hang up on me. I mouthasshole into the receiver and then open

my search program. A few minutes later, I have a plan.

“You’ll need to leave,” Dr. Kincaid says.

“But I’m the father,” I protest.

He gives me a closed-mouth smile. “HIPAA rules. Unless the lady gives permission, the visit must be private.”

Slater sighs. “Let him stay. He is the father, after all.”

She sounds defeated instead of excited. The doc nudges me aside and straps a cuff onto Slater’s wrist. He pulls out his stethoscope and asks a few questions about when she last had her period, whether she has any pain or cramping, and a few other things. He draws her blood for a test.

“Here’s my card. I’ll confirm the pregnancy with the lab, but based on your answers as well as your symptoms, it’s likely you are with child. There are options.”

“I want to keep it,” Slater says immediately, her hand going to her stomach.

He nods, and I breathe an internal sigh of relief.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“My office will call you with the results, and we can move on from there. For today, take it easy, but try to get something in your stomach if you can. You’re not the only one who needs the nutrients.” Doc looks up at me. “I’ve been meaning to ask, Chef Brooks, about a possible booking for the fourth. My anniversary?—”

“You can eat in the kitchen. Just tell my staff what days you want and they’re yours.”

He smiles. “Great.”

“And send the bill for this to me.” I see him out and then hustle back to the bedroom to find Slater getting out of bed.

I push her back onto the pillows. “Doc said to take it easy.”

“That doesn’t mean I should be lying down. Pregnant women exercise up until the day of their delivery.”

I scrunch my brows together. “That sounds fake to me.”

“It’s not.” She pushes at my arm, and I let it fall away. “Besides, I’m thirsty and maybe even a little hungry.”

“I’ll make you soup.” I scoop her up in my arms and carry her into the living room. A press of a button and the painting on the wall lowers to reveal a television.

“Really?” Slater says.

“It’s cool.” I shrug. The high tech things please me like the disappearing kitchen stools and the hidden television. “The one in the bedroom comes down from the ceiling.” I hand her the remote and cover her legs with a blanket.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a guy that likes fancy technological things.”

“How so?”

“You’re a chef. You cook with your hands. That seems analog to me.”

“I make foam out of broccoli juice.”

She allows a small smile to escape. “Okay, you’re right. I guess we have a lot to learn about each other.”

“We can fill out questionnaires.”

This time a laugh bursts forth. I blink in confusion. Her laughter dies out. “Oh, you were serious,” she says.

Irritated she isn’t on board with what I thought was a great idea, I ask her stiffly, “Do you have food allergies?”

“No. I like everything.”

“Great,” I say in a tone that implies anything but. In the kitchen, I pull out a chicken. After washing it and putting it in a pot to boil, I start preparing the dough for noodles. Maybe it’s the written kind of questionnaire she doesn’t like. She answered the doctor’s questions easily enough. I should have looked up a getting-to-know-you scenario along with how to get married. I can do that later after I’m done making the soup, I decide.

“I’m glad you’ve given up on the marriage thing,” Slater says when I bring a tray over to her. I wait until she swallows her first bite.

“In my culture, when you eat something made by the hand of another, it’s an agreement of marriage.”

“Bullshit,” she says, dropping the spoon.

I allow a smile to spread across my face. “We’re basically hitched, Mrs. Neal.”

Chapter Seven

SLATER

I swear I can’t keep up with the things that come out of this man’s mouth. He knows how to shock the hell out of me, that’s for sure. We’ve gone from him telling me he was a virgin and we needed to get married, then to us filling out a questionnaire, and now according to him, we’re already married.

“We aren’t basically anything. I don’t even like you.” I place the bowl down on the fancy coffee table, which might be a piece of art for all I know.

“You need to eat.” He picks the bowl back up.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

"Besides, if that is true, then you're married to a million people, Brooks. You prepare food for everyone." Got you, Mr. I Have an Answer for Everything. I smile inwardly so as not to gloat.

"It's different. We're in my home, and no one else helped prepare the food." He's really trying to sell this.

"You've never had someone else here who you cooked for?" I challenge. I don't know why, because it's silly. We aren't practically married. I should eat my soup because it is wonderful and ignore the married crap. I should bask in someone taking care of me for once.

"I don't care to have people in my home."

"I'm here. The doctor was," I point out, my eyes dropping to the soup bowl in his hand. It looks and smells so delicious.

"The doctor is an exception, and I might have people here for certain things, but they don't stay or linger." I want to call him on this, but he might be telling the truth. "But if you need something, I won't hesitate to bring someone here to make that happen for you."

Brooks brings the spoon to my mouth. I open it, letting him feed me a bite. His eyes linger on my lips. I lick them, and that same heated expression he'd gotten that night at the bar takes over his face. He's not the only one affected, either.

"Give me this." I take the bowl from his hand. "I'll feed myself." Why is him feeding

me so damn erotic? Also, it's endearing, and Brooks isn't endearing. He used me. I need to keep reminding myself of that little fact. No, that's a big freaking fact.

“Now, why don’t you like me?”

“Seriously?” I can’t even believe he has the audacity to act as though he doesn’t know exactly why.

“You think I used you.”

“Think? I saw the folder on your desk in the hotel. My name was in it.”

"I turned down that offer, and I had no clue who you were until I hired that private investigator. I don't use social media. I've heard of your reviews and what they can do for a restaurant, but I didn't have a face to go with the name of who ran My Favorite Feeds."

"You don't use social media." I roll my eyes. That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.

"Why would I lie about this?"

"I don't know. Why would you?" I glance around for my bag.

"What do you need?" Brooks quickly stands, ready to hunt down whatever it might be that I’m looking for.

"My bag." I can't recall where I set it down, but Brooks is already on the move, so he must know. I watch him head toward the kitchen, coming back a few seconds later to give it to me. I set my bowl back down and search through my bag, pulling out a ring light and my Kindle.

"What is this?" Brooks holds up the ring light.

"It's to obtain the best lighting when you film videos."

"Oh." He turns it each way instead of putting it on the table. Why do I find that kind of adorable? I don't know; can I blame it on the baby? Focus, I remind myself, going back to search for my phone. I give up, deciding just to dump it out on the table. Things scatter everywhere. A few things fall off onto the floor.

"Damn it," I mutter to myself. "See, I'm a mess. You don't want to marry me."

"I don't mind." He leans down, grabbing the items that had fallen. One is my phone.

"You say that, but you haven't seen my bathroom sink or my closet." I take the phone from him. "Are you sure you don't want to change your story?"

"I don't have social media," he says again.

"Okay, so not only a user but a liar."

"I didn't use you." I ignore him and pull up first his Instagram and show it to him, and then go over to Facebook and even TikTok, showing him each one. "Got nothing to say? Cat got your tongue?"

"You're right." Brooks pulls out his phone.

"See, you can't even be straight with me about social media. Why the heck would I believe you about anything else?"

"I don't run those accounts. You can see my phone. I only have the TikTok app."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“The main one I’m known for? That social media app?” Sarcasm hangs on to my every word. I’m being a dick, but I don’t care. He needs to be straight with me.

Brooks rambles off the code for his phone. “You’re just giving it to me?”

“We are married.” He’s relentless, I’ll give him that.

“Oh my God.” I punch the code in. I swipe through his phone and see that he does only have TikTok. When I click the app, the name of the user is random numbers and letters. There is no profile picture or anything. There also aren’t any followers, and he only follows one account. I click to see it's me.

“I got it once I realized who you were.” He shrugs.

"After you had someone stalk me?" It wasn't hard to spot the man in the suit following me. The stupid fedora hat he wore made him stand out. I knew at some point I'd have to face Brooks. I wouldn't have kept the pregnancy from him, but I was still trying to process it myself. "Also, your PI guy sucked."

“He does, but he found you. I have now fired him. I just wanted to find you, and then once I knew who you were, I could watch you."

"You wanted to watch me?"

"I missed you." I lose some of my resolve. "I was never taking the TV offer. It's not a fit for me. That folder you saw was given to me. I didn't even bother reading it."

“Really?” I want to believe him so badly. He does seem genuine.

“Think about it. I’m not being a dick, but I don’t need help with promotion.” That is true. I can’t even be upset about that. Brooks made a name for himself on his own.

“Oh.” What do I say to that?

“I saw you in the bar, and I wanted you. I still want you.” When Brooks reaches for me, I don’t stop him. He pulls me into his lap so that I’m straddling him. “Now that this is solved, we’ll get married.”

Okay, maybe he didn’t use me, but he is totally insane.

Chapter Eight

BROOKS

A two-day waiting period is crazy, but at least she’s here with me. I run my hand up her back and then let it fall to her hip. I press her forward so she’s riding my erection. “Since our first time was when we didn’t know each other, it’s time to get reacquainted.”

“Sex complicates things,” she says, but her body is starting to move, tiny fractions forward and backward.

“Not in our case. It’s made everything very simple.” I take her mouth. She hesitates, but then her lips part, and I sweep in, tasting every corner.

Her hips move faster in time with the thrusts of my tongue. Her passive hands find their way into my hair, holding my head tightly so that she’s the one kissing me.

Everything is simple now. It's heat and desire. Her and me. I sweep my hands up under her shirt to unclasp her bra. We break just long enough to fling her top off, and then our mouths clash again, nipping and biting, licking and lapping.

Her concerns have been overcome by want. Her fingers skip down the buttons of my shirt, and then the cool fabric is replaced by hot palms, smoothing over the surface of my pecs and down along the ridges of my abdomen.

I push up against her sex. I can feel her pulsing heat through the layers of cotton and denim, but it's not enough.

"Off," I growl. "All of this off." I flip her onto her back and rip off her jeans. She's naked except for a flimsy bit of lace and silk covering her pussy, and I take a moment to absorb the picture she makes. Her honey skin against the xxx leather is so beautiful it's a crime.

"You're not showing much." I stroke my hand across her belly. Inside of her, under my palm, our child is growing. The idea makes me dizzy with excitement.

"It's early." Her hands flutter around her breasts and then her sex, trying to cover herself but only drawing attention to her tantalizing parts. Her nipples are hard and surrounded by a rosy flush that extends from Slater's cheeks and travels all the way down her torso.

"You're a sexy sight, Slater Braxton." I run my tongue along my lower lip in hot anticipation. "This here's a feast, and I'm going to start here." I tap the hollow of her throat where her heartbeat pounds visibly. "You hold this." I place her hand against my cock, still constrained behind the zipper. I can't let the monster out. Not yet.

Even the grip of her hand is making me crazed.

I lean down and place my teeth around that pulse. The artery thrums against my tongue. Her breath catches in her throat, and my own blood throbs against my temples. I can see why vampires exist. Who could resist this lure? This temptation. I bite down, and she cries out. Her hand convulses around my cock. I nearly come.

I release her flesh and then lave the wound with my tongue. I alternate sucking and biting and kissing until she's writhing under me. Her hand has undone my fly and found its way under my shorts. The heat of her fingers is scorching my shaft.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“You excited to have that inside you?” I say as I move down from the reddened patch of her neck to her rosy tits. “I’m going to fill you up.”

“You might break me apart.”

The way I’m reacting to her touch, I’m the one who is going to be in pieces soon, not her. “And then I’ll put you back together, tenderly.” I squeeze her breasts, pushing them until a deep, fuckable valley forms.

“I appreciate that you added tender.”

“Always a gentleman,” I lie. I’ve never been much for putting ladies first and all that shit. Everyone is the same in my kitchen, man or woman. But Slater is all woman, all tits, hips, and ass. She has the body of a girl who likes food. Lush and welcoming. Full of life. I drag my hands down her sides, my thumbs skimming lightly over her belly until they stop at the top of her lightly trimmed bush. “You sore anywhere? I’ll be careful.” I should’ve asked Doc, but it’s too late. I can’t stop now. I rip her panties and brush the delicate lace away.

