

The Heart System #Chapter 281 - Read The Heart

System Chapter 281

Chapter 281: Chapter 281

I raised my hand and knocked once. Solid. Measured. Loud enough to be heard, not loud enough to beg.

Then I waited.

Nala stood half a step behind me, close enough that I could feel her presence at my back, her posture straight, composed, CEO calm layered over quiet fury. If this turned into a negotiation, she was the blade I trusted. If it turned into something uglier, I'd handle the rest.

"So this is Anotta's place..." She murmured to herself.

The villa itself felt like a statement before the door even opened. Marble floors under my boots, tall white pillars framing the hallway, art that looked expensive enough to be insured separately. Even the air smelled curated—faint perfume, clean wood, something floral and cold. Money lived here. Power lounged comfortably in every corner.

Two guards stood at attention on either side of the door ahead of us. Black suits, earpieces, hands folded loosely but ready. They didn't look at us. They didn't need to.

From inside, a woman's voice carried through the thick door, smooth and amused.

"Come in, Marlowe."

One of the guards reached out immediately, opening the door inward.

We stepped through. The room beyond wasn't an office like how I initially thought.

It was a bedroom—huge, opulent, unapologetically indulgent. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined one wall, sheer curtains drawn just enough to let the afternoon light spill in. A king-sized bed dominated the center, dressed in dark silk sheets that caught the light like liquid. A chandelier hung above, crystal catching fire from the sun. Plush chairs sat near a low table scattered with jewelry and a half-finished glass of something amber.

And near the far wall, framed by a vanity crowded with makeup, brushes, and small bottles of perfume, sat Anotta.

She faced the mirror, back to us, one leg crossed slowly over the other as she applied eyeliner with a steady hand. Her short silver hair was tied back neatly, exposing the line of her neck. She wore a long black dress that clung to her body like it had been tailored

with intent—high slit revealing one toned thigh, low back dipping just enough to promise more without giving it away. Elegant. Dangerous. Sexy in a way that didn't ask permission.

Her reflection met mine in the mirror as we entered. The guard closed the door behind us with a soft click. Anotta didn't turn around.

She didn't rush.

She simply continued what she was doing, as if we were furniture that had always been there.

I stepped forward and stopped a few feet behind her, crossing my arms. Nala stayed at my side, her expression unreadable, eyes sharp.

"I need your help," I said.

Anotta didn't react. Her hand didn't falter. She leaned in closer to the mirror, fixing a small detail near the corner of her eye.

"I really need your help," I added, my voice firmer.

Silence stretched, thick and intentional.

Finally, she spoke, still not looking at us directly.

"About what, I wonder, Marlowe."

Nala shifted slightly, her heels clicking once against the floor. "Carrie Beldenwary," she said. "She took someone precious to us."

That earned a pause. Anotta's hand stopped mid-motion. Just for a second. Then she resumed, slow and unbothered.

"Who might that be?"

"Kim," I said. "You don't know her. But she's valuable to me. And I want her back."

Anotta's lips curved faintly. She met my eyes again through the mirror.

"I'm not Carrie," she said coolly. "As you can see. And, again, as you can see, Kim isn't here."

"I need help," I said. "To bring Carrie down."

Her eyebrow lifted, elegant and mocking. "You want my help?"

"Yes."

She chuckled under her breath, finally setting the makeup pencil down. "Carrie and I go a long way back. Three years. Maybe four. Why would I betray her?"

"You know something," I said. "You always do."

She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs the other way, studying her reflection like she was judging the world itself. "Each time shit hits the fan, you come to me. I refuse to help you. And somehow, you win anyway."

"This time is different," I said. "There's no room for error. One mistake and Kim is gone. I can't afford that. That's why you're going to help me."

Her smile sharpened. "Going to?"

I met her gaze without blinking. "Or you'll be my next target. I won't stop until you have nothing left, Anotta."

The air shifted. Nala gave me a side glance, like wondering what the hell I was doing.

Anotta stared at me through the mirror, expression unreadable. A moment passed. Then another. Her fingers tapped once against the vanity.

Then she laughed.

Low. Soft. Dangerous.

She lifted a hand, covering her mouth briefly, as if catching herself before the sound got too loud. When she lowered it, her smile was gone.

"Tom isn't her real son," she said.

Nala stiffened beside me. "What?"

"Step-son," Anotta continued calmly. "Carrie never married again after her husband died. She couldn't have children. Doctors told her it was impossible."

I frowned. "Then Tom...?"

"He was taken from an orphanage," Anotta said, finally turning in her chair to face us fully. "She picked him herself. He was young, malleable. She raised him like an investment."

She stood up, smoothing the front of her dress, then walked a slow, unhurried circle as she spoke.

"Three years ago, Tom was involved in an accident. Late night. Heavy rain. He was drunk. Not tipsy—drunk. He shouldn't have been driving at all."

"Shit... how did it happen?"

"He was speeding through an intersection," Anotta went on. "Didn't see the pedestrian crossing. Hit her head-on."

Nala inhaled quietly beside me.

"She died instantly," Anotta said. "Just a woman on her way home. Her name was Elena Menlin."

"The husband?" I asked.

"Mark Menlin," Anotta replied. "Construction engineer. Ordinary man. No influence, no protection. He lost his wife and got a lawyer who didn't fight very hard."

She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Carrie handled it," Anotta said. "She paid for the funeral. Paid the hospital anyway, even though it was pointless. Then paid Mark directly. Enough money that he didn't push for charges. Enough that the case quietly disappeared."

"So Tom walked," I said.

"Yes," Anotta answered. "License revoked. Some paperwork. No trial. No prison. No consequences that mattered."

"Fucking Tom," I muttered.

"Carrie buried it," Anotta said evenly. "She does that well."

She turned back toward her vanity.

"This information isn't free," she added. "Project Phoenix. I want everything. Structure, development process, long-term plan."

"Deal," Nala said immediately.

I glanced at her. She didn't hesitate.

"Where is Mark Menlin now?" I asked.

"East of here, Vanguin Street," Anotta replied. "Small apartment. Drinks too much. Keeps his head down."

I nodded. "I'll talk to him."

"Convince him to reopen a dead case?" Anotta said with a small shrug. "Good luck. We have a saying. Деньги не пахнут."

"What does that mean?" Nala asked.

"Money doesn't smell," Anotta said, already returning to her makeup. "Now go. I need to get ready."

I exhaled quietly, tension sitting heavy but controlled.

"Hmm..."

We stepped out of Anotta's bedroom together.

I paused in the corridor for a second, watching as one of the guards closed the door behind us. The soft click echoed more than it should have. I stared at the door, then shook my head and turned away.

Nala fell into step beside me.

The corridor was long and quiet, dark wood panels on the walls and low lights near the floor casting soft shadows. Thick carpets swallowed the sound of our footsteps as we headed toward the stairs. The whole place felt too calm for what I was thinking about.

We reached the top of the staircase. As we started down, Nala pulled out her phone and immediately called someone.

We went down a few steps.

No answer.

She pulled the phone away, frowned at the screen, then tried again. The call rang longer this time.

"Damn it," she muttered. "Kim. Pick up..."

"She's not answering me either," I said quietly. "I've been trying all morning."

Nala ended the call with a sharp movement, jaw tight, and slipped the phone back into her pocket.

We reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed the wide foyer toward the main doors. A maid hurried ahead of us and opened them before we reached the handle.

Cold air rushed in immediately.

We stepped outside, and the wind hit us full force. Snow whipped sideways, stinging my face as I lowered my head and walked faster.

The villa's garden looked unreal under the storm. Perfect hedges buried in white, stone paths barely visible, statues half-covered in snow. Tall trees bent under the wind, shedding powder with every gust.

Our car was parked near the edge of the circular driveway, close to a row of decorative lanterns that barely cut through the snowfall. We hurried toward it, boots crunching against packed snow.

I unlocked the car and we climbed in quickly, shutting the doors against the wind. The silence inside felt heavy.

I started the engine, turned the heater up, and eased the car forward. Snow slid off the roof as the iron gates slowly opened ahead of us.

We rolled through, and the gates closed behind us with a dull metallic sound.

As I drove, the surroundings shifted into wide, quiet streets lined with high walls, security cameras, and tall trees. This part of the city was all estates and privacy. No shops. No people. Just money and distance.

I kept the speed low, steady, manually holding it around twenty so the tires wouldn't lose grip. The road was slick, and the wind made the car rattle every now and then.

I rubbed my face with one hand, then put it back on the wheel.

"You were quick to accept that deal," I said.

"Deal?" Nala asked.