Her clit peeks out, eager and ready. When I thumb it, her body jerks.

“Stop playing with me,” she orders.

“No.” I wet my thumb and reapply it to her greedy little button. Her whole body goes tense. I drag my thumb lower until I reach the dew of her sex. I dip two fingers inside. My mouth goes dry at that first touch. I’m filled with an insane thirst for her. This obsession is greater than anything I’ve ever felt before. I bring my fingers to my

mouth and suck them clean. She inhales swiftly. I dip into her well again. “If I could replicate this, I’d make billions.” But the thought of someone else tasting her enrages me. I curl my fingers and tighten my grip on her hip. “But this is mine. No one else gets to eat you.” I thrust my fingers higher into her tight cunt. “Do you hear me?”

A cry of pleasure bursts from her, and my hand is flooded with her cum.

“Stop talking,” she pants. “Just...take me.”

I don’t need to be asked twice. I strip off my jeans and enter her in a swift, hard motion. My hands hold her hips in place while I drive into her again and again. Ecstasy burns behind my eyes. Furious need wraps itself around my frame. I feel like one solid beam of steel piercing her softness, her sweetness, her lush body.

She is so slick and tight around me. My head wants to blow off. But she needs to come first. I drag her legs around me, lick my thumb again, and pinch her clit. “Come for me, Slater. Come for me now.”

She arches her back, digs her heels into the back of my legs, and screams as her orgasm overtakes her. I let my own release burst out of me, filling her up like I promised. If we hadn’t made a baby before, I know we would have this time.

Chapter Nine

SLATER

This bed is way too comfortable to be mine. I open my eyes to only find darkness, except for a sliver of light spilling out from the bathroom. I know it has to be nighttime. I sit up, glancing around. I don’t remember moving to Brooks’ bed. The last thing I recall is the killer orgasm he gave me that must have knocked me out.

I stand to head toward the bathroom, forgetting that I'm naked. I quickly rush in and shut the doors behind me. Not that Brooks hasn't seen me naked, but that's all been horizontal. Things are different when you're vertical.

When I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I don't let myself do a double-take. I don't need to see that I'm a hot mess right now. Wait, maybe a cold mess. I use the bathroom before I steal a robe off the hook, putting it on. The thing engulfs me.

That is one of the things I enjoy about Brooks. I'm not a tiny girl; I'm curvy and tall. Two things most men aren't into. With Brooks, however, I feel small and dainty.

Speaking of, where is Brooks? I step out of the bathroom. "How do I turn the light on?" The lights flicker on. I spin around, thinking Brooks turned them on, but he's not standing in the doorway.

"Light off," I say, and they flick off. Damn that's cool. "Light on." That is fancy and matches the rest of this place. I can barely get Siri to tell me the weather.

I don't spot my clothes anywhere. They must still be in the living room. I make my way there, the lights flickering on at my feet as I go down the hallway. Still no Brooks, but I do see my clothes folded nicely on the coffee table. Along with my purse. All of my crap that had spilled out has been put back.

I'm so out of place here. I'm new money, and I don't even mean big money. It's enough so I no longer have to live paycheck to paycheck. My social media does well, but I do have old debt I'm paying off. I did two years of college to get an associate's degree that I've never used, but that doesn't mean you get to skip paying for it.

I spot a note on the table with Brooks' phone number on it.

Went down to The Plate to check on things. I'll bring dinner back. Text me when you

wake, if I'm not back.

Your fiancé,

Brooks

The man is dead serious about this marriage thing. It doesn't help that I fall into bed with him anytime we're together. Which might be only twice, but it's becoming a pattern. The first time is on me; I'm blaming the second time on baby hormones. I know it's bullshit, but I'll be using that excuse while I can.

I shove the note in my bag because I do need his contact info. I'm not ghosting him again; I'm merely going home. Going to do my walk of shame. I need to get my thoughts together, and I can't do that here.

Thankfully, I don't need a fancy key to get the elevator to go down. When the doors open onto the bottom floor, three women in server uniforms for The Plate turn my way, their expressions filled with surprise.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“Hi.” I give an awkward as hell wave. The walk of shame joke is no longer a joke. I fight not to reach up and fix my hair, which I’m guessing is a mess. I didn’t pay it any attention when I quickly got dressed.

The expression on the girl with black hair quickly changes from surprise to a glare. “Who are you? All the offices are closed up there,” she remarks.

“I wasn’t at any of the offices.” I step off the elevator because it starts to beep.

“Bullshit, who are you?” The other two girls don’t say anything while the other steps closer to me.

“I’m Slater. I was at Brooks’ place.” Her eyes roam up and down me. Okay, wow. I didn’t need her to tell me I look like shit too.

“You’re a liar.”

“If I were a liar, I would have denied my walk of shame.” All three of them gasp. Shit, why did I say that? Dark Hair gets it together quickly.

“You’re full of shit. No one is allowed up there.”

“I’m not no one.” This time I step toward her. “I’m his fiancée.” I can’t stop the words from coming out. Damn it and my mouth. I’m sure word is going to get around now.

“No.” She shakes her head rapidly. “It’s impossible. I know it.” She spins around,

almost hitting me in the face with her ponytail before marching off and down the hallway.

“Are she and Brooks a thing?” I can’t help the jealousy that begins to creep its way in. He told me he’d never slept with anyone, but I’m not sure I’m buying that. It’s easier for me to think straight when he’s not near.

“I’m not in this,” one of the other girls says, turning to follow after the rude one.

“You really with Brooks?” the last girl asks, giving me a soft smile.

“I don’t know what Brooks and I are,” I tell her honestly.

“But you were up there.” She nods up. “At his place?”

“Yeah.”

Her smile grows bigger, showing off dimples. “Good. I’m Quinn, by the way.”

“Slater.” I glance down the hallway. I need to get out of here. Dark Hair might be snitching on me. “I’ve got to go. It was nice meeting you,” I tell her, heading for the side door we came in, pulling my phone out in the process. I need a ride.

“I’ll be seeing you around, Slater,” Quinn calls after me.

My ride doesn’t take long to show. I wait until I’m back home and in my place before I text Brooks, letting him know I arrived safely. I can see he read the message, but he doesn’t respond. I toss my phone down, telling myself that he’s busy and that I don’t care.

I guess I am a liar after all.

Chapter Ten

BROOKS

“What do you mean they delivered our beef to La Boeuf?” I stare dumbfounded at my sous chef, Jess.

She wears an equally pissed expression. “The butcher has a new boy working logistics, and for some reason they entered your order into La Boeuf, who had also ordered the same meat, so it’s not like we can even go there and get the overage from them. It just doesn’t exist. And the butcher said that the only extra stuff he has left are choice cuts, not prime.”

I spit out a curse so vile half the kitchen flinches. We cannot serve choice cuts at The Plate. Our customers would flay us alive in their reviews and deservedly so. “We’ll have to do lamb then. Get on the phone with some suppliers and see what you can find. If I have to drive to another state, so be it. Anything within—” I check the time. Only six hours until the first service. “Onehundred miles.” This puts a wrench in my day. I’d planned to spend it with Slater, but I’m needed here.

“I need someone from the front of the house to run upstairs for me.”

A few minutes later, I spin around to see Gabby, one of our front of the house staff, waiting to speak to me.

I start to order her to go up to my apartment then realize no one here knows what’s happening in my life. The Plate is not a large place. My staff of about fifteen provides two services a night to forty people in total. Because we are small, we are a family. We yell, we curse, we cry here, and so they should know before anyone else that our family has grown by one. I send Gabby out to get the rest of the staff.

Once everyone is assembled in the kitchen, I announce, “I’m getting married.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

From the collective gasps, one would've thought I said I'd murdered someone. Jess, my sous chef, clasps her hands over her mouth. Her eyes are wide with surprise.

“Why is this so shocking?”

Jess drops her hands back to the stainless steel counter. “Because you're...you.” She waves a finger in the air as if that one word explains everything. By all the nods of agreement in the room, I guess it must.

“I am getting married, and it is to Slater Braxton.”

Another chorus of gasps sweeps around the room.

“The critic?” Jess's mouth is agape. “With you?”

I clench my jaw in irritation. “I did not know that she was a food critic when we met, but I do now.”

“How will that work?” This comes from my pastry chef, who leans against the marble island that serves as his station with his beefy arms folded across his chest and a frown on his mouth.

“I was told that this is not the type of establishment she usually reviews, so there shouldn't be a problem.”

“But if she's part of the establishment, she doesn't have the same independence that she did before,” he points out.

Terry, the head of the line prep, shakes his head. “Yeah, it’s like her reviews will be tainted because she’s an insider now. Before she was one of us, I mean, not us, but like one of the people.”

The whole kitchen starts murmuring about what a shame this is and how much they like Slater’s channel. The general consensus being that it’s a loss that Slater is marrying me. Apparently one million followers on TikTok is more impressive than maintaining a three-star Michelin rating.

“Slater’s TikTok account will not be preparing the meals tonight, so let’s get moving on the protein. Terry, run down that lamb. Gabby, please let Slater know that I’ve got a problem with prep and that I’ll call her when I have a free moment. Jess, come with me. We need to rework the menu.”

Everyone scatters at my orders. It’s time to get to work.

About ten minutes later, Gabby returns with a note in her hand. I flick it open and read the message.

I heard about your beef issues. Sad! I’ll stay out of your way. Come up whenever you’re done. xoxo

“She wrote this?” I ask Gabby. I’m not familiar with Slater’s handwriting other than the scrawl of her signature on her driver’s license, and while it looks nothing like this round printed lettering, I’m not an expert.

Gabby nods.

Slater doesn’t seem to be the type to write “Sad!” either, but it could be the pregnancy hormones. Again, not an expert. I don’t know what “xoxo” means.

I tuck the note in my pocket and shoo Gabby out of the kitchen. She has a tendency to linger back here. If she's interested in cooking instead of serving, she should go to culinary school.

Jess and I finish making the changes and filling out a list of produce and fruits we'll need to make the new lamb dish. Terry has secured enough lamb for forty dishes. I call Slater to see if she wants to make the supply run with me, but her phone skips right to voicemail. I don't have time, but I run upstairs anyway to find the apartment empty. She probably went home to get her things.

I shoot off a text.

Call me.

I read it back. It seems abrupt. Should I add xoxo since that's how she ended her note? Maybe I should come up with my own code phrase. What's the name of her channel. Favorite Feeds? I type in FAFE and hit send.

Call me

FAFE

That looks good. Call me, Favorite Feeds. I tuck my phone away and head off for the supplier. It takes me an hour to pick everything up. By the time I'm back at The Plate, things are getting more hectic as service nears. I need to roast the lamb and prepare the sauce. Even though I don't have the time, I run upstairs again to check on Slater, who has not responded to my text.

The apartment is still empty. My phone is silent. Another text won't hurry her response. I'll talk to her later tonight about how, as my wife, she needs to reply to my texts.

She's never been married before nor had sex, so she just doesn't understand how these things work. I'll be patient and let this slide. Clear lines of communication are how the kitchen works smoothly. It's reasonable that Slater, being a customer, doesn't understand this.

Service goes smoothly. Everyone loves the lamb. We celebrate an anniversary and two birthdays, and once the kitchen and front of the house is spotless, the staff goes home happy.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

I trudge up the stairs, lighthearted and hungry. I'll make a late-night dinner for myself and Slater, and then we can talk about the text issue. After that, we'll have sex but this time in the bedroom. She'll be the perfect dessert. I throw open the door and find...nothing. The apartment is still empty. There is no sign of Slater, not a purse, not a tube of lipstick, not even a shred of lace from the panties I tore. She should have been back by now if she ran home to grab a few things.

It's like she was never here. Like the morning I woke up and the side of her bed was empty. Pain tears through me and then anger. I slam the door shut and head for my car. Unlike before, I know her name, her address, and her Social Security number. She will never be able to hide from me again.

Chapter Eleven

SLATER

A banging sound has my eyes flying open. I sit up, trying to get my bearings to whatever the hell is going on but don't hear anything.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

What the hell is that?

"Slater, open the door, or I'll have to break it."

Oh, that's my crazy baby daddy. I throw my blanket off, padding over to the door. I flip the lock, jerking the door open. What the heck does he think he's doing?

“People are sleeping, jackass.” I grab his arm, yanking him into my apartment before one of my neighbors comes out. He’s got a grumpy-ass expression on his face, but it’s still handsome. Now is not the time to be thinking about his looks. We’re mad, I remind not only myself but my body as well. I fold my arms over my chest and glare at him. Brooks’ eyes trail me up and down. It’s then I remember I’m only wearing an oversized shirt. “Don’t even think about it.”

Everything with us turns to sex, which does kind of sound nice right now. No, knock it off, Slater. It doesn’t matter that a good orgasm from Brooks would knock me right back out, but I can control myself—maybe.

“That’s how you answered the door? Did you even check the peephole?”

“I’ll have you know there isn’t one. It’s fake. I got it on Amazon and glued it onto the door so people would think I had one.” I thought it was smart. If people think you might be watching them, they won’t do any funny shit.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters, running his hand down his face in frustration. I’m not sure what he’s upset about. He’s the one banging on my door at an obscene hour.

“What time is it? Why are you here?”

“It’s after eleven, and I’m here because my wife isn’t at home.”

“We’re not married.” I hold up my hand. “Where’s my rock?”

“I’ll get one.” Brooks sounds defensive. “Where are your clothes?” I point with my thumb behind me toward the closet.

“And your home isn’t my home,” I add in there to remind not only him but me as well.

“We'll settle that later. Let's go.”

“No.” I step back. “It's so late. If you wanted me to come back to your place?—”

“Our place.” I jump right over his comment.

“Then maybe you should have noticed I left six hours ago!” I shout the last part. Oh, I guess I'm madder about that than I realized.

“I thought you went home to grab things and return.”

“No clue how you got that idea, but it's still six hours, so whatever.” I shrug. “I saw your note. If you got shit to do, that's fine, but I'm not staying locked away.”

I don't know why it's bugging me that he wasn't there when I woke up or that he didn't come back, but it is. Which I can't admit because that would make me a giant hypocrite.

“I sent Gabby to check on you. There was an issue in the kitchen I had to deal with.”

“So you sent a random worker up to check on me.”

“Gabby isn't random.”

I narrow my eyes. “Really dark hair? Bright red lipstick?” I could never pull that lip color off, but she had.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“Yes.” Now I know why I got those looks and questions.

“It’s time to go.” I motion for him to move toward the door. He doesn’t.

“What is the problem?”

“You know what? You wouldn’t understand, okay?!” I sniff.

“Are you about to cry?”

“No,” I snuffle again. “It must be allergy season.”

"Tell me what I did, and I'll fix it." I shake my head no. What is wrong with me? I'm being ridiculous.

"Too busy to check on me. I get it." I nod. "I had a father who was always too busy." Brooks's eyebrows rise. "And then you send your girlfriend up to check on me."

“Okay, wait.” Brooks puts his hands up, palms facing me. “You said a lot of information in two seconds and are talking about two different things.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t understand!” I stomp my foot. Did I seriously just stomp my foot? “Oh God, you’ve given me your crazy. It’s contagious.” I walk over and drop down on the daybed. Never in my life have I been this emotional.

Brooks walks over and sits down next to me. “Gabby isn’t my girlfriend. She works at the restaurant.”

“I know, we met.” If you call her being a jerk to me meeting.

“I know. She brought me your note back, which is why I thought you were okay. I called and texted too.”

“What note? I got your note.”

“Then I got your text that you were running home to grab things.”

“That's not what I texted you. I told you I got home safe.”

“Which meant you got back to your place safely. Then you'd grab things and come back. I wish you would have waited; I would have come with you to help.” I start shaking my head no.

“Whoa, you added that whole last part. I think you might have assumed.”

“But I also have your note.” This is getting confusing.

“I didn't write you a note; I only sent the text.” I start searching for my phone. Brooks pulls a note out of his pocket, handing it to me. I take it and grab my phone out from under my pillow. It's always getting lost in my bed.

I read the note. “What beef problem? I don't know what this is.” I hand it back to him.

“You wrote it.”

“I did not.” I swipe the screen on my phone and see that he did text me. A lame text. He must have sent it after the note I didn't write. “What the hell?” That's when I realize all of the alerts on my phone. My social media has blown up. What is going

on?

“You didn’t write this?” I shake my head, my attention on my phone, swiping through things.

“Brooks, what did you do?”

“Do?”

“Did you tell people about us? That we’re getting married?”

“I made an announcement.” He smiles, like he’s proud. It’s kind of adorable, but I have a bigger issue here.

“Oh, Brooks, what have you done?” I groan.

“Do people know? Are they saying we can’t get married because I’m a chef and you’re a food critic?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“I wish they were saying that instead of what they are saying.”

“What are they saying?” He tries to peek at my phone.

“They’re calling me a cheater and a slut and so on. But don’t you worry. You’re a man, so everyone’s saying I fooled you into our affair.”

“Why would they say such things?” He takes my phone from my hand, scrolling through.

“Don’t comment!” I snatch the phone back.

“There is some Felipe claiming to be your boyfriend. I was going to set him straight.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“I know,” Brooks says with so much certainty. “How could he be when we’re married?” I don’t even bother to correct him. There’s no use.

“He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“I don’t like it.”

I would laugh at his remark, but my anxiety is rising by the second.

“He was kind of a boyfriend. I don’t know. He would tag along to places I went. Felipe has a following on social media too. He’s into the wine world or whatever.” I

wave my hand, not wanting to talk about wine because I've heard enough about it to last me a lifetime.

"He's in the past, so why is everyone mad then?" His eyes drop to my phone. I pull it closer. I don't need him commenting everywhere, especially from my account.

"Because I've been telling him for months to let everyone know we're not together, so the internet still thinks we are."

"I'll tell them."

"It's not going to be that easy. I have no clue how Felipe will take this. You see, he slept with my best friend. So he is the cheater, if what we ever were was boyfriend and girlfriend, but he pushed hard on his social media to make it appear that way. I didn't post him on mine."

"He cheated on"—Brooks's eyes drop to my bare legs—"you?"

"Yes, on me." In fairness, I told him I was a virgin and was keeping it that way. I wasn't interested in sex. I was wondering if I might be asexual. Brooks shot that theory to hell and back, twice now.

"I don't understand this. Why would he cheat on you?"

It makes it hard to be mad at Brooks when he's saying sweet things, and I don't even think he's doing it on purpose.

"It doesn't matter. He's going to lean into me having cheated on him to get more social media attention. So if I call him out about sleeping with my friend, he'll say I made it up. Or this could be his way back in with me."

“Back in?” Brooks's eyes narrow.

“He’s been wanting to get back together. Keeps showing up here.”

“Is that so?” His expression hardens.

“Brooks.”

“You’ll be my wife. You’re having my baby.” Brooks stands. “We’re leaving.”

“Fine,” I agree. There is no place better to hide than Brooks's mini mansion in the sky.

Chapter Twelve

BROOKS

“Felipe must die,” I say to the boys before the first hand is even dealt. I would have skipped poker night, but Slater almost pushed me out of the apartment, saying she wanted to talk to her mom and have some alone time. I didn’t like that, but I also didn’t want to make her more upset after the day she’d had.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:04 am

“I know of a pig farm in Lakeside,” offers Graham.

“Brooks doesn’t need a pig farm. He can chop him and cook him at The Plate.” Kaden, the starting quarterback for the Mavericks, makes up and down motions with his hands as if he’s slicing and dicing some imaginary vegetables.

“Don’t use a knife. It’s too easy to trace back to you. Use like...”—Graham’s eyes stray to the dealer, Dylan, our former lawyer and current knitting guru—“a knitting needle.”

Dylan isn’t a fan of this idea. “So I can be the suspect? Why not a hammer or why are we even using these sorts of tools? Isn’t a gun the best and quickest?”

“Poison is the easiest.” Graham turns to me. “Can’t you reverse engineer a duck into some kind of toxic poison?”

“Right. A natural death would be the most undetectable, so get some super-duper salmonella.” Kaden nods in agreement.

I look from one of my friends to the other. “I meant metaphorically.”

There’s a small bit of silence before Dylan shuffles the cards again. “I knew that.”

“We were just joking,” Graham adds.

“Not me,” says Kaden with a wide grin. “I’m all in for hiding the body, too.” He swings his now healed arm. “I’m a super soldier now with my repaired rotator cuff.”

“Since our body disposal business is on hold, what are your plans?” Dylan asks.

“I’ve got a guy who was able to get the birthday video taken down,” Graham offers. He does have social media experience of the negative kind. He’d given his nephew a car for his birthday. The problem was that the car was six figures and the nephew only one. From what Graham explained, everyone had something to say about that.

“Slater makes her living off the internet. I don’t think one video being taken down will help.”

“She’ll suffer the Streisand Effect,” Kaden says. Everyone else nods.

“What’s that?” I’ve never heard of it.

“It’s when you bring attention to something by trying to cover it up. Streisand sued a photographer who had posted photos of her oceanside property. The news reported on the lawsuit, which drove more traffic to the photos. If you get one video taken down, people will start talking about how you’re silencing them. Our PR team tells us to keep our fingers in our pockets and our mouths zipped whenever there’s some internet scandal brewing.” Kaden draws a finger across his mouth.

“You’re making the idea of killing him more appealing.” I can’t stay silent while Slater is being accused of being everythingbut a child of Satan online. It’s not the money because I can easily support both of us. It’s the unfairness of it. She doesn’t deserve this kind of abuse. While I can’t take Felipe’s life, I can make him miserable, and if all else fails, perhaps I do inject him with a high dosage of mold that I grew in my kitchen.

I return home with empty pockets, having lost all my money due to my inability to concentrate. I kept thinking about what kinds of mushrooms I could feed to Felipe.

Slater is in the living room with the television on but the lights off. Her arm is thrown over her eyes, and her other hand is clutching her phone. The screen of the device is darkened, though.

“How was poker night?”

“I’m poor now.”

I sit down next to her and pry the phone out of her hands. It’s turned completely off.

“Did you torment yourself?”

“By scrolling through comments? No. I turned it off after talking to Mom because Felipe was blowing up my phone.”

I check her face but don’t see any tear stains. “How was your mother?”

“Good. Mad, though. She wants to kill Felipe.”

I straighten. “I had the same thought.”

“We aren’t killing anyone.”

“You should always listen to your mother. Why don’t you give me her phone number? She and I can plan this together.”

Slater pulls her phone out of my hands and shoves it into the cushions behind her. “Stop. I just want to put this behind me. I should just talk with Felipe. I don’t think he really wants to get back together with me because otherwise, why sleep with my best friend?”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“I still am confused about why he would cheat on you. If he loved you, he would wait until you were ready.” What a pathetic human.

“Can we not talk about this anymore? It’s humiliating to me.” Slater throws her arm over her eyes as if by blocking her vision, she can push away all the bad things.

I stroke her head until she sighs and lowers her arm. “Are you hungry?” I ask. Food is my comfort and the kitchen my refuge. Among the produce and meat, the knives and iron pans, there is magic and healing. I will make Slater something that will ease her pain.