"Project Phoenix," I said. "You really just gave it to her."

"A project isn't more valuable than Kim," she replied immediately.

I glanced at her.

"Besides," she continued, looking out the windshield, "Project Phoenix is an idea. I can always build another one."

I bit my lip, my shoulders easing without me noticing. "Thank you," I said. "Really."

"I don't need a thank you," she said softly. "I need Kim back in the penthouse. I need us together. It sounds strange, but... we're a family. In a twisted way."

I smiled faintly and kept driving.

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The storm got worse as we moved farther from the villa. Snow thickened, wind pushing hard against the car. I stayed careful with the steering, not pushing it.

Nala watched the snow streak past the window, then exhaled. "Got a cigarette?"

"Jacket pocket," I said, shifting slightly.

She leaned in, grabbed the pack, took one, lit it, then slipped the pack back into my pocket. She wasn't really a smoker, but moments like this did it to her.

"You should've told me about Carrie," she said, blowing a thick smoke.

"I know," I replied. "I'm sorry. I thought I could handle it."

"We'll fix this," she said.

"Yeah," I muttered, nodding. "We will."

I kept my eyes on the road as the car moved through the snow.

The storm got worse by the second. Snow slammed into the windshield so hard the wipers could barely keep up. Even on the fastest setting, they weren't doing much more than smearing white across the glass. The road ahead was a blur of gray and shadow.

I slowed down even more, easing my foot off the gas.

Nala took another drag from the cigarette and stared out the window.

"Evan," she said, exhaling smoke. "It's really getting worse. Should we stop?"

"I can't stop while Kim is out there," I said. "Sorry."

I kept going.

The car suddenly jolted to the side. A dull thump came from below as the tires bumped against a sidewalk I hadn't seen under the snow.

"Evan!" Nala snapped. "We should stop."

"Look, I've got it," I said, gripping the wheel tighter. "I'll just—"

Another gust of wind slammed into the car, rocking it slightly. Visibility dropped even more, and my jaw clenched.

I pulled over.

The engine stayed running, the heater blasting, the wipers still fighting a losing battle. I leaned forward and smacked the steering wheel twice, hard.

"Fuck."

Nala immediately put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey. Come on," she said calmly. "Let's just wait it out."

I exhaled sharply, then nodded once. "Fuck... okay. Okay. You're right."

"Good."

I rubbed my face and glanced at the dashboard. "I'll get us to the nearest hotel."

I tapped the screen, pulled up the map, and selected the closest one. Just a few blocks away.

I eased the car back onto the road and drove even slower this time, barely pushing it forward.

"I know you want Kim back as soon as possible," Nala said gently, taking another drag. "But crashing into something won't help that. Or worse—crashing into someone."

"I know," I said. "I just... lost my cool for a second. I'm sorry."

She smiled faintly. "I understand. That's why I'm here, aren't I?"

I let out a short chuckle. "Yeah. Yeah."

"Now drive even slower," she added, glancing at the dashboard. "I don't want to damage this thing more than it already is."

"Hm," I muttered. "That rear-end was bad."

"Woman driver," she shrugged, then shot me a sideways look.

"I'm not agreeing with that," I said. "Feels like you're setting me up."

"I am," she said. "Good job."

I chuckled and focused back on the road—or at least the faint outline of it through the snow—as I carefully guided the car forward.



The closest hotel took more than half an hour to reach. The roads were so bad I had to crawl forward, hands tight on the wheel, eyes aching from staring through sheets of snow. One of the roundabouts was a mess—traffic lights completely dead, two buses stuck at awkward angles, a truck jackknifed near the curb. I took the longer route, slower, safer, cursing under my breath the entire way.

When we finally arrived, I parked, killed the engine, and sat there for a second before moving. My shoulders felt like stone.

I pushed the door open, the cold air biting at my back as I stepped into the warm lobby. Nala shook off the snow from her coat, eyes darting around the dull, faded space. The hotel was... not good, not terrible. Exactly what you'd expect from a place that survived on business travelers and bad weather. The receptionist, a middle-aged woman with heavy glasses perched on the tip of her nose, barely looked up from the desk as I approached.

"Checking in?" she asked, voice flat.

"Yeah, one room," I replied.

She gave a quick nod, her fingers tapping on the keyboard with no hurry. "ID?"

I handed it over, sliding it across the counter. Nala shifted from foot to foot beside me, clearly not impressed with the place. Her eyes flicked to the flickering overhead lights, then to the worn-out carpet underfoot.

"Any issues with the heat?" I asked, trying to make small talk while the woman took her sweet time.

"The heat's fine," she answered, sounding like she was reading from a manual. "Just... don't touch the thermostat. Some of the rooms get a bit... finicky."

I gave a short nod, not wanting to drag this out longer than necessary. After a few more seconds, she finally slid a key across the counter—room 214, second floor.

"Breakfast is from seven to nine. No pets allowed," she added, with a kind of finality in her tone.

I pocketed the key and glanced at Nala. She looked at the worn-out lobby with mild disdain.

"Well, it's not a five-star," I muttered, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yep."

I laughed dryly and nodded toward the staircase. "Yeah, but it's the best we've got for now."

We made our way to the second floor, the wooden steps creaking underfoot. The hallway smelled faintly of old cleaning products and stale air. I unlocked the door to 214, and we stepped inside.

Inside the room, the heat hit us first.

The room was modest. A queen-sized bed sat in the center against the far wall, white sheets tucked neatly, a dark wooden headboard with two small lamps mounted on either side. To the left was a narrow desk with a chair pushed in, a TV mounted above it. A luggage rack stood folded near the door. Beige curtains covered the window, but a strip of city lights still leaked through. The carpet was clean, a little worn, and the air smelled faintly of detergent and heater dust.

I dropped my coat on the chair, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled my phone out again.

I called Kim. Again. Straight to voicemail.

"Fuck..." I muttered, letting the phone drop into my hand.

Nala took her coat off, shook the snow from it, and hung it on the hook near the door. She came over and sat beside me, close enough that our knees touched.

We both looked toward the window. Snow battered the glass sideways, streetlights barely visible.

"The forecasters say it'll take some time to clear," she said quietly. "We're stuck here until midnight."

"Shit," I said. "Great. Kim's gone, and we're stuck in this place."

She stood up and turned to face me, hands on her hips, studying my face.

"Okay," she said. "Come on."

"What?"

"Let's take a bath," she said simply. "The snow's drying on us. We'll catch a cold by midnight if we don't."

I exhaled, then took her hand and stood. "You're right."

We walked to the bathroom together and I pushed the door open.

It was small but clean. White tiles, a wide mirror over the sink, folded towels stacked neatly on a shelf. The bathtub was tucked along the far wall with a glass divider, a simple showerhead above it. Steam still lingered faintly from the heating system.

We started to undress, slow and quiet. Nala shrugged out of her sweater, the fabric sliding down her arms, her hair falling loose around her shoulders. She caught me looking and smiled faintly, the tension in her eyes softening just a little. I pulled off my pants, then my shirt, tossing them aside.

I turned the water on, adjusting it until steam rose and the sound filled the room.

When we stepped in, the heat wrapped around us instantly.

Hot water poured over my shoulders, loosening muscles I didn't realize I'd locked so tight. I closed my eyes for a moment, breathing it in. Nala stood close, her back against my chest, the warmth and closeness grounding in a way nothing else had been all day.

For a few seconds, everything else faded—the storm, Carrie, the fear.

Just heat, steam, and the quiet sound of water.

Nala grabbed the shampoo bottle, poured a generous amount into her palms, and worked it into a thick lather. Then she pressed her front to my back, her full tits sliding up my skin, slick with bubbles.

She moved slowly, using her breasts to wash my back—up and down, side to side, nipples dragging over my muscles. The foam spread everywhere, warm and slippery.

I let my head fall back, eyes closing, relaxing into it. "Fuck, that feels good."

Her tits circled lower, over my shoulder blades, then down to the small of my back. My cock, already half-interested, stiffened fully, throbbing against my thigh.

One hand snaked around from behind, fingers wrapping around my shaft. She started jerking me off slow and steady, grip perfect, bubbles making everything glide.

"So tense," Nala whispered into my ear, breath hot. "Let's get you all relaxed and soft."

"Oh..." I groaned, hips rocking into her hand.

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She kept stroking, thumb swiping over the head on every upstroke, while her tits kept massaging my back. Then she stepped around in front of me, water streaming down her body, and dropped to her knees on the tile.

Her dark eyes locked on mine as she took my cock into her mouth in one smooth motion.

"Fuck—" I hissed.

She sucked deep, cheeks hollowing, tongue swirling around the head before sliding down again. I put one hand on her wet hair, guiding gently, moving in rhythm with her.

"So fucking hard," she murmured around me, pulling back just enough to speak, spit stringing from her lips to my tip. "So delicious. I love this cock."

She dove back down, taking me deeper, humming so the vibration shot straight through me. My cock throbbed harder in her mouth.

Nala pulled off with a wet pop, looked up at me with that wicked smile, and moved lower. She cupped my balls, lifted them gently, and sucked one into her mouth—warm, wet suction, tongue rolling slow circles. Then the other, sucking harder, pulling just enough to make my knees weak. She alternated, licking the seam, tracing every ridge with the flat of her tongue, all while her hand kept stroking my shaft in perfect rhythm.

"God, your balls are so full," she murmured against them, voice muffled. "Love tasting you here... love how heavy they feel on my tongue."

I groaned, fingers tightening in her hair.

She moved back up, spat on my cock, a thick stream that made me twitch, then took me deep again, throat opening until her nose was close to pressing to my pelvis.

"You're getting good at this," I rasped. "Spitting like that. Taking me all the way."

She pulled off just long enough to smirk up at me. "Wonder why?"

"Can you... go deeper, Nala?"

She sank down again, trying to take me even deeper. She gagged halfway, eyes watering, and pulled back coughing, hand still pumping me fast.

"Ugh... god," she laughed, wiping her mouth. "Did I bite you?"

"A little," I chuckled. "No complaints. Feel free to try again."

"No thanks." She turned on her knees, got on all fours right there on the wet tile, water pouring down her back. She looked over her shoulder and shook her ass slowly, hypnotizing. "Think it's time for the main course."

I slapped her ass hard, the crack echoing off the glass.

"Finally."

I crouched behind her, hands on her hips, thumbs spreading her ass cheeks wide. The sight of her—pussy glistening, pink and swollen, asshole tight and perfect—made my mouth water. I leaned in and dragged my tongue up her slit in one long, slow lick.

Nala shuddered, a low moan echoing off the tile.

Erogenous Insight lit up like a map in my head—every sensitive spot glowing. Her ass cheeks were the brightest. I pulled back, gave one a sharp slap. The crack rang out; her flesh jiggled, turning pink instantly.

Nala chuckled, breathless. "Again."

I slapped the other cheek harder. She pushed back against my face.

I dove in again, tongue fucking her pussy deep, then flattening against her clit in quick flicks. I licked like I was starving—long strokes, short teases, sucking her lips into my mouth before plunging back inside.

"God, your tongue," she gasped. "Eat me... just like that..."

I kept going, relentless, hands spreading her wider. She rocked back, grinding against my mouth.

"I'm gonna cum—" she warned, voice shaking.

I pulled back just long enough to growl, "I haven't even put my dick in you yet."

"Oh god, shut up and lick my cunt!"

I buried my face again, tongue lashing her clit, two fingers sliding inside to curl against her front wall. She came hard—body locking, a sharp cry bouncing off the walls, pussy pulsing, gushing over my tongue.

I licked her clean, savoring every drop, then smiled. My cock throbbed, slick with pre-cum. I lined up and pushed into her in one deep thrust.

Nala moaned, head dropping forward. "Fuck, yes... fill me."

I started slow, long strokes that dragged every inch out, then slammed back in. The wet slap echoed loud.

Then faster. Hips snapping, balls hitting her clit with every thrust.

"Harder," she begged. "Fuck me harder."

I gripped her hips and pounded, the sound wet and obscene. Her legs started buckling; she sank lower until her tits pressed flat to the tile, ass still high, back arched perfectly.

I slid one hand under her tummy, lifted her hips just enough to keep the angle, and kept fucking her like that—her chest and cheek on the ground, ass in the air, my cock driving deep from behind.

"You love this, don't you?" I rasped, voice rough against her ear. "Love being fucked on the floor like my dirty girl."

"Yes—fuck—love it—" she panted, pushing back to meet every thrust.

"Good girl."

She was close again fast, breath hitching. "Evan... I'm—"

"Cum for me again," I ordered, slapping her ass sharp. The crack echoed off the tile. "Milk this cock."

Her legs shook harder. "I love your cock... can't live without it... oh fuck, make me cum, Evan—make me cum—"

I went harder, balls slapping her clit loud and wet with every stroke.

She screamed, body seizing, pussy clamping down as she came again, gushing around me in hot waves.

I slapped her ass once more, the flesh jiggling under my palm, turning a deeper red. I went even faster, hips pistoning, the wet slap of our bodies filling the shower.

Not even thirty seconds passed and Nala was already climbing again, voice breaking. "Fuck—your cock—make me cum again, Evan. Please, please, please. Oh fuck, right there. Fuck me, ruin me."

"What a good CEO you are, huh?"

"Yes, fuck this CEO." She moaned. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!"

I slammed into her with everything I had, balls smacking her clit hard enough to sting, water splashing everywhere.

"Evan... Evan... EVAN!"

She came again, legs buckling completely, a raw scream tearing from her throat as her pussy spasmed wildly, squeezing me like she wanted to trap me forever.

Nala was hornier than ever now, voice hoarse and desperate. "Yes! Fuck me! Slap my fucking ass—fuck me harder—harder!"

I slapped her ass again, the crack echoing off the tile like a gunshot, her flesh jiggling under my palm, turning a deep, angry red. She screamed for more, body writhing beneath me, pussy clenching with every hit.

I used every last bit of strength, gripping her hips like vices, fingers digging bruises into her skin, and pounded into her like an animal. Skin slapping skin, wet and relentless, the rhythm brutal and fucking unforgiving. Water splashed everywhere, steam thick as fog, the air heavy with the scent of sex and soap.

She moaned nonstop, broken and needy, pushing back as much as she could from her position on the ground.

But then Nala twisted, shoving up off the tile with surprising force. "Oh, come here..."

She scrambled up, spun around, and jumped me like a woman possessed. Her legs wrapped around my waist, arms around my neck, mouth crashing into my shoulder, biting it, licking it—savoring me. I staggered back, my back slamming into the shower wall with a thud, cold tile shocking my skin.

As I slightly parted my legs while I was sitting, she reached down, grabbed my cock, and sank down onto it in one desperate drop. "Fuck yes—need this cock—need it now!"

I groaned, hands flying to her ass, squeezing hard as she started bouncing like a horny dog in heat, fast and frantic, pussy swallowing me whole with every slam. Her tits bounced against my chest, nipples scraping my skin, water making everything slick and messy.

I met her with rough hands, gripping her ass cheeks and lifting her up, then slamming her down to meet my upward thrusts. The new position let me hit even deeper, the head of my cock grinding against her cervix every time.

"That's it, Nala—ride me like the slut you are," I growled, slapping her ass again, the sound amplified by the water. "Take this cock. Own it. Fuck me like you can't get enough."

"I can't—fuck, I can't—your cock is everything—fill me, Evan—fuck my brains out!"

She moved even faster, hips rolling in wild circles, clit grinding against my base with every drop. Her nails raked down my back, drawing blood, but the pain only made me thrust harder.

She was close again—thighs trembling, breath coming in short, desperate gasps.
"Evan—close—gonna cum—oh god—"

"Cum for me one more time," I rasped, one hand sliding up to pinch her nipple hard, the other still slapping her ass in rhythm with our thrusts. "Let me feel this pussy break. Come all over my cock like the perfect girl you are."

"UGHHH..."

It hit her like a storm.

Nala's whole body locked up, eyes rolling back, a raw, guttural scream ripping from her throat as her pussy spasmed wildly around me. She came so intense it was like she shattered—legs shaking violently, back arching so hard her tits thrust up, a hot gush flooding down my cock and soaking my balls. Her nails dug deeper into my shoulders, body convulsing in waves that seemed endless, tears mixing with the shower water on her cheeks as she sobbed my name over and over.

I was right there.

"I'm gonna... Nala..."

"Do it inside," she begged, voice cracking through her aftershocks. "Breed me with your cock, Evan—I want it so bad—fill me up—"

"Oh... SHIT—I'M—"

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I slammed up into her so hard the sound nearly cracked the bathroom mirror. My cock throbbed deep inside, pulsing hard as I came, thick, hot ropes flooding her pussy one after another. I groaned loud and long, hips jerking with every spurt, pushing deeper to empty everything I had.

One more thrust. Then another. Then another, grinding slow to milk the last drops from my balls.

"Take it all," I rasped, voice wrecked. "Every fucking drop... feel me filling you up... my perfect girl..."