“I could eat,” she admits. I help her to her feet and guide her to a stool.

“People pay thousands to watch me cook. You are getting a free show.”

“My mom did squeal a little when I told her I was staying at your place.”

“Did you also tell her we are getting married?” I already know the answer, but disappointment still pinches the back of my neck at her quick “no.”

“I don’t want to confuse her,” Slater adds.

“It’ll be more confusing when you present me as your husband. She would probably want to be there when we say our vows in front of the officiant, so you should tell her soon. And the baby? Did you share that?”

Slater purses her lips but doesn’t reply. Instead, she watches. I pull out bread from the

bakery down the street and slice thick pieces. Eggs are cracked, butter is melted. Ham is set to caramelize in the pan. Cooking is a performance, but this is the first time I've cared what the audience thinks.

Before, I always felt confident that any dish I made would please the diner. With Slater, though, I don't just want to feed her; I want to nourish her. I want her to be warmed by the meal from the inside out so that when she sits down at the table in the future, her body will remember the food she ate and she will always, always return to me.

Chapter Thirteen

SLATER

I'm trying to not let this situation with Felipe bother me, but it is. It took me a long time to gain an online following, and it sucks that it's being tarnished because of lies. I have to admit that Brooks is being super sweet, and I know I'm being a bit of a jerk.

I did my best last night to eat his dinner, which was amazing. I'd gone to take a picture of it because he even plated it beautifully but then remembered I couldn't share it. I hate how out of control I feel in all of this.

Brooks got me to forget for a little while when he made love to me twice after dinner. That man is seriously addictive. He touches me, and all rational thought leaves my mind. There is only him and me and this crazy passion we fall into together. It's all-consuming.

"How's your stomach?" Brooks sits down on the side of the bed, brushing hair out of my face.

"It's good today." I rest my hand on my stomach. No bump has formed yet. Brooks

puts his hand over mine.

“What can I get you?”

“I’m going to lie in this bed and watch reality TV and forget about everything else.”

“What are we watching?” He stands, grabbing a tablet from his side of the bed. Holy crap, we both have sides of the bed. Brooks taps away on it, and of course a television comes down from the ceiling.

“I’ll binge Bravo, and then I might watch some Chef Ray.”

“Chef Ray?” The question comes out like an accusation.

“Maybe.” I shrug.

“Why would you watch him? He’s terrible. He can’t make a proper risotto to save his life.”

“His Wellingtons always look yummy.”

“Because you only see it through the television. That’s why he has so many damn shows because he can’t get a Michelin star for his restaurants to save his damn life.” Brooks starts to get heated. “I’ll make you a Wellington tonight. You don’t need Chef Ray.” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Maybe you should read a book instead.” He looks so damn adorable when he gets heated.

“Really?” I try to keep my face passive.

“And who is this Bravo? I’ve never heard of them either. Must not be a very good chef.” I burst into laughter, unable to hold it back any longer. Brooks only stares at

me with a pout on his handsome face. I didn't know Brooks could pout, which only makes me laugh harder. "I don't see what is so funny."

"Bravo is a television network; it's all reality shows like *Housewives* and people arguing."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“Oh.” He nods, handing me the tablet. “Chef Ray is blocked.”

“Seriously?”

“He will be shortly when I can get to another television in this house.”

“I can’t.” I laugh more. “Oh gosh, Brooks. Thanks, I needed that.”

His face softens. “I’ll endure Chef Ray if it makes you laugh,” he says, sitting on the side of the bed next to me. “I mean, he is pretty laughable.”

"You don't have to endure anything. Don't you have a kitchen to run?"

"I could stay."

"Or you can go. I'll watch my TV, no Chef Ray. Then you'll come home and make me that Wellington you promised."

"Is that what you want?" I think about it. What the hell do I want? I'm not sure anymore. Your whole life can really be flipped in seconds.

"Yeah, and maybe I will read. I should probably get one of those books about babies because I don't know shit about them. Hell, I'm an only child."

"I'll have some ordered. We can read them together." A tension inside me relaxes. He's really into this. I hope that's true because I'm freaking out a bit. I love my dad, but he wasn't very involved in my life. The man adores my mom, but he is also

married to his job. He's gotten better now that I'm older, but that shit did sting when I was little, and I don't want that for our baby.

"Are you lost in the whole baby area too?" I really have no clue about Brooks's family life.

"I can be lost a lot when it comes to people in general." Yeah, I'm putting that together. It can, at times, be rather endearing.

"I'll work on being more straight with you. Work being the key word there," I tell him. My emotions have been all over the place. I'm not sure if it's only baby hormones. Brooks sparks other things to life inside of me. He makes me want things that I never have in the past. That scares the crap out of me.

It hurt when I thought he used me. It actually cut deeper than anything Felipe or my ex-best friend did, which made it all the more clear to me that my feelings for Brooks run a whole lot deeper than I want to own up to.

"You don't have to work on anything. You relax."

"I'll try."

Brooks leans in, pressing a kiss to my lips. "Are you sure I should go?"

"Are there things you need to handle?"

"I would like to check on a few things."

"Then go." I know how important his work is, and I don't want to keep him from it.

"If I text or call, you'll answer?"

"Yes."

"Okay." He gives me another kiss before standing. "I'll check in soon."

"All right," I laugh. "Go."

"Are you kicking me out?" he says, playfully this time.

"I'm about to," I tease.

"It is your home. I suppose you could."

"Nice." I shake my head. He's always slipping those comments in there. Brooks checks to see if I've got my phone before he leaves. I've silenced all my social media for the time being, and I blocked Felipe. I don't want to deal with him right now. He's anticipating a reaction from me, so that's the last thing he's going to get.

I'm also enjoying that he is having a small freak-out. Not sure why, seeing as the hate is directed at me, but if I had to guess, he's not going to be the biggest fan of the narrative that he was cheated on. That any woman would dare step out on him.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

How did I even allow myself to hang out with the jerk? Wait, now that I think about it, Sara had been the one to point out Felipe's TikTok to me. She was always nudging me toward him and even telling him when we went places. I often took her with me.

What if there is a lot more to this than I realized? I grab my phone. I should do some internet sleuthing of my own.

Chapter Fourteen

BROOKS

The apartment complex where Felipe Wilson lives looks fancier than a sommelier at a steak house where you cook your own steak should be able to afford. I double-check the address the head chef at his restaurant gave me to make sure I'm at the right place.

The doorman isn't sure of me.

"Brooks Neal of The Plate. I'm here to discuss a business deal with Mr. Wilson." What kind of Felipe has the last name Wilson? Nothing about this guy adds up.

"He has a no visitors notice."

"You married?" A glance at his left hand suggests he is.

"Yes."

“Got an anniversary coming up?”

“Not for six months or so. Missus and I had a Christmas wedding so it’d be easy for me to remember.” He taps the side of his head.

“Smart.” I tap my fingers against my leg. The doorman doesn’t appear bribable. How else can I get into this building? What would Graham do? There’s no door closed for him. I return my attention to the doorman. “Is there a leasing office?”

“Yes.” There’s a wary note in his voice.

“I’m not trying to get you fired. You’re just doing your job, but I’m interested in a place here. Can you direct me to the person who’s in charge of that?”

“Just to get into Mr. Wilson’s apartment?” He arches an eyebrow.

“I have a recipe to share,” I reply, but the doorman’s no dummy.

He shakes his head but directs me to the management office. There, the reception is different. I’m not only taken to see an empty apartment, but the manager, a fifty-year-old with two kids and a wife who likes to shop at designer stores, is more than happy to trade information about Felipe Wilson in exchange for a reservation at The Plate. He also buys the story that Slater didn’t cheat. Or at least he pretends to believe it.

Wilson is not Spanish or Hispanic but some medley of European, mostly French, the manager thinks. He heard that Wilson had been able to put a down payment on a two-bedroom here. Word is that he is struggling and a couple months behind on his payments.

“Any reason why he’d be behind?” I ask as we walk toward Wilson’s place on the third floor. My mind starts conjuring up a bunch of different criminal scenarios. He

defrauded someone in a fake wine selling scheme. He fleeced an old woman out of a money market account. Did Slater give him cash?

“He’s one of those influencers. Had a big rise in his followings and got endorsement money from some different wineries, but from what I’ve seen, his engagements have been way down since that initial big rise, which only came his way because he was dating that food critic, Slater Braxton, but his content isn’t as interesting.” The manager shrugs and points to the apartment we’ve stopped in front of. “Here you go. Let him know that we don’t like defaulters here. It’s not good for the image.”

“Will do.” I nod as if I’m some kind of bill collector.

“Congrats on your engagement.” The manager is lingering when he needs to be gone.

“Thanks.”

The man shifts from foot to foot and then finally pulls out a pen and a piece of paper.

“Can you sign this? My wife will die.”

“Sure.” I’m standing in front of Wilson’s door. Giving an autograph is a small price.

“What’s her name?”

“Angie. She’s a big fan. I wish I had your cookbook with me. She’s never made anything out of it, but she’s sure paged through it.”

“Bring it to the restaurant,” I say as I scrawl my name across the page. “I’ll sign it when you guys come by for dinner.”

“Really?”

“I don’t lie.” I give him a piercing look so he understands that I’m talking about more

than a signed book. Slater is not a cheater, and if I have to go around this city and tell each and every person that, I will.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

The manager nods in understanding and skips down the hall with the paper tucked into his pocket.

Immediately I start banging on the door. Wilson doesn't answer on the first knock or the second one, but I can stand here all day if I need to, making a ruckus, embarrassing him in front of his neighbors. Finally, the door is wrenched open.

“Wha—“ he starts to say before I barge in, my hand on his throat.

I kick the door shut and back Wilson up against the wall. “Nod if you know who I am.”

Wilson nods.

“I don't like what you're saying about Slater on the internet. Make it stop.”

He spreads his hands from his sides as if to signal he's helpless. He makes some gurgling sounds which I can't interpret, so I ease up on his windpipe.

“Fuck man, what the hell? Do I look like I control what's being said? It's the fucking internet.”

I reapply the pressure. “You started it. You can put it out.”

He gasps out some words that I can't make out and claws at my wrist. Disgusted, I release him. There are better ways to threaten this punk.

“Where are you going?” He scampers after me as I move toward the kitchen. His place is one of those open plans, and the cooking space is clean and uncluttered. The island is a different story. There are dozens of bottles, most of them empty. A funnel and tube lies next to a red concoction in a pitcher. Wine glasses are scattered throughout. A round donut-shaped light is clamped on one end of the counter, and a tripod without a camera is placed to the left. His knife block appears as if it was just unwrapped from a home goods store a day ago. I pull out the large chef’s knife and run my finger across the surface. Dull but serviceable for my needs.

I turn the tip down and drag it across the quartz counter top.

“You’re scratching my counter,” he cries, slapping his hands to his cheeks.

“Brother, I’m going to be scratching more than the counter in about two seconds if you don’t get on your phone and start fixing the problem.”

Chapter Fifteen

SLATER

I debate if I should call or text Brooks. I think it might freak him out, or he’ll want to come along. Am I that crazy that I don’t want him to come with me to meet up with my ex-best friend who slept with my kind of boyfriend? I think not, but then maybe I am because I agreed to meet up with her myself. I should have ignored her call, but with everything going on, I answered.

Not only that, I had thought she was my friend, and I know she's got issues, but don't we all? I'm a bit looney tunes myself lately. I’m not sure what I’m hoping to accomplish, but I’ve already resigned myself to going.

I throw on a pair of yoga pants and an oversized sweater and grab the baseball hat I'd

gotten at a baseball game when I did a food crawl at the stadium. I usually wear it whenever I want to hide, and right now, that's what I really want to do.