- Sexual Activity Completed

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Partner: Nala

EXP Gained: +410

Big-Hearted Bonus: +50

Star Rating: 4.1 ★★★★★

Reason: -

=====

Bliss Multiplier: 41c

Mystery Chest Earned

Nala, still sitting on my cock, looked down while panting, thighs trembling around my hips. Cum had overflowed from her pussy, thick white streaks running down my thighs and pooling on the tile beneath us.

She scooped up a dollop with two fingers, brought it to her lips, and licked it clean slow and deliberate, eyes locked on mine.

"Delicious," she murmured, voice husky, then scooped more and licked again, tongue swirling like she was savoring every drop.

"Hey," I chuckled, voice rough. "No kissing until you brush your teeth."

"I mean, I suck it all the time," she teased, scooping one last bit and sucking her fingers clean. "It's not disgusting when it's you."

"I'd rather not taste my own dick, thank you very much," I said, grinning.

We stayed like that for a while, her on my lap, my back against the wall, water still pouring down around us. The heat between us cooled slowly, smiles fading as reality crept back in.

Kim was still gone. Carrie was out there, circling. This had been the perfect distraction, but it wasn't enough. I needed Kim back—needed to see her sleepy smile every morning, the same way I needed all of them.

"Come on," Nala said eventually, voice softer now, serious but still smiling. "Let's wash each other and dry off."

"Hmm," I agreed, wrapping my arms around her waist.

Evan Marlowe (Lvl 13)

=====

Age: 21

Height: 180 cm

Weight: 75 kg

=====

EXP: [██████████] 447/4556

♥□♥□♥□

I was actually lucky, for once.

The Mystery Chest I earned from that night with Nala gave me a solid 100 credits. A little richer than yesterday—couldn't complain about that. And since I'd leveled up, the Shop had updated too. Another page unlocked.

Good. New items meant new opportunities.

I was lying on the bed, propped against a pillow, staring at the ceiling. Or maybe past it. My thoughts weren't really attached to anything in the room. They kept drifting back to Kim. To the letter. To the ultrasound.

Bad scenarios kept replaying in my head, each one worse than the last.

SHOP [Page 2]

=====

- Hypnotic Perfume (40c)
- Time Stop (90c)
- 500 Dollars (50c)
- 1 Ability Point (150c)
- 1 Mastery Point (160c)
- Main Quest Unlock (Bought)
- Desire Aura (100c)
- New Ability (1500c)

=====

Credits: 2323c

A new ability.

I frowned slightly. That sounded... promising. Too promising. What kind of ability even cost that much? And more importantly—would it help me get Kim back? The temptation was real. Way too real.

But no. Rushing was how mistakes happened. I closed the Shop interface and let out a slow breath.

I turned my head to the right. Nala was sleeping peacefully beside me, her breathing slow and steady, completely unaware of the mess in my head. The clock on the wall read 10:00 PM. Outside, the storm had finally started to calm down. The wind wasn't screaming anymore. The snow had softened.

In a few hours, it might actually be safe to go out again.

Good.

No matter how late it got, I needed to visit Mark. I needed to talk to him. About his wife. About reopening the case. I didn't know how I'd convince him—but I had to try.

My phone rang.

I grabbed it instantly from the nightstand, wincing slightly and turning away from Nala so the sound wouldn't wake her. I didn't even check the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Oh my god, Evan." Delilah's voice came through. "I just heard the news. I've been trying to call you, but the storm—no signal. Are you okay?"

"I'm good," I said quietly. "Thanks, Delilah."

"And Kim?" she asked right away. "Did you find her? Why would she just... leave like that? A letter? Seriously? And—she's pregnant?"

"It's... complicated," I said, rubbing my forehead. "Honestly, I don't even know where to start. It's been a complete shitshow since she left. I feel kind of lost right now."

"This Carrie woman," Delilah continued, her tone changing. "I know her. Our company attended one of her charity parties not long ago. She was all smiles. Warm. Charming. I was shocked when I heard... this side of her."

"She's a fucking snake," I said flatly. "The worst kind."

"Yeah..." Delilah exhaled. "So what's your plan?"

I hesitated, then answered. "Carrie's step-son, Tom, was involved in an accident three years ago. Drunk driving. He killed a woman. Carrie paid the husband hush money. No charges. No headlines. He walked."

"Damn," Delilah muttered. "I didn't even know she had a step-son."

"Neither did I," I said. "Neither did I."

I glanced over my shoulder, making sure Nala was still sleeping and I wasn't disturbing her.

"So... how are you holding up? The storm hit hard, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "My bedroom window cracked. I'm staying in Ivy's room for now."

"Shit. You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just exhausted."

"You should take a weekday off," I said. "This weather's brutal."

"We mostly work from home when it's bad," Delilah replied. "At least people aren't messing with me anymore... thanks to you."

"All in a day's work, ma'am," I said lightly. "All in a day's work."

She laughed. "I just imagined you tipping a fedora."

"Who says I didn't?"

She laughed again, then took a deep breath. "Crap—Ivy's coming. I've gotta go."

I grinned. "Wait, shouldn't Ivy be the one who's scared, hiding her secret boyfriend from her mom? You really are a bad mother."

"Oh, shut up," she said, but I could hear the amusement in her voice. "Bye."

The call ended.

I stared at my phone for a moment before lowering it, my mind already drifting back to Kim... and to Carrie.

"Who was it?" Nala asked, turning toward me under the blanket.

"Oh—sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"I was already awake," she said, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

"Huh." I exhaled. "It was Delilah. She asked about Kim... and what my plan was."

Nala watched me for a second. "Yeah," she said quietly. "What is our plan?"

"What do you mean?" I frowned. "We go and talk to Mark Menlin. We ask him to reopen the case."

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she shifted closer, propping herself up on one elbow, her expression careful.

"Evan," she said, calm but firm. "Reopening a cold case isn't that simple."

I sighed. "Okay. Explain."

She nodded once. "First of all, Mark isn't the one who decides that. Even if he wants justice now, the case was officially closed. That means prosecutors already looked at it, accepted the settlement, and moved on."

"So he can't just walk into a police station and say, 'Hey, I changed my mind'?"

"No," she said. "At best, he can request a review. But for that to even be considered, there needs to be something new. New evidence. New testimony. Proof that the original case was mishandled."

I rubbed my face. "And hush money doesn't count as mishandling?"

"It's unethical," she replied. "But not illegal if it was done properly. Especially if Mark accepted it willingly back then."

"What if he didn't?" I asked. "What if he was pressured?"

"That's different," she said slowly. "But pressure is hard to prove years later. Carrie would've covered her tracks. She always does."

"So you're saying this might go nowhere."

"I'm saying," Nala corrected gently, "that this can't be our only angle. Even if Mark agrees to help, it'll take time. Lawyers. Statements. Investigations. Carrie won't sit still while that happens."

I swung my legs off the bed and stood up, pacing once across the room.

"God..." I muttered. "Well, I don't know. I don't have a backup plan."

Nala watched me, quiet, letting me vent.

"This has to work," I continued. "It will work. I don't care how long it takes."

She gave a small smile. "Fingers crossed."

Then she turned her head toward the window. The wind outside had softened, snow falling slower now, almost lazily.

"The storm's clearing," she said. "We should get ready."

"Yeah," I nodded, exhaling. "We should."

Nala stretched slightly and glanced toward the window. "Let's eat something before heading out," she said, her voice calm but tired.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding. I looked around the room for a phone, the kind hotels used to keep on the nightstand for room service, but there was nothing there. I checked the desk, the wall, even near the bed. Nothing. Nala looked as well, then shook her head.

"I guess this isn't that type of hotel, huh?" I said with a small shrug. "You get ready. I'll head downstairs and grab something."

She nodded. "Alright. Don't take too long."

I exhaled and stepped out into the hallway. To my right, a couple was pressed against the wall, kissing clumsily while the guy fumbled with his keycard, clearly too distracted to care where they were. To my left were the stairs, dimly lit and quiet. I went left and headed down.

The lobby was mostly empty, quiet in that late-night way hotels got when the storm outside scared off anyone who didn't absolutely need to be out. I walked up to the front desk and cleared my throat.

"Any chance of getting food this late?" I asked.

She gave an apologetic smile. "Sorry, sir. Kitchen closed two hours ago. Vending machine by the entrance has cold sandwiches and snacks."

I followed her gesture and saw it standing near the glass doors, stocked with bottled drinks and plastic-wrapped cold sandwiches. I exhaled through my nose and walked over without saying anything else. I fed the machine some bills, watched it hum, then crouched down as the sandwiches dropped into the tray.

That was when the door opened.

Her... shit.

Chapter 285: Chapter 285

Cold air rushed in first, sharp and brutal, followed immediately by Carrie and two men flanking her. I straightened in surprise and the sandwiches slipped from my hands, hitting the floor with dull thuds.

"My, Henrik," she said pleasantly as she stepped inside, brushing snow off her long coat like this was a casual visit. "You were hard to follow in this weather, I won't lie."

"Carrie," I said, my jaw tightening. "What are you doing here?"

"I know you went to Anotta," she replied, her tone light. "Come on. Let's talk somewhere more private."

Before I could finish whatever I was about to say, one of the men grabbed my arm hard and hauled me toward the door. They didn't give me time to react. We were outside in seconds.

They were all dressed for the cold, coats zipped, gloves on. I wasn't. The wind cut into me immediately, the storm still raging hard enough to make my skin burn.

"F-fuck," I muttered through chattering teeth. "What are you doing?"

"Drop whatever you're planning," Carrie said as she stepped in front of me. The two men positioned themselves behind me, blocking the door back inside. "And this ends quickly. I was supposed to leave today with Kim, but the pilot said the jet couldn't take off in this weather."

"Leave?" I asked.

"Miami," she said casually. "Or Dubai. Somewhere warm. Not this disgusting country. This disgusting city."

"You won't take Kim with you," I said, my voice shaking from the cold.

She smiled. "I won't?" Then her expression sharpened. "Take off your sweater, Henrik."

"What?"

"One phone call," she said quietly. "And I let ALL of my men have their turn with Kim."

She leaned in close, her breath warm against my ear, her voice full of contempt.

"One FUCKING call."

I stared at her, my hands trembling, then shut my eyes and pulled the sweater over my head. The cold slammed into me instantly, vicious and unforgiving.

"Do you understand who's in control now?" she asked. "Do you really think you're in a position to threaten me?"

"I'll—"

"Your boots," she interrupted. "Now. And the socks. Or my men will... excuse my language, Henrik, or my men will rape the absolute shit out of Kim."

I looked at her, fury burning through me, but I bent down and removed them anyway. My feet hit the snow and the pain was immediate, sharp enough to make my vision blur. The storm hadn't stopped, only slowed, and every second felt worse than the last.

The sky shifted color, a strange pink hue spreading overhead, and suddenly everything froze. The wind stopped, the snow hung motionless in the air, Carrie locked mid-step.

Dierella appeared behind her, wings moving lazily, her face twisted with anger as she pointed straight at Carrie.

"Use Time Stop," she said harshly. "Kill her. Fuck her. Break her."

"No," I said, my voice hoarse, my body still shaking. "Not yet. I need to know Kim is safe first. Then comes whatever comes next."

"She threatened you," Dierella screamed. "She threatened everything you care about."

"No," I said again.

"You can always find a girl like Kim to fill her place!" Dierella screamed. "She is just a fucking meat hole!"

"NO!"

The world snapped back into motion. Carrie stepped away from me, laughing softly. She grabbed my sweater, boots, and socks from my hands and threw them into the street.

"Go get them," she said. "Dog."

She turned, crossed the street, and got into her car. Before it pulled away, she looked back at me with something close to pity and waved once.

I rushed into the street, grabbed my clothes with numb hands, and pulled them back on as fast as I could outside, not caring how I looked. I stumbled back inside, the door slamming shut behind me. My foot caught on something and I went down hard on the floor.

Carrie. Carrie. Carrie.

What she did to me didn't matter. I didn't care about the cold, the humiliation, any of it. But threatening Kim crossed a line she was going to regret crossing.

Nala came down the stairs at a near run. The moment she saw me on the floor, pale and shaking, she yelped and hurried over, the clerk woman rushing out from behind the desk at the same time.

"Oh my god, what happened?" Nala said, dropping to her knees in front of me. Her hands were already on my arms, rubbing warmth into them. "You're freezing. I—I saw you outside through the window and..."

"I'm... I'm good," I said, though my teeth chattered hard enough to make it a lie.

"EVAN, WHAT THE FUCK," she snapped, panic breaking through her composure.

"We'll talk at the car," I said, forcing myself to focus. "Can you help me up?"

"O-okay," she replied, nodding quickly.

She hooked an arm under my shoulder and helped me to my feet while the clerk hovered nearby, asking if she should call someone. I shook my head, coughing once as the air scraped my throat. It was clear she couldn't wait until we got to the car.

I leaned closer to Nala, keeping my voice low since the clerk was right there. "Carrie was here," I whispered. "They were supposed to leave today, but the weather grounded her. If the forecasters are right, we have a few more days to get Kim back."

Nala froze for a second, her jaw tightening. "She... made you do this?"

"Yeah," I muttered, anger buzzing under my skin. "Had me strip outside. Don't worry. I'm fine."

Her eyes darkened. "She's worse than Guy."

"Go upstairs," I said quietly. "Grab my jacket. And... you drive."

"Alright," she said immediately. "I'll do that. Stay here, okay?"

I let out a weak huff. "Not like I'm going anywhere."



As Nala knocked on the door, I leaned my forehead against the cold, cracked wall, letting my shoulders slump under the weight of everything that had happened. I could feel my muscles trembling beneath my jacket, the strain from the climb, the stress from the confrontation, and the overwhelming fatigue that had settled in my bones.

This place was a dump, no elevator, and Mark had to live on the tenth floor. We'd climbed every single step, and after what Carrie had pulled earlier, my legs felt like jelly. I had to stop twice on the way up, my chest tightening, like someone was slowly wrapping their hands around my ribs. The black spots in my vision were starting to fade, but I still felt light-headed.

Footsteps echoed from the other side of the door, sharp and heavy. Then I heard the soft slide of something metal—probably the peephole cover—before a man's voice, wary and irritated, filtered through the wood.

"Who is it at this hour?" His voice was rough, like he'd just woken up. "It's nearly midnight."

"We're here about something important," Nala said, her voice steady, almost disinterested. "It concerns your wife."

"My wife?" Mark's voice shifted from confusion to flatness. "She's been dead for three years. God bless her soul. What do you want?"

"Just to talk about the accident," Nala said, the words clear and precise, like she was briefing a witness. "Please open the door."

"No." Mark's response was firm, almost robotic. "Go away. It's over. She's dead. I've moved on."

I lifted my head, feeling the pulse in my throat. Anger flared up inside me, sharp and immediate. I turned toward the door, my voice tight as I stepped closer. "Did you take the hush money?" I asked, the words full of contempt. "Did you take Carrie's money so you wouldn't push the case, Mark?"

There was a long pause. The silence stretched out, thick and uncomfortable. Finally, he spoke, his voice edged with disbelief. "What?"

"Did you take it?" I pressed, my pulse quickening. "Did you sell the truth for a check? Did you let them bury your wife's murder for a few extra bucks?"

"Who the fuck are you?" Mark's voice cracked with rising frustration.

I was done holding back. I planted my feet in front of the door, leaning into the tension. "Have some guts, Mark," I said, my voice rough but steady. "Don't let your wife's death mean nothing. Don't take the easy way out."

"Ms. Beldenwary and I settled the case," Mark said, his voice flat, almost rehearsed. "The traffic light malfunctioned. The city was at fault. The driver hit her. That's what happened."

"Bullshit." My words cut through the air, direct and cold. I straightened up and stared at the peephole like I could burn a hole through it with my gaze. "You and I both know that isn't true."

"It is the truth," Mark snapped, his tone growing more defensive. "I don't want to continue this conversation. You can both go to hell."

"Do the right thing, Mark," I said, my voice rising with the anger that had been simmering under the surface. "For your wife. Let us help you. Help us reopen the case and—"

"No," he interrupted, the finality in his words like a door slamming shut. "I said no. And now I get why she came here earlier to warn me."

Nala's head snapped toward the door, her eyes narrowing. "She?"

"Yes," Mark said, his voice cold. "Ms. Beldenwary. She reminded me of our agreement. I didn't understand why she showed up tonight, but now I do. It's because of you two. Stop meddling in other people's business."

"Open the door," Nala said, her voice still even, though there was a new edge to it. "Let's talk face to face. We can find a solution."

"Leave me alone." Mark shot back.

"Listen to me," I said, my heart pounding harder now, the anger turning into something darker. "Carrie is dangerous. You know it. I know it. So why hide? Why keep lying for her instead of standing up and—"

"That's exactly why," he cut in, his voice rising with irritation. "Ms. Beldenw—"

"Oh, fuck off. Say her name," I snapped, the words like a whip. "Say Carrie. Stop kissing her ass. Her son killed your wife. Do you really sleep at night knowing you took her money?"