When I step onto the elevator to head down, I say a silent prayer that I don't run into Brooks. If I do, I know there isn't a chance in hell I'll be getting to do this alone. He is rather hostile when it comes to people wronging me. I probably shouldn't get a kick out of how riled up he gets, but I do. It's kind of adorable, but I'm not telling him that. He has already been plotting Felipe's death. I thought he was joking at first, trying to get me to smile, but Brooks never cracked a smile himself.

I don't need my baby daddy and maybe fiancé going to jail. That would be a nightmare for both of us. Actually, I bet Brooks would still be praised, while I'd be the villain that caused all of this.

Well, shit, I internally sigh when the doors open and I see who is standing there. It's not Brooks; instead, it's the girl who works for him that dislikes me. What did he say her name was again? Jill, Jessica—no, Gabby! Her eyes narrow when she sees it's me. I'm guessing she wasn't a fan of the announcement Brooks made about us being together.

"You're still here." Wow, she's not even trying to hide her dislike for me. I can't help but think it's because she forged a note from me but still has a job. If Brooks is at work, he had to have seen her.

"Yep, I'm around." I step off the elevator. I play like I don't care, but damn, how is Brooks so protective of me in one area but not another?

I suppose this one actually touches his life. What if he has some attachment to her? It might not be sexual or whatever, but there must be some kind of he's letting her get away with what she did. I hear her say something under her breath that I don't catch.

“Did you say something?” I know I should keep my mouth shut, but she’s pushing it.

“Yeah, I did.” She lifts her chin, letting me know she’s taking her gloves off. I kind of want to hear what she has to say and why she doesn’t care for me. “Everyone knows what kind of person you are now.”

“And that is?”

“A slut.” Well, damn. I guess she’s been on TikTok. “Did you even think about how this might make Chef Brooks appear to the public? What impact your doings could have on his reputation? You obviously tricked him into sleeping with you. Men can be so stupid and only think with their dicks.”

Wow, we actually agree on one thing.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

The last I checked, which was yesterday, all the comments in the negative were about me. Are they going after Brooks now too? I should look at his reviews. That's how a lot of people go after businesses. Shit, I hadn't thought about that. Has some of the tide turned?

"How's it going for you? Were you able to trick Brooks into sleeping with you?" I poke at her, knowing it will ruffle her feathers.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Gabby gives me a smug smirk. One that I would love to wipe off her face.

"I already know." Brooks can be a touch crazy, but I have learned he's not a liar. In fact, he is extremely blunt.

"You don't know shit," she snips back at me.

"Clearly, you don't know shit either." This conversation is over. "Nice running into you again. My Lyft is here." I walk past her. "See you around," I say before I exit the building.

I hurriedly walk to the car, checking the details and then getting in. The last thing I need right now is for Brooks to come home, which might happen if Gabby is going to go run and tell on me. I need to get to the café and get this over with before he can show up.

It's not long before I'm being dropped off at Lily's, a small café in a quieter part of town. Once inside, I spot Sara at a small table in the corner. I take a deep breath and

head in her direction. A whirlwind of emotions comes over me. We'd been friends for years.

Sara is staring down at her phone, scrolling away with a happy smile on her face. Glad to see she's not all torn up about any of this. My mom was never a fan of Sara's. She and I have only ever had one fight before this, and that had been over her sleeping with a married man. That should have been a giant flag for me.

I was so pissed when I found out. Sara had gotten defensive at first but then had a breakdown, saying he manipulated her and she wanted to be better. I now see this might be who she is.

"Hey," I say, making Sara's head pop up. That smile she had falls away, and an expression of sadness takes over. Tears even fill her eyes.

"Hey." She starts to stand.

"Don't." I motion with my hand for her to stay while pulling out the chair with my other to sit down across from her. "I'm here, so what's up?" I get right to it.

"I've missed you."

"Oh please." I roll my eyes. "You haven't spoken to me since I found Felipe balls-deep in you." Her shoulders drop. Sara should have been an actress. I think her bratty tale snapped me out of whatever fog her friendship had on me. "And did you set that up? I mean, you knew I was coming over."

"Slater, you have to?—"

"Don't try to sell me your bullshit." Sara's eyes narrow for a half second before she quickly hides what is truly behind the veneer of who she really is. "You knew I was

coming over. You wanted to hurt me.”

“It’s not that I wanted to hurt you.”

“I don’t believe you. Now tell me why you wanted to meet up, or I’m leaving. Be straight with me.” Sara’s mouth forms into a line. I wait.

“You didn’t even like him.”

“If you liked him, why didn’t you say that? You were always pushing us together. You introduced us!” Sara folds her arms over her chest. “If you told me that you wanted him, I would have backed away.” Actually, I don’t think I would have needed to back up. It was Felipe and her always initiating contact with me.

"Fine, I want you to back away."

"I'm not anywhere near him. He's all yours. In fact, why don't you tell him to leave me the hell alone?" I mean, this has gotten ridiculous. All I want is for both of them to go away, but here we are.

"We're not talking anymore."

"Good, because he's a leech." I'm beginning to believe Sara shares this attribute. They should be together.

"He is not." Her hands slam down on the table, making me jump back in my chair. "He's sophisticated and smart." Oh boy, someone’s been drinking the Felipe punch.

Are we talking about the same person? Sure, he tries to come off that way, but over time you can see a lot of it is fake. She should be able to see that more than me.

"Why am I here, then?"

"I need you to talk to Felipe for me."

Holy hell. This is why she called me here? For me to somehow get her back in Felipe's good graces?

Page 25

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“What do you even want me to say to him?”

“You’ll do it?” Her smile returns. The screen of her phone lights up. If I can get them together, maybe they’ll leave me alone. “Oh, he’s live now.” Sara quickly snatches her phone off the table. I start to get up, thinking I can slip out of here and block her. It was pointless to come here. Not sure what I thought I would get out of this.

Can’t a girl just have badass best girlfriends?

When I hear Felipe's voice play out over the speaker of her phone, I start to get up. That is until I hear Brooks's voice. What the hell?

“Why is Brooks with—” I snatch the phone from her hand. Sure enough, he is there.

What the hell is going on now?

Chapter Sixteen

BROOKS

For the first time since I opened The Plate, there are empty tables. I dismiss all the staff except Jess, who served as a maître d’ at a small Paris eatery to help pay for culinary school before she became a chef. She mans the front of the house for the few customers while I prepare everything from the prepped ingredients.

Slater sits in the kitchen alternating between watching me and checking the internet. I don’t need for her to tell me what they’re saying online. I can read it in the thin line

her mouth forms and the tightness around her eyes. I can feel it in the chill of the kitchen and the quiet of the front of the house.

Savvier than I gave him credit for, Felipe Wilson was able to capture—and broadcast—my threats of harm to him. After I left, Wilson had continued his lies saying that he wasn't able to catch it on camera, but I'd talked about how Slater was mine and that I wasn't going to allow anyone else in her life. Rather than coming off as a protective boyfriend, Wilson made me out to be an unhinged misogynist who wanted to control Slater. People were in her comments telling her to leave me.

Those comments bothered me, but I didn't say anything to Slater because she was upset enough.

When the last customer is served and the kitchen is spotless, I turn all the lights off and lead my girl upstairs.

"I guess threatening to kill someone is not the best form of advertising," I joke as the lights to the kitchen come on when we enter.

A high-pitched giggle escapes and then abruptly turns to a sob. She stuffs a fist in her face. "God, I'm so sorry. What did I drag you into?"

"I didn't realize you dragged me over to Wilson's."

"You know what I mean. You just wanted to get laid, and now your restaurant is ruined."

"Ruined is a strong word." I push in the dial to the gas stove and listen to the click click click as the gas ignites the burner. It's a comforting sound. As the water and cinnamon stick heats in the sauce pan, I grab the maple syrup and herbal tea leaves from the cupboard. "And I'm happy to have gotten laid, as you put it, because you

and I were meant to be together.”

“Are we? Because so far both our reputations have been ruined.”

“We’re in a downturn. I think Graham would say this is a buying opportunity.” I pour the cinnamon infused water over the loose tea to steep. Once it’s ready, I add the syrup and top it with a squeeze of lemon.

“Is there a reputation stock market where we can buy good reviews and customers?”

“Probably.” I push the drink toward Slater. “Drink. It will make you feel better.”

“What about you?” she asks as she picks up the booze free hot toddy.

“Having my own comfort drink.” I pour myself a whiskey and tap my glass to hers. “To better times.”

Slater looks marginally better after a few sips. The hot drink has put color in her cheeks. She still looks defeated, slumped on the kitchen stool, her elbows on the counter and her hands cupping the mug. I lean back against the counter and cross my ankles.

I can’t even be mad about what Wilson said online after I’d left. Those were my sentiments. Slater belongs to me, and I’ll crush anyone that tries to come between us. I don’t know why that’s considered unhealthy.

I try to remember the other stuff I said, things he might have recorded but not released. As I’m running through our conversation, the image of his counter springs to mind. I tell Slater about it.

“I think he’s pretending to buy expensive wines and giving fake reviews for them,” I

say. “There were bottles that cost five or ten grand. They were all empty.”

“And he had a funnel and tube?” she asks.

“Yes. Those wines are carried by the steakhouse where he works, so it would be easy for him to take the empties home with him, fill them with some kind of diluted grape juice, and then pretend to give reviews.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

She taps her fingers against her glass for a moment, pondering this information. “How do we prove that it’s not wine and that he’s faking it?”

“Have another sommelier go on a broadcast with him and they can do a taste test?”

“He wouldn’t agree to that.”

“I could host a wine tasting event at The Plate. We could broadcast it and have everyone give their opinions of the wines.”

“That wouldn’t really show that he was faking his reviews on his channel, though. At best, it would show that he doesn’t have as much knowledge as some other wine guys, but it wouldn’t prove that he’s stealing empty bottles from the restaurant and passing them off as his own. Besides, I think he’s up to something else.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know. I saw Sara today.”

“The cheater?”

“Yeah. She was the one that kept pushing me toward Felipe. I’m not a wine person. I like regular people food, and my booze is usually a wine spritzer.”

I make a face. She laughs. “I know. This is really good. I think I taste...maple syrup?”

“Yeah, a non alcoholic version of a hot toddy.”

“It’s perfect. I like mixed drinks, fruity drinks, and stuff that doesn’t taste like strong booze. Wine doesn’t do it for me, although Felipe tried to get me interested. Anyway, that’s not where I’m going. Sara was the one who hooked me up with Felipe, only to sleep with him behind my back. Today she said he doesn’t take her calls and was trying to get me to mend their relationship.”

I do not understand people. “Why?”

“I don’t know. There’s something going on with Felipe, though, because why did he want to get with me? Why did Sara push me into his life?”

“Isn’t it because you’re hot and funny?”

This time, Slater’s laugh is genuine. “No, I mean, thank you for saying that, but Felipe didn’t try to date me because I’m hot and funny. It’s for some other reason.”

Fame, probably, but I keep my thoughts to myself. I finish off my whiskey and take Slater’s hand. “We’ve discussed the asshole enough for the day. Let’s do something we both will enjoy a lot more, such as me proving to you that the only reason any guy would want to be with you is because you’re hot”—I kiss her neck—“and funny.” I lift her onto the counter. “Open up, darling. Time for dessert.”

Chapter Seventeen

SLATER

I’m going stir-crazy. Brooks’s condo might be big, but it’s not helping at the moment. I’ve wandered from one room to another, bored out of my mind. A few months ago, the idea of being trapped in my apartment sounded like a dream. The reality of that is

way different.