Chapter 286: Chapter 286

There was a long, taut silence. Mark didn't answer at first, and in that quiet, I could feel the weight of the question hanging between us. My fists clenched, and I could almost hear him struggling with the words, with the shame of it all. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and final.

"It's over," Mark said, cold as ice. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

"Mark!" I slammed my fist against the door, the impact sending a jolt up my arm. The sound echoed down the stairwell, bouncing off the walls. "Open it! Mark!"

Nala grabbed my arm, her grip firm but not aggressive. "Evan," she said, her voice sharp but not unkind. "It's no use."

"But—" I protested, my chest heaving with frustration.

"We'll think of something else," Nala said, her voice softer now, almost soothing. "This isn't going anywhere. Come on."

I wanted to scream, wanted to break the door down and make him face the truth. But I knew she was right. We couldn't force him. Not now. Not like this.

Frustration exploded within me, and I kicked the door as hard as I could, the impact rattling the frame and echoing down the hallway. "Fucking coward!" I shouted, my voice rough and raw with rage. "You hear me? How do you even sleep knowing—"

"EVAN," Nala barked, her tone cutting through my fury like a blade. "Enough."

I clenched my jaw so hard it ached, then let out a slow breath. "Fine," I muttered, my voice thick with barely contained anger. I nodded once, forcing myself to step back. "You're right. We should go."

"Yeah," Nala said quietly, her voice softer now, like she was trying to calm me down. "We should."

We turned away from the door and headed back toward the stairs, the hallway feeling smaller with every step.

We started down the stairs, and at least going down was easier than climbing up. My legs still felt heavy, like the cold and exhaustion had sunk straight into my bones. Halfway down, I sneezed hard and immediately zipped my jacket all the way up, even though we were indoors.

"Jesus," Nala muttered as she followed a step behind me. "I still can't believe Carrie. Who does something like that? Threatening people, throwing money around like it's nothing."

"I'll do worse to her," I said quietly, my jaw tightening as I kept moving. "Trust me, Nala. Worse."

She glanced at me, her face tightening into a grimace. "Yeah. She deserves it. Putting you in that... that situation and all."

We reached the bottom floor, pushed through the heavy door, and stepped back outside. The wind slapped us immediately, sharp and cold, carrying the last remnants of the storm. Snow crunched under our shoes as we crossed the lot toward the car. I slid into the passenger seat while Nala went around to the driver's side.

As soon as the door shut, I pulled out my cigarette pack with stiff fingers, lit one, and leaned back against the seat. I closed my eyes and let the smoke fill my lungs, then slowly breathed it out. My head felt crowded, like there were too many thoughts fighting for space. Anger, fear, frustration, all tangled together. Kim's face kept popping up no matter how hard I tried to focus on anything else.

"We have to do something else," Nala said as she started the engine. "If the weather clears tomorrow, Kim could be gone."

"But what?" I asked, staring up at the roof of the car. "Mark was my only lead, and he shut the door in my face... no, fuck. He didn't even open it, that dick."

"Then we find another way," she said without hesitation. "We don't stop just because one door stayed closed."

I wanted to argue, but the truth was I didn't have anything better. Hope felt thin, stretched tight, but I forced myself not to let it snap. If Mark wouldn't talk to me at his door, then I'd catch him somewhere else. Work, a store, anywhere he let his guard down. I just needed one opening.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I frowned, pulled it out, and saw one of Anotta's bodyguards calling. I took another drag from my cigarette before answering.

"Hello?"

"Marlowe," Anotta's voice said smoothly. "How did it go?"

"Your lead didn't say a word," I replied. "He shut us out."

"Mmm," she hummed. "That's unfortunate, but not unexpected. You should try talking to him at work. He's a clerk at a thrift store near his building. Lemin's T-Shop."

I frowned. "I thought he was a construction worker."

"When there's nothing to build, people adapt," she said. "He takes a second job."

I shifted in my seat. "How do you know all this? You just happened to know where he works?"

"I assumed he wouldn't listen to you," Anotta replied calmly. "So I looked into him. You're welcome."

I let out a breath through my nose. "Yeah. I am grateful. More than you think."

"I'm only honoring our deal," she said. "I help you reach Mark. You give me Project Phoenix. Simple."

"Right," I said. "If that's all, I'm hanging up."

She disconnected before I could finish the sentence.

"Motherf—" I muttered, shoving the phone back into my pocket.

Nala slowed at a red light and glanced over at me. "Anotta?"

"Yeah," I said. "Mark works at Lemin's T-Shop. I'll go there tomorrow and see if he's more talkative when he's not hiding behind a door."

She nodded. "Let's hope he gives us something real this time."

I stared out the window at the snow-covered street. "Yeah," I said quietly. "Let's hope."



I tapped my keycard against the reader. The panel blinked green, the lock buzzed, and I slid the card back into my pocket. I lifted my hand to push the door open and...

Someone lunged at me and wrapped their arms around my neck so fast I staggered a step back.

"Evan," Delilah said, squeezing me tight. "Nala texted me what happened. I came as soon as I could."

I let out a tired laugh and rested a hand on her back. "You really shouldn't have. It's late."

"I don't care," she said, pulling back just enough to look at my face. "You look like shit."

"Charming as always," I said, smiling despite myself as I stepped inside.

The living room was already full. Jasmine was pacing near the couch, Tessa stood with her arms crossed, and Minne hovered a little behind them, hands clasped in front of her apron. The moment they saw me, the room exploded.

"That woman is insane," Jasmine snapped. "Absolute psychopath."

"Making you strip outside in that weather?" Tessa added, shaking her head. "I swear, if I ever see her—"

"She's disgusting," Delilah cut in. "Who does that to someone?"

Minne lifted her hand a little, hesitating before speaking. "I-I think she is very cruel," she said softly. "No one should be treated like that."

"Thanks, everyone," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "I'm still alive, see?"

"My god..." Jasmine shook her head. "That evil whore..."

"When did you even tell them?" I asked Nala as she knelt to pull off her boots. "You could've kept this quiet."

She looked up at me, calm but firm. "This wasn't something I could keep to myself. They deserved to know."

Before I could argue, Delilah waved me over. "Sit. Now. And tell us what happened with Mark."

I exhaled and followed them into the living room. We settled onto the couches, the tension still hanging thick in the air. Minne disappeared for a moment and came back with a blanket, draping it over my shoulders. I nodded at her. "Thanks."

She smiled and quietly turned the AC up a notch, warm air starting to push back the chill in my bones.

"Alright," I said, leaning back. "Mark wouldn't talk. Wouldn't even open the door. He shut us down completely."

"What did he say?" Jasmine asked.

"That it was over," I replied. "That he'd moved on. He admitted Carrie came by earlier and 'reminded' him of their deal."

"So he's scared," Tessa said. "Or bought."

"Both," Nala added. "He wouldn't even let us speak face-to-face."

"But," I continued, lifting a finger, "Anotta called after. Gave us a new lead. Mark works at a thrift store. Lemin's T-Shop. I'm going there tomorrow."

Delilah frowned. "Do you think he'll talk there?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But it's better than a locked door."

Nala nodded. "At work, people are different. Less guarded."

Jasmine leaned back, arms crossed. "Just don't go alone."

"I won't," I said. "I promise."

The room finally went quiet, the anger draining into exhaustion. My eyelids felt heavy, my head foggy.

"I really need to sleep," I said, rubbing my face. "Minne, can you prepare the guest bedroom for Delilah?"

She blinked, then smiled proudly. "I already did, Master."

I chuckled. "That's my girl."

Color rushed to her cheeks and she ducked her head, clearly pleased.

I stood, blanket still around my shoulders, and headed toward the master bedroom. I opened the door, barely bothering to close it behind me before collapsing onto the bed.

As soon as my head hit the pillow, my eyes shut on their own. This time, sleep didn't argue with me. It took me immediately.



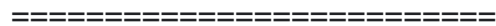
Chapter 287: Chapter 287

Okay... I needed to get stronger, no matter how I did it. That meant buying the New Ability from the Shop. I had no idea what it would turn out to be, but I couldn't afford to hesitate anymore. Useful or useless, I was taking the risk.

The interface updated the moment I confirmed the purchase.



SHOP [Page 2]



- Hypnotic Perfume (40c)
- Time Stop (90c)
- 500 Dollars (50c)
- 1 Ability Point (150c)
- 1 Mastery Point (160c)
- Main Quest Unlock (Bought)
- Desire Aura (100c)
- New Ability (Bought)



Credits: 823c



As soon as the transaction completed, my status screen slid into view. I frowned slightly as I read it.

Luck.

That was it. The mysterious ability turned out to be Luck.

CURRENT STATS

=====

◆ Strength: 10

◆ Charm: 12

- Manipulative Charm

↳ Honeyed Words (□□□□□)

↳ Gaslight (□□□□□)

↳ Emotional Charisma (□□□□□)

- Seductive Allure

◆ Libido: 10

◆ Pleasure: 25

↳ Sensory Overload (□□□□□)

↳ Erogenous Insight (□)

↳ Bliss Multiplier (□□□□□)

◆ Luck: 1

=====

3 Unused Ability Points

I slipped my jacket on and straightened, staring at the glowing UI. Luck at one. That was it. I let out a quiet breath and checked my reflection in the mirror, fixing my hair out of habit before turning toward the window.

Outside, the storm was still raging. Snow fell thick and relentless, the wind whipping between buildings like it was trying to tear the city apart. I never thought I'd be relieved to see weather this bad, but here I was. As long as the storm held, Carrie wasn't flying anywhere.

I pulled up the ability description.

(

Luck

=====

Chance to get better rewards from
Mysterious Chests. Chance to have
your partner climax instantly
during sex. Chance to Critical Success
when persuading a target.

)

So... I'd had a one percent chance of persuading Mark. I didn't care about the other stuff that Luck would help—not right now. My entire focus was on that coward. The man who played the three monkeys after his wife was brutally murdered. A monster. Both of them were—Carrie and Mark.

"Mmh... Evan..."

Nala's voice drifted from the bed, sleepy and soft. I turned and walked back to her, leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"I'm heading out," I whispered. "I'll be back in a few hours."

She stirred, eyes barely opening. "Let me... walk you to the door."

"No need," I said gently.

She wrapped her arms around my neck anyway, holding on tighter than necessary, then smiled and kissed me. I lifted her without thinking, one arm under her knees, the other at her waist, and carried her toward the penthouse door. When I set her down, she leaned against the frame, arms crossed, watching me lace my boots.

It felt... grounding. Someone there when you leave. Someone waiting.

"Goodbye," she said quietly, then smirked. "Go break his legs."

"Yes, ma'am."

As I finished tying my boots, Jasmine appeared behind her, half-asleep, resting her chin on Nala's shoulder.

"Goi—" She yawned hard. "Going outside?"

"Yeah," I said. "Storm's still bad. Carrie won't be taking her jet today."

"Want us to come?" Jasmine asked. "We can get ready in five minutes."

"No," I said firmly. "You both need sleep. And work."

Nala nodded, leaning her head against Jasmine's. "He's right."

I kissed Nala first, then Jasmine, gave them a small wave, and stepped into the elevator. As the doors slid shut, I rolled my shoulders and exhaled. It was time.

The elevator opened into the lobby, and the first thing I noticed was Tessa sitting on one of the couches, scrolling on her phone.

"Tessa?" I asked, walking over. "What are you doing here?"

She looked up, slid her phone into her pocket, and stood. "About damn time you showed up. Come on. We're going."

"I—"

"I'm coming with you," she cut in. "Didn't tell our CEO, though. Hope it doesn't come out of my paycheck."

"You probably should've told her," I said.

She shrugged. "I sucked her pussy Evan. And kissed her. And fingered her asshole. I think the boss-employee line's already blurred. Same goes for you."

I snorted. "Yeah. Fair point."

I walked toward the automatic doors but stopped just short of stepping outside. The storm was still raging, and I wasn't about to stand there freezing again like an idiot. I pulled my phone out and called the valet instead.

"Mr. Marlowe?"

"Yeah," I said when they picked up. "I need my car out front."

"Yes, sir," the valet replied smoothly. "We'll bring it around."

I hung up and slid the phone back into my pocket. Tessa crossed her arms and shook her head, clearly still pissed.

"That woman is a straight-up whore," she muttered. "Making you strip outside like that? If I were there, I would've clawed her eyes out."

I let out a short breath through my nose. "Yeah. I'm lucky I didn't get sick."

"You shouldn't be lucky," she said. "You shouldn't have gone through that at all."

We waited in silence for a few seconds, the sound of wind howling faintly even through the glass. Then I spotted my car pulling up in front of the hotel, headlights cutting through the snow.

"Mark Menlin," I muttered under my breath. "Time for us to meet face to face."



By the time we got there, it was already seven. It had taken a full hour just to cross the city because of the weather and all the closed roads. I killed the engine and checked the weather app again before getting out. Good. This bad weather was going to last today as well... if this thing was right.

The thrift shop sat on a quiet street, wedged between a bakery and a shuttered convenience store. Snow had piled up along the sidewalks, dirty and slushy from foot traffic. A few people passed by, collars pulled high, heads down, clearly just trying to get where they were going without freezing.

Tessa wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck, shivering. Without thinking, I slipped one hand into my jacket pocket and she leaned closer, sliding her own hand in with mine to share the warmth. We walked like that toward the shop, breath fogging in front of us.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck." Tessa muttered. "I hate snow."

"Yeah." I agreed. "I'm starting to hate the snow, too."

The bell above the door chimed when we stepped inside.

The thrift shop was small and cramped, with narrow aisles packed with mismatched clothes, old jackets, and shelves full of secondhand junk. The air smelled faintly of dust and detergent. A heater hummed somewhere in the back, barely doing its job.

I didn't know what Mark looked like, so I scanned the room slowly. Then I saw the counter. And behind it, a man with a long, untrimmed beard and thick glasses, shoulders slumped like the weight of the world had settled there permanently. He looked tired in a way sleep didn't fix.

His name tag caught my eye.

MENLIN.

I walked up to the counter and rested my hand on it.

"Mark Menlin," I said calmly. "I believe we talked yesterday."

He froze for half a second, then looked up at me properly.

"Mm?" He scoffed and shook his head. "Oh. You two again. What do you want?"

"I just want to talk," I said. "That's it."

He leaned back slightly, eyes hard behind the lenses. "Talk to my ass, dickhead. I told you already, we have nothing to talk about."

I kept my hand on the counter and didn't raise my voice. I didn't lean in aggressively either. Mark looked like the kind of man who shut down the second he felt cornered, so I stayed calm and steady, like this was just another boring conversation he couldn't escape.

"I'm not here to threaten you," I said. "I'm here because whatever deal you think you made is already cracking."

He let out a dry laugh and turned his attention to a pile of folded sweaters beside him. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know Carrie Beldenwary," I replied. "And I know she doesn't let things stay buried unless they're useful later."

That got him. His hand paused mid-fold. He didn't look at me, but his shoulders stiffened.

Tessa stayed quiet beside me, arms crossed, eyes locked on him. She didn't interrupt. She didn't need to.

I exhaled slowly and let the UI surface.

Persuasion Attempt: Mark Menlin

=====

□□□□□

=====

Remaining Chances: 0/3

Three chances. Five markers. I could feel the Luck stat sitting there like a loaded coin flip. I didn't rush.

I chose my first words carefully.

Attempting Persuasion

"She already came to warn you.

That means she's nervous."

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding: ☒

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"Yes," I said evenly. "She already came to want you. That means she's nervous. Carrie doesn't warn people unless she thinks they might break."

Mark's jaw clenched. He finally looked up at me, eyes bloodshot behind the glasses.

"She didn't warn me," he snapped. "She reminded me."

"That's worse," I replied. "Reminders mean leverage."

He swallowed.

Persuasion Attempt: Mark Menlin

=====

☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

=====

Remaining Chances: 1/3

One box checked. Nice.

Chapter 288: Chapter 288

He wiped his hands on his apron and leaned against the counter.

"You don't understand," he said. "You think you do, but you don't. That woman ruins lives without lifting a finger."

"I understand enough," I said. "She's holding someone I care about. And you're the only loose thread she didn't fully cut."

His eyes flicked to Tessa, then back to me.

"She paid me," he said quietly. "She paid me because the system would've eaten me alive otherwise."

"That's what she told you," I said. "Not what would've happened."

He shook his head. "The driver was drunk. Everyone knew it. The city didn't want the scandal. The police wanted it gone. Carrie just... made it easier."

I leaned in a little, lowering my voice.

"And the evidence?" I asked. "Because drunk drivers leave evidence."

His breathing hitched.

I brought the UI back up.

Attempting Persuasion

"You didn't take the money

because you were convinced.

You took it because you were afraid."

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding: ☒☒

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"Calm down, Mark. You didn't take the money because you were convinced," I said.