I know I can go outside, but I don't want to. I'm keeping myself off of social media so I don't have to face or deal with it. I want to keep my stress to a minimum. I read in one of the baby books that it is for the best.

"Babe."

I smile when I hear Brooks call for me. He has been my saving grace through all of this, even though it has affected him as well.

"I'm in the living room," I shout back, shoving my book under the pillow on the couch.

"What's that?" Brooks asks, catching me.

"Nothing." I shift to sit in front of it. Brooks comes over, leaning down to kiss me. My eyes fall closed, and I lean forward, kissing him back. If I could kiss him all day every day, I would forget about all my problems. Brooks has the superpower of making me forget about anything else in those moments.

"Got it." Brooks smirks, his mouth still against mine.

"Hey. You tricked me." I push at his chest and try to grab my book. He's way quicker than me. He glances at the book in his hand and back at me. "I can explain."

"Now that you've been busted? Would you have told me?"

I shrug one shoulder. "I'm bored," I huff in my own defense.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“I know, I’m sorry.” His face softens, and a trace of guilt shows. He was only teasing about the book. It’s a baby book he ordered, and we were supposed to read it together. It was on the table, so I might have been peeking inside.

“Please stop saying sorry.” I tug his hand for him to sit down next to me. When he does, he scoops me into his arms and onto his lap. “This is my doing.”

“No, it’s not.” Now it’s Brooks being defensive but for me. He really is a good man. Brooks might go about things in not the best of ways, but he always means well. He is passionate about those he cares about, and I so happen to be at the top of that list.

“It is. If I hadn’t jumped to conclusions that night, maybe all of this wouldn’t have happened.”

"You were normal."

I snort a laugh. "I wasn't pregnant then." It's sweet how he defends me even against himself. Crap, I'm going to fall in love with him at this rate. Going to, Slater? Really? I push that thought to the side. There is way too much already going on to go there.

"You kind of were." He tries again.

"What, like five seconds?"

"It counts."

"Thank you."

"It's not all you." He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "I shouldn't have gone and told everyone about our engagement." I'm not sure if we are engaged, but I am keeping that thought to myself for now. Don't you need a ring? Also, why don't I think the idea of marrying him isn't so crazy anymore?

"Or went over to Felipe's place."

"Sure, that too." He doesn't sound the least bit regretful about that.

"Don't make me laugh about it." I smack his chest. "It's not funny; you're getting all this hate." Which extra sucks. Why is the good man in all of this being dragged through the mud when it should be Felipe? He's the user, asshole, liar, and so many other things.

"I know I told you last night, but I want to say it again: No matter what happens with all of this, we'll be okay." I nod. He said that after we made love last night, when we were lying in bed. That he could take care of us. That the baby and I would never want or need for anything. It did bring comfort, but now I'm starting to get pissed about all of it. Which is honestly better than sad. "I've got a surprise for you. What shoes do you want me to grab for you?"

"Shoes? Where are we going?"

"Just downstairs."

"You want me to go to work with you?"

"What shoes, babe?"

"I'll change really quick." I wiggle, trying to get up, but he doesn't let me. "Do you want me to change or not?"

“I want a kiss.” He claims one before I try to give it to him. I smile against his mouth.
“Go, we need to get downstairs. We’re late.”

“Late?” I slip off his lap.

“The sooner we leave, the sooner you’ll know.”

“It’s not a wedding, is it?” I point a finger at him.

“I could do that?” Shit, did I just give him an idea?

“Give me a couple of seconds.” I hurry back to the bedroom and into the closet. It’s strange seeing all my things next to Brooks’s. I swear each day more and more of my stuff starts to take up his place. It started with me leaving a few things here and there, and now it looks as though I kinda live here.

I toss on my wide-leg black slacks that have a stretchy waist. I noticed yesterday my pants are starting to get more snug. I grab a blouse and slip on shoes. I give myself a once-over in the mirror, brushing my hair out and putting on lip gloss and mascara. I have to admit it feels good to be getting out.

I’m sure I’ll just be staying in the kitchen at the private table, but I could run into that Gabby girl. She wasn’t there the last time I was. I’m not sure whether Brooks fired her or if she simply had a day off. I didn’t ask him about it. I wanted to, but there are so many other stressors right now that I decided to pick my battles.

Believe me, it’s been eating away at me that she thinks she got away with it. Or better yet that she’s somehow untouchable. The girl did forge a note, but if I say something, then it’s me pushing for him to fire her. Maybe I should let it go. There are enough problems to deal with as it is. Still, she’s sneaky, and it irks me after my disastrous friendship with Sara.

“This look okay?” I ask Brooks as I enter the room.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“God, you’re breathtaking.” His heated stare eats me up. How the heck does this man continue to make me feel this way when the entire world seems to be crumbling around us? “We need to leave, or I’ll take you back to bed.”

“I’m not opposed to that.” I smirk. I have been itching to get out of here, but I wouldn’t turn that offer down. I think my body went too long without sex, and Brooks flipped the switch inside of me.

“We don’t have time.” He takes my hand, leading me out and onto the elevator. “They’re already waiting for you.”

“Me? Who is waiting for me?” Oh no. “What have you done?”

“Nothing for social media. This is private.” I give him a look. “Swear it.”

I trust him and let him lead me into the back of The Plate. We pass the table in the kitchen and head out toward the main part of the restaurant. They aren’t open yet. Brooks stops at two double doors, pushing them open. Three girls turn around to face us. Bright smiles light up their faces.

“Is this her?”

“Gorgeous, how did you land her?” Two women speak at the same time.

“Ah, thanks.” I smile back at them.

“You’re Slater?” a redhead asks. It hits me who she is: Frankie. Brooks has talked

about his friends from poker and their partners. This is them.

“That's me.” A mischievous smile spreads across Frankie’s face.

“We’re here to celebrate. I’m Luna,” The pretty blonde pulls me in for a quick hug.

“And to come up with a plan.” Frankie rubs her hands together.

“A plan?” I glance at Brooks, who shrugs.

“They wanted to meet you,” he tells me.

“And plot the demise of Felipe.” Frankie looks way too excited about this. The other two nod their heads in agreement.

Damn, I think I’m going to like these girls.

“Do you guys have any ideas?” I ask as I take a seat at the table set for four.

“Not yet, but that’s why we’re all here together. Nat and I are lawyers, and Luna is?—”

“I’m a spender,” the delicate blonde interjects with a smile. Everyone is so pretty, Nat with her chestnut hair and the pert nose and wide-set eyes who looks like a movie star lawyer, and Frankie with the red hair and that body that would make pin-up models cry with envy.

I run my hands over my own curvy figure and remind myself that this is the body Brooks loves. Or at least lusts after.

“She’s a planner,” Frankie corrects. “Luna plans enormous fundraisers.”

“Where I spend a lot of money.” Luna’s like her name, fine-featured and glowing from within.

“I can attest that she spends a lot of money,” a deep voice booms in the space. We all turn at once to see three men walk in. One of them I recognize because he’s Kaden Gunner, the star quarterback of the Mavericks. The other two look vaguely familiar.

“I didn’t say you needed to come.” Brooks sounds peeved. He lays a hand on my shoulder as if he’s afraid one of them will steal me away.

“I had to drive Luna here,” the deep-voiced guy says, pulling up a chair and shoving it between Luna and Nat. “Move over, Nat, would you? It’s been a good fifteen minutes since I was last with Luna. That’s about all I can handle.”

“Unlike this wimp, I haven’t seen Frankie all morning.” Kaden leans down and places a loud kiss on Frankie’s cheek. “How’d I do, kitten?”

“You’re very patient.” Frankie pats the quarterback on his head like he’s a puppy. Kaden just grins happily.

The other guy who is literally the walking poster-child for tall, dark, and handsome, takes a seat between Nat and me. He hangs a satchel over the back of the chair and pulls out a gorgeous cream sweater with an orange and blue star pattern across the chest. A moment later I realize that it’s not a store-bought sweater, but one he’s actually knitting.

“Oh my God, you’re Dylan Wolfson. I read your feature in the Times on men with needles. What was it called? Cocky Crafting?”

Page 29

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

A slight reddish-tinge appears on Dylan's cheeks. "They liked the alliteration, I guess."

The girls laugh, but the guys groan.

"Dylan is always trying to steal the spotlight from us," Graham complains. "You pull out the knitting to make us look like losers."

"Speak for yourself. I've won a Super Bowl," says Kaden. But then he turns to Dylan. "You could dial down the whole 'I'm an enlightened man who creates clothes with two sticks' thing."

"I could, but where would the fun be in that?" Dylan counters.

That draws a laugh from me which, in turn, earns a growl from Brooks.

"I thought you were coming to plan a way to save Slater's reputation," he says to the big crowd.

"What about The Plate?" Graham asks.

"It will recover on its own." He sounds confident as he passes out an extra set of glasses, pitchers of lemonade and iced tea, a carafe of coffee, and a banana and cocoa coffee cake.

The rest of them nod. It's probably true. Brooks's food is so good that people won't be able to stay away.

“Tell us what you have been thinking.” Frankie says.

Nat and Frankie plate the cake up while Brooks and I explain everything that has happened up until now. The cheating story is embarrassing but draws disgusted looks from everyone, which makes me feel better. They’re even more disturbed about the way Felipe made me out to be the cheater. I end with the livestream that exposed Brooks’s violent threat.

“He didn’t mean it,” I say in Brooks’s defense.

“He did,” the three men say in unison.

“I did,” Brooks confirms.

“Brooks thinks that Felipe is stealing empty bottles from the restaurant where he works, that he pretends he’s bought and then he gives reviews of them. And he lives in a fancy condo he can’t afford.”

“The management agent told me Felipe is behind on his payments,” Brooks shares.

Everyone starts giving out ideas on how to expose Felipe. Kaden is chosen as the one who would be able to get Felipe on camera.

“Won’t he be suspicious because you’re friends?” I point to Kaden and Brooks.

Kaden shakes his head. “Brooks doesn’t have social media, and I don’t use it either. I’ve got a PR agency that maintains my Insta account.”

“This plan seems overly complicated.” Graham isn’t a fan.

There’s a small silence that falls in the room because he’s not wrong.

Frankie scrunches her nose. “We’re going about this all wrong. Instead of trying to show Felipe is faking his wine reviews, because let’s face it, that’s boring and won’t redeem your reputation, we need to show that Slater is the victim and you stood up for her.”

“What’s your suggestion?” Brooks leans forward.

“Kaden messages Felipe and asks for a wine recommendation. Felipe will be thrilled to do this. By way of thanks, Kaden invites Felipe for a stadium tour. He also invites Sara. We’ll think of a reason later. The two are in the same place and fireworks.” Frankie touches her fingertips together and then opens her fingers wide as if to mimic something exploding.

“And we’ll get both of them to agree to being recorded ahead of time. Kaden can tell Felipe that the footage will be forwarded to him to share on his socials,” Nat says.

“We will definitely share all this footage on our socials.” Kaden claps his hands together and grins widely.

Brooks and I share a look. Neither of us are convinced about this. “I’d rather cut his belly open,” Brooks says quietly.

I pat his arm. “It’ll be a metaphoric flaying.”

Chapter Eighteen

BROOKS

The next day I'm back at Felipe's condo. Everyone pitching in to concoct a plan to save Slater's reputation was great, but it leaves too much up to chance. Simply putting two unsavory ingredients together doesn't make an explosive dish. There needs to be heat or agitation. Some kind of force multiplier.

So here I am. Like Carrie, the owner of the coffee shop said, no one in culinary school liked me. It wasn't just because my dishes were always better but because I didn't allow the instructors to intimidate me. I hadn't grown up rich and privileged like a lot of the other students. I'd had to fight for my place there. I worked jobs washing dishes and mopping floors. I cleaned toilets on the weekends in big office complexes. I was never afraid to get my hands dirty because I knew that I deserved to wear the white coat. I did what needed to be done.