"You took it because you were afraid. And you still are."

Mark's hands started shaking. He curled them into fists, pressing them against the counter.

"Stop," he muttered. "Just stop."

Fuck. It failed.

Tessa finally spoke. "You think she's done with you?" she asked flatly. "You really think someone like her just walks away?"

That did it. He laughed, but it was hollow and broken.

"She kept it," he said suddenly.

"Kept what?" I asked.

"The recording," he said. "The dash cam from the delivery van behind them. All of it."

I didn't move. I didn't react too fast.

"Carrie took it before the police finalized the report," he continued. "Everyone thought it was destroyed."

I narrowed my eyes. "So she wiped it."

He shook his head immediately. "No. Fuck no."

I leaned closer. "Then where is it?"

"She hid it," Mark said, voice low. "Ms. Beldenwary isn't stupid. You don't destroy leverage. You save it."

Tessa's fingers tightened around her scarf.

"Why?" She asked. "Why would she need leverage against you? You're the victim here."

He hesitated, then let out a bitter breath. "Not me. Against her own son."

That made my stomach twist.

"She kept it in case he stepped out of line," Mark said. "In case he talked. In case he embarrassed her. She wanted proof that could end him in one move."

I closed my eyes briefly, then opened them again.

"So the recording still exists," I said. "Somewhere."

"Yes," he replied. "And if you're smart, you won't go looking for it."

I straightened and brought up the final push.

Attempting Persuasion

"Where would she hide something
that dangerous?"

=====

Base Chance: 20%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 70%

Upon Succeeding: ☒☒

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"Where would she hide something that dangerous?" I asked calmly.

Mark's shoulders sagged. He looked older all of a sudden.

"Not here," he said. "Not in this city. Somewhere private. Somewhere only she controls.
A safety deposit box, maybe. Or a private server. She doesn't trust people."

Persuasion Attempt: Mark Menlin

=====

☒☒☒☒☐

=====

Remaining Chances: 3/3—SUCCESS

I nodded once and stepped back from the counter.

"That's all I needed," I said.

Mark looked at me, eyes dull. "If you find it," he said quietly, "you're declaring war."

I met his gaze. "She already did."

I turned and walked out of the shop with Tessa beside me, the bell chiming softly behind us. The cold hit my face the second the door opened, but I barely felt it.

A recording. Proof. Something Carrie hadn't destroyed, only hidden.

That was enough.

Now I just had to find where she thought no one would ever look.

I slid into the driver's seat and pulled the door shut, the cold sealing outside with a dull thump. Tessa buckled up beside me, rubbing her hands together for warmth.

"So," she said, glancing at me. "Where to now?"

I stared through the windshield for a second, watching snow skitter across the road like nervous insects.

Before I could answer, my phone rang.

Ivy.

I felt a sharp twist in my gut and answered immediately.

"Hello?"

"YOU IDIOT," Ivy chirped, way too loud and way too cheerful for the situation. "Why didn't you tell me you knew her?"

"Knew who?" I asked, already dreading the answer.

"Carrie fucking Beldenwary," she said. "She's here with me."

My fingers tightened around the phone. "With you?"

"Yeah," Ivy continued. "At Burney's. She said she tried calling you, but you didn't answer, so she decided to come say hi. You even told her about me, huh? I'm flattered. Really."

"Ivy," I said, keeping my voice steady with effort. "Listen to me. Stay in public, okay? Do not go anywhere with her."

There was a pause. "What? Evan, you're being weird."

"I'm coming," I said. "I'll explain when I get there. Don't move. Don't leave. Just stay where people can see you."

"...Okay," she replied, slower now. "I'll stay."

"I'll be there," I said and hung up.

I dropped the phone into the cup holder and leaned back in my seat, letting out a long breath through my nose. My heart was pounding, not fast, but heavy, like each beat was hitting something solid.

Fuck.

Of course she knew about Ivy. Of course she did. Carrie didn't stumble into people's lives by accident. She mapped them, catalogued them, decided which ones were useful and which ones were pressure points. This wasn't a direct threat, not yet. This was her reminding me she could reach into my world whenever she wanted.

I turned my head toward Tessa.

"Burney's," I said. "Carrie is with my friend Ivy. We're going there now."

Tessa's expression hardened instantly. "Shit. Alright, let's go."

♥◻♥◻♥◻

I pulled up to the curb hard enough for the tires to crunch against the slush, yanked the handbrake, and was out of the car before the engine even fully died.

Cold air slapped me in the face as I crossed the sidewalk in long strides and shoved the café door open. The bell above it rattled violently. A few heads turned. Someone frowned. Someone else didn't even look up from their cup.

I didn't care.

My eyes scanned the place immediately, sharp and fast, tables first, then corners, then the back.

Tessa came in right behind me and didn't hesitate. She lifted her chin and pointed.

"There," she muttered. "Back table. She's wearing fucking glasses."

I followed her finger.

Carrie was tucked away in the back, hood pulled low, thin-framed glasses on her face like a cheap disguise. Anyone who didn't know her would think she was just another rich

woman hiding from the weather. Ivy sat beside her, relaxed, smiling, completely unaware of the predator sitting inches away.

I walked over and pulled a chair out sharply, the legs scraping against the floor louder than necessary, and sat down next to Ivy. Tessa took the seat across from us, her posture stiff, eyes never leaving Carrie.

"Ivy," I said, keeping my voice even. "Hey."

"Hey," she replied, then leaned closer, her voice dropping. "Are you okay? You sounded... weird on the phone."

"I'm fine," I said quietly. "We'll talk later."

Before Ivy could say more, Carrie spoke, smooth as silk.

"Mr. Marlowe," she said with a pleasant smile. "I tried calling you earlier. I wanted to personally thank you for helping me with that charity gala. You never picked up."

"Yeah," I replied, meeting her eyes. "Shit happens."

"Indeed."

"I came as soon as I could," I added, smirking faintly. "Careful drive, too. Didn't want to hit anyone on the road."

For half a second, just a fraction, her expression twitched. She caught it immediately and covered it with a soft chuckle, but I saw it. She knew exactly what I meant.

"Yes," she said. "Accidents do happen."

She tilted her head slightly.

"Ivy and I were just talking about your college days. About Delilah. Ivy's mother helped you quite a bit back then, didn't she? Such a kind woman. I was thinking, maybe I should speak with her sometime."

Before I could answer, Ivy's phone rang.

"Oh," she said, pulling it out. "Hold on. Yellow?"

As she turned away slightly, talking into the phone, Carrie and I locked eyes.

Her smile changed. Less friendly. More knowing.

This was her reminding me she could reach anyone. Any time. Anywhere.

I glanced toward the windows. The snowfall had thinned, the wind calmer now. The sky looked lighter than it should have. That made my stomach sink. I needed the storm to last. I needed that jet grounded.

"Alright, bye," Ivy said suddenly, standing up. "Sorry, guys. I have to go. My mom called. The taxi she was in got into a small accident."

My chest loosened just a little.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Ivy said, already pulling on her jacket. "She's fine. Just shaken. I need to help her."

Yeah, that was life. I'd called Delilah and fed her a lie to get Ivy far away from there. Thankfully, it worked—Delilah succeeded, and Ivy was on her way out. The farther she was from Carrie, the better. I couldn't let her lay a hand on my friend.

Ivy waved at us, then turned to Carrie with a polite smile. "It was nice talking to you, Ms. Beldenwary. I hope we meet again."

"I hope so too, dear," Carrie replied warmly. "Take care."

Ivy left, the door swinging shut behind her, and I didn't look away from Carrie until she disappeared down the street.

The moment Ivy was gone, the air at the table changed.

I leaned forward slightly. "If you get close to her one more time," I said quietly, "you're done."

Carrie raised an eyebrow. "Threatening me again?" she asked. "You want another lesson out in the cold, Evan?"

"I know about your son," I said. "Your step-son. The accident."

"Oh?" she replied lazily, crossing her legs. "And what will you do with that information? Re-open a cold case? Be my guest."

I stood up. Tessa did the same, her chair scraping back.

"This isn't over," I said.

"I know," Carrie replied, smiling. "But tomorrow might be. The forecast says sunshine. Let's hope they're right."

I didn't answer. I turned and walked out, Tessa right behind me.

Outside, the cold hit again, but my skin still felt too tight, like it hadn't recovered from last night.

"That was too close," Tessa said. "Her being near Ivy like that."

"Yeah," I muttered. "Way too close."

I ran a hand through my hair, thoughts racing. The recording. The accident. Carrie hadn't destroyed