Slater needs protection, but even more than that, she deserves to be exonerated. I'm not letting this lowlife with a ring light and a video camera take away her dignity, and I'm not leaving her fate up to chance.

The doorman gives me a chin nod of recognition. "Number 18," he says in greeting.

I nod in return. I signed the papers right after leaving Felipe's apartment. I knew that my visit wasn't the end of things and would need to get back in. Being a resident was the easiest way to do that.

Number 18 is on the fifth floor, and Felipe's apartment is on the third. I get off on the third. Outside of Felipe's place, I pause to listen. There's no noise inside. With a

master key I pilfered from the manager's office when he went to make copies of the lease agreement, I let myself in.

Without all the lights on, the apartment is dim and empty. Slater said that Felipe films everything. I thought that was an exaggeration until I looked at his socials. He had short videos of himself flipping blinis for his caviar, drinking wine as he's watching a movie, and even showering. The one video which showed him drinking wine had several angles following him from one room to another. I asked Slater how that was done, if he had someone film him, and she thought that he had different cameras set up in his apartment.

I find small ones mounted on tension rods in nearly every corner of the room, just as Slater guessed there would be. There were three in the living room, four in the kitchen, and one over the entry door. I found two in the bathroom including one over the shower head and one mounted on the mirror. In the bedroom, there were even more. One in the headboard, one above the mirror across from the bed, one in each corner. All of these just for a few seconds to capture him walking from the bathroom to his closet? I didn't believe that.

His spare room holds a desk, dozens of empty wine bottles, empty bags with designer logos, and a computer. I sit down at his desk and rifle through his mail, which is mostly junk mailers with a couple of overdue bills from credit cards. He appears to be maxed out and a couple months behind.

The computer login pops up. I search around the desk mat and find a sticky note with passwords written down and crossed off. I enter the latest one, "wineGod69!" and the screensaver dissolves to the main desktop. It takes me only a few minutes to confirm what I suspected. Felipe does film everything and likely not with everyone's consent.

He filmed me secretly, and it wasn't his first time doing it either.

A text alert pops up on my phone.

I'm here

I shove away from the desk and go open the apartment door. A small, thin woman shifts nervously side to side. It's Sara, the person who betrayed Slater.

"Chef Brooks?"

I nod and move out of the way.

"Where's Felipe?" She peers around the entry and then living room, moving around as if she's been here before.

"Coming soon." According to his socials, he's having lunch at Cipriani's, and they stop serving at two. He should be arriving anytime.

"I don't really understand why I'm here. Are you and Slater really a thing?"

"Yes. We're getting married."

"Oh, she didn't tell me that."

"You slept with her boyfriend. What did you expect?"

Sara flushes. "He convinced me that they weren't in love anymore or I wouldn't have ever touched him."

"I don't care. Come with me." I walk back into the office and gesture for her to take a seat. "Did you agree to these?"

I wave my hand toward the screen and then move to the opposite side of the desk where I can't see the monitor screen. Sara moves slowly, as if she knows what she is going to see but doesn't want to watch.

"I'll wait for you in the living room."

Fifteen minutes later, she emerges ashen-faced and shaking. I hand her a glass of diluted grape juice that Felipe uses as pretend red wine. She needs the sugar.

"Why did you connect Slater with Felipe?" I ask.

Sara drains the glass and then shoves it toward me. "Does he have any real stuff here?"

“Some cheap red.”

“I’ll take it.”

I give her a refill, and she takes a large gulp before starting, “I started following Felipe several months ago. He seemed so cool and interesting. I left comments, but he never responded. I noticed he was always commenting on Slater’s TikToks. I managed to bump into Felipe in person, and when I told him I was friends with Slater, he began paying attention to me, replying to me online, meeting up with me. He told me that if he had a few more followers, a few more views, that he’d be able to get some real endorsements, and then he’d be able to take me out instead of always meeting here.”

She pauses for another drink. “After a while, I realized he was using me to get to Slater. They started going out officially. He gained a lot of followers by being in Slater’s TikToks, but the endorsements didn’t come through like he wanted. I thought if he just had more exposure, he’d get the money he needed and then we could be together. I didn’t mean to hurt Slater. I just wanted to be with Felipe.”

“What will you do about the videos?”

Her chin goes up. “I’m going to report his disgusting ass.”

The door flies open, and Felipe appears in the frame. Sara jumps to her feet and throws the glass at his head. He’s too shocked to duck, and it strikes the middle of his forehead.

“Fucking hell, that hurt. Am I bleeding? I’m bleeding!” he cries, his hands red from the wine.

“It’s wine, you ass. I can’t believe you recorded me. I’m reporting you to the police and pressing charges! Your career is over!” Sara runs out, leaving a stunned Felipe behind.

He stumbles into the apartment. “Get me a towel! I’m bleeding out!”

I step aside and watch him careen against the island. “You never should have targeted Slater. Forget she exists and maybe your career is the only thing you’ll lose.”

With that, I walk out.

Chapter Nineteen

SLATER

When I wake up from my nap, the first thing I notice is that Brooks isn’t here. I grab my phone off the charger, wondering where he went. Normally he would leave a note or text me. It makes me think he’s up to something, but what? That man has a way of keeping me on my toes.

My first thought goes to Felipe, but that can’t be right because we have a plan. At least I think we do. It sounds complicated, and I’m not excited about dragging all of Brooks’s friends into my mess. Kaden, and hell, all of them have careers or their lives in some kind of spotlight, and I don’t want to tarnish that in any way. I’ve already brought this on Brooks, and I don’t want that for anyone else. I know how the internet can turn on you. I’ve been living it.

I really had a great time with all of Brooks's friends. Especially the girls. They are the

definition of ride or die. I know without a doubt that you'd never catch them in their friends' beds, not only because that's not their style— they're girls' girls—but also because their men would kill each other. It was adorable how possessive Brooks was toward me around them.

I pile my hair on top of my head in a messy knot before getting dressed to head downstairs. My hand goes to my stomach. “Do you know what your daddy is up to?” I smile, feeling the bump more today than I have before. A flutter of excitement fills me.

When I enter the back of the kitchen at The Plate, there are only a few people there. It's still early. “Anyone seen Brooks?” I ask.

“He hasn't been in yet,” one of them tells me. What the heck? Then where the hell did he go?

I pull my phone back out to call him when I notice a bunch of missed texts. I click it, seeing it's a group chat I've been added to called Heart Connection. It only takes a couple of seconds for me to realize that it's all the girls from last night texting, asking what is going on and if Brooks has gone AWOL and done his own plan because Felipe is losing it on social media.

I don't have to ask Brooks if that's the case. We might have only known each other for a short time, but I know that man, and the Felipe situation was driving him insane. He wanted to fix it for me. I'm starting to think he might be more upset than I am at this point.

I flick out of the texts, hopping over to social media. I have to unblock Felipe to see his crap. He's cursing into the cameras and screaming about being hit in the head. Oh God, Brooks is going to jail. He went and hit him.

Felipe is on a tangent going on about a range of things. It's hard to keep up with his erratic behavior, but my eyes drop down to the comments. Everyone is laughing at him and calling him a creepy pervert. That's a change from before.

I'm not sure why the tide has turned, but that's the power of the internet for you. Changes happen in the blink of an eye. One second you're the victim, and the next you're a villain or vice versa. But everyone is going on about him filming the people he has sex with and all his stuff being a con.

I think from the things he's saying and going off the comments, he's snapped and is telling on himself while blaming the public for turning him into who he is. That he's done everything for his followers. Yeah, he's completely lost it and is likely going to jail.

Another person comments, asking if he really had cancer a few years back that he did a GoFundMe for. If I had to bet, that was all a lie, like the rest of him. At least I wasn't the only person he fooled.

My phone starts to ring in my hand, showing Frankie's name. I answer. She doesn't even wait for me to say hello, she's already chattering the second I pick up.

"Girl, is that the tea over there? That perverted man was filming sex with girls, and the wine is all fake?"

"Wait, what?" I think Frankie has more tea than I do. "Maybe you should fill me in."

Page 32

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“All I know is your ex?—”

“He’s not my ex; we never agreed to be together.” I cut her off, not wanting her to get the wrong idea about what my relationship was with Felipe.

“Did you agree to marry Brooks?” Shit, she’s got me there.

“We’re not married, and he more ordered it.” Which should annoy me, but it’s all honestly cute.

I also think he made up the whole eating his food in his home thing and how it makes us married already. Also annoyingly adorable. Gah, I think I might love him and his strange ways that only make him more endearing to me.

“Are you sure? I wouldn't put it past one of these men to have you sign papers and the next thing you know you're married.”

“Is that possible?” I laugh. It can't be.

“With money and some pull, people can do just about anything.” I’m going to take her word for that. She does know everyone better than I do in this group. Plus, she’s a lawyer.

“I suppose it’s inevitable. I’m having his baby, after all.” I swear everything goes quiet. Shit, did I just blurt that out? I peek behind me and see the other chefs staring my way. They quickly glance away, pretending they didn’t hear anything.

“Are you really?” Frankie asks in a gushy sweet voice, showing a softer side that is in there.

Frankie has a sharp tongue, but I quickly realized she’s all marshmallow on the inside, but she has to trust you to get that from her. It means a lot that I’m getting it so quickly. They really have taken me into their fold. Even if all this shit with social media goes sideways, it would be worth it to get Brooks and all of them.

“Yes,” I tell her.

“No wonder Brooks went rogue today.” I’m not sure what he did, but whatever it is has sent Felipe into a total meltdown. I even noticed people calling him out about his name being fake too.

“Are you really pregnant?” I turn back around to see Gabby.

“Can I text you later?” I ask Frankie.

“Yes, but have more tea for me,” she says before ending our call.

“Yes, I’m pregnant.” Gabby nods. I notice she’s not in uniform. She is carrying an oversized purse that is filled to the brim.

“I’m already fired.”

“I didn’t?—”

“I know.” She cuts me off. “I was a bitch to you, and I let my crush get the best of me. Brooks is a good one and never gives women the time of day romantically. He picked you, so that means something.” I didn’t see that coming. Today is filled with surprises. “Like I said, I’m sorry, and I wish you both the best.”

The door to the dining room swings open. Brooks's eyes land right on me, and he smiles. Then he catches sight of Gabby, and the smile falls away.

“Why are you here?” Brooks comes to stand next to me.

“I was just getting my things.”

“You’ve got them.”

Gabby gives a nod, turning to leave.

“Gabby,” I call after her. “Thank you.” She gives me a smile. “And Brooks will give you a glowing recommendation.”

“I will?” I elbow him in the side. “I mean, I will.” He nods.

“Thank you, and congratulations. I’m happy you found your one.” With that, Gabby turns to leave.

“Why do I feel like the asshole now? Maybe you should hire her back.”

“No.” Brooks stares down at me like I’m the crazy one now. I might be. “She lied. Hopefully she’s learned her lesson, but I have zero tolerance for anyone that would try to upset you or break us up.”

Page 33

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“You’re right.” I sigh. “I’m a sucker.”

“No, you have a soft heart.” He leans down, pressing his mouth to mine. “And I’ll always protect it.”

Yep, I’m totally in love with him. “I love you,” I blurt out. How could I not love him? I can be a hot mess, but he doesn’t care. All he cares about is making sure that I’m happy and protecting that happiness.

“I love you too.” He wraps his arm around me, lifting me off my feet. “And we’re getting married.”

“And we’re getting married,” I agree, not that it was a question. Everyone in the kitchen cheers, making me laugh.

It might have been a crazy-ass mess to get here, but I’m thankful for all of it. In the end, everyone got what they deserved. Fate has a way of doing that.

Chapter Twenty

BROOKS

“The Plate’s reservation book is full for six months. I had to turn so many people away today. Felt bad about it,” Slater comments as we climb the stairs to the condo. Her lush ass sways from side to side. More edible than the apple tart I served tonight where we formed the pastry into a round cookie shape and the apple and ice cream were blended, frozen and reformed into strips placed in a domed lattice structure

covering an edible apple blossom. It was a big hit. Slater TikToked it, and everyone was asking her to get me to sell them separately. I shared the news with the pastry chef, who looked intrigued by the idea.

As for me, I'm in a hurry to get Slater in bed. She looks tired. These nights at the restaurant aren't good for her.

"Do you think you should be staying up this late?" I smooth my hand around her ass. It's gotten juicier as her pregnancy has advanced.

"The baby is happier at night. She's more active, and it's hard to sleep when she's kicking me."

"I'll make you some ginger honey tea." That seems to help calm the baby down.

Inside the apartment, as I'm making her nighttime drink, Slater holds up her phone from the living room. "Sara's been calling me."

The frown on my face is instant.

"She's pretty remorseful. She was hurt worse by Felipe than me, and I understand getting caught up in wanting someone desperately. I'd probably do worse things to make sure that I got your attention."

"No you wouldn't." But maybe I would. "You stepped right up to my face and propositioned me all on your own. You wouldn't have lied to a friend, watched her date a man you liked, and then went behind her back to sleep with him."

Slater wrinkles her nose as she acknowledges the truth of my words and changes the subject. "What do you know about Escoffier? They sent me an invite to their kitchen to learn how to make beef bourguignon and peach Melba. I've never had peach

Melba before, and no one can make beef bourguignon better than you.”

Slater’s given up reviewing restaurants and instead goes to various eateries and has them teach her—and her over a million subscribers—how to cook the restaurant’s signature dish. She gets invites from places all over the world. After she has the baby, we’ll start traveling to other countries. Slater’s pretty stoked about it, and I’m thrilled for her.

I grin at her compliment. “Peach Melba is poached peaches with a raspberry sauce served with vanilla ice cream.”

“Yum. That sounds amazing.”

“I’ll make some right now.” I’ve heard that tone in her voice before. It’s the one she gets when a craving strikes her. We’re in the twentieth week of her pregnancy, so it’s one I’ve heard frequently before. I reach for the fruit bowl and grab three fresh peaches. We’re lucky it’s peach season.

“Really?”

“Chef Escoffier made this dish for the opera singer Nellie Melba. Originally it was only poached peaches and ice cream, which he served on the back of a carved ice swan.” I heat a saucepan with two parts water to two parts sugar with a pod of vanilla, a stick of cinnamon, and when it’s boiling, a squeeze of lemon juice. “He later added raspberry. Some say it was to add tartness. Others for color.” In another pan, I place frozen raspberries, water, sugar, and lemon juice, cooking it down until it forms a nice syrup. “Famously, Ferran Adrià, one of the leaders of gastronomical cooking, made this dish at his last service before he retired from the restaurant business.” I poach the peaches in the syrup until they are tender but still firm and then transfer them to an ice bath. “He had silicon molds made that looked like a peach stone and then, using the mold, recreated three stones from almonds, peaches, and

almond milk, which he freeze-dried and then served with a peach crust and custard.”

After the peaches are peeled, cut, and placed on top of the vanilla ice cream, I carry the dessert over to Slater with a cup of the ginger tea. “Not as pretty or innovative as Adria, but it will do in a pinch.”

Slater’s eyes roll back as she takes the first bite. “If I hadn’t agreed to marry you before, this would have convinced me.”

“Now you tell me.” I steal a kiss between bites. “Mmm, you taste good.”

“It’s the raspberry sauce.”

“No, it’s you.” I take the spoon from her fingers and dip it into the ice cream until the metal is good and cold. Her eyes widen as she watches me unbutton her shirt and push the fabric to the side. “I’ll do a taste test.”

I place the frozen spoon on her bare tit. Her cry of surprise turns to a moan when my lips warm up her cold skin. “Now for the comparison.” I scoop out a small portion of ice cream and raspberry sauce and spread it all over her lush breast. “Pretty good,” I admit after licking it all off.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

“You’re a demon,” she pants. Her fingers pull at my T-shirt. “And I’m going to be so mad if you don’t get your clothes off immediately.”

“I’m not done with my experiment yet. I’ve still got other areas to explore.” I slide the spoon under her waistband and down between her legs until the cold heats up against her hot pussy. Her hands move from my shirt to my head. I laugh against the rise of her belly. “Thought we were taking my clothes off.”

“New plan.” She widens her legs. “I thought you always liked dessert before bed.”

“Oh, baby, you know me so well.” Like I said before, there’s no creation on earth that I could concoct that would be better than Slater’s honey. If she hadn’t come on to me first, I would have kidnapped her and held her captive in my lair, feeding her peach Melba and beef bourguignon until she agreed to be my bride. But fate worked in my favor.

Her dirty martini led to a proposition, which led to a baby. We made a heart connection, and it can’t ever be broken because love is what binds us together. The love that’s sweet and sticky, savory and salty, all the good flavors and seasonings in the world mixed together to create an explosive, lasting concoction that only Slater and I will have ever tasted. Love’s our ultimate dish, the only thing we will ever need on that plate called life.

Epilogue

SLATER

“Those things are pumped?” Frankie pokes my boob, making me laugh.

“It’s the dress.” I tug at the top, trying to cover up some of my girls that are trying to escape. “And I have a real bra on.” I swear for the past five years I’ve been pregnant. Not that I’m mad about it. I’m not complaining that my husband can’t keep his hands off me.

After we had our first, I knew I wanted more, and if I was going to have them, then I wanted them close together. Brooks was more than pleased to help me with this plan. But now the baby shop is closed, I think. No, it is. Maybe.

Holy hell, am I really having this inner fight with myself again? I can't let Brooks know. He will one thousand percent have another bun in the oven if he even gets an inkling that I’m leaning toward having another one.

“It’s not the dress. You’ve always had those sexy curves.” Her comments remind me of what a good friend she is. She’s a girl's girl, always uplifting women. I consider myself lucky to have her in my life. That goes for all of the women I met through Brooks.

I grab the door to Hot Spot, opening it for Frankie and me. We see Luna and Nat right away, waving us over. I’ve been to Hot Spot dozens of times before. It is a bar they frequented for happy hour before any of them found their husbands. In fact, they met them there.

What’s exciting about tonight is that for the first time all of us are at happy hour and not one of us is pregnant. Well, at least the last time I checked. These pregnancies pop up all the time in this group. I guess we will know sooner than later based on what everyone is drinking.

"I already ordered drinks." Luna gestures toward the two cocktails placed in front of

the extra chairs that are meant for us. By the looks of it, everyone else also has a cocktail in front of them, which means no babies on the way.

"Thanks." I sit down, pulling out my phone to take a couple of pictures. I see a text from my mom, sending a picture of our little ones. She is always good about keeping us updated when she watches them. I trust her, but it's nice reassurance.

"I need this after today." Frankie downs half the drink.

"Did something happen?" I ask, picking up my drink to take a sip. Another text pops up; this one is from my husband. All the men are at poker night. They hadn't been too excited about going to poker and us going out for happy hour.

Brooks inquired about the origin of the term "happy hour" and questioned my ability to maintain happiness in his absence during this said hour. God, I love that man so much. He's so over the top but in an adorable way.

"My daughter is a mini me but has the speed of her father," Frankie exclaims.

"Oh shit." We all laugh.

"It might drive you crazy now, but she'll be a force to be reckoned with." Luna raises her glass to that. If anyone is a force to be reckoned with, it's Luna. She is always so soft and sweet, very put together. When you learn of her past and upbringing, it tells you so much more about her.

"This is true." Frankie clicks her glass with Luna's.

I check my texts from Brooks inquiring if I'm happy or not. He's really not going to let that go. I pick up my phone and take a picture of myself, sending it to him.

I bite my lip knowing he's going to comment on my dress. That wasn't what I was wearing when I left. Well, the bottom is. I had a cardigan covering up the girls still trying to escape.

It's not but a couple seconds later and he's texting me back with my own picture. Just my cleavage is visible in the first cropped selfie. The next is the same selfie of me again, but it's focused on a table of men behind us. They are all staring our way.

All the ladies' phones start going off at once. "The hell?" Nat snags hers off the table. "Dylan is demanding I send a selfie." She shakes her head.

"Really?" Luna leans over to look at her phone. "Graham wants to know if I'm still in the white dress he dropped me off in."

Frankie's phone is going off too. I see it's Kaden. She merely turns it over, face down, smirking. She gets a kick out of ruffling Kaden's feathers and knows ignoring him will definitely do it.

"How long is the drive from here to where the guys are playing poker?" Nat asks. Luna's eyes bounce over to the table behind me, and I know Brooks must have told the others about them in my picture.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:05 am

"It takes ten minutes to navigate city traffic at this time of day," Frankie answers.

"Unless you're on foot and married to a quarterback who can do the forty-yard dash in under five seconds," Luna adds. I didn't know she even paid attention to football, but I should have known better. Luna is thoughtful, and I'm sure she talked to Kaden about it before. I only remember that he's a quarterback and won some Super Bowls.

"4.57 seconds." Frankie corrects.

"My apologies." Luna laughs.

"What do you mean we have to leave?" We all turn at the sound of a man's voice getting loud. All the men from the table behind us are now standing and arguing with a server and, I think, the bar's manager.

"We're sorry, but you need to leave," the manager tells them.

"What the hell did we even do?" The man throws his hands up, his face getting red. The other men at the table start putting their suit coats on, talking about another bar down the street.

"We have the right to refuse service. If you leave now, your bill will be comped. If you don't leave, we'll have to call the police for trespassing."

They are all pissed, but they leave.

"Did they do that?" I ask. Luna's cheeks turn pink. If anyone could get those men out

of this building that quickly, it would be her husband. His family does own half the buildings in this city.

"Six minutes!" Nat chirps. "Did they run or just drive fast?" I follow her line of sight to see all of our husbands walking into the bar. They focus their attention on us. They slow their steps when they see we are watching them.

"Ladies," Graham says with a nod as though they didn't just run a group of men out of here. "Oh, an open table," he says, acting innocent as he pulls out one of the chairs at the table all of the men vacated. "We can push these together."

Brooks bypasses that table, snags a chair, and sets it down right next to me. "Sweetness." He smiles, leaning in to kiss me. I don't scold him for busting into our girls' night. It's adorable and sweet. How can we be upset when our husbands always want to be with us?

"You purposely ignore me, so I'll do this shit." Kaden plucks Frankie right out of her chair and sits down with her in his lap.

"You're so annoying," she huffs but wiggles in his lap to get comfortable.

"I missed you." Brooks kisses the shell of my ear. I tilt my head so he can give me a few more.

"Did you win?"

"Yes." He hooks his foot under my chair, pulling me close to him so that I'm between his open thighs.

"How much?"

"How much?" he repeats.

“How much did you win playing cards?”

“We didn’t play,” Dylan says as he slides a pair of mittens on Nat.

“You said you won.”

“I did win; I’m here with you.” I turn my head to stare into Brooks's eyes. He’s dead serious; it’s not him joking or teasing. Yeah, there is so going to be another baby being made tonight. I glance around the table, watching the girls with their husbands. Everyone is laughing and smiling.

The server comes over, placing two dirty martinis down in front of us. We both hate them, but old habits and fate have us drinking them.

Brooks isn’t the sole winner in this. We both hit the jackpot when it comes to love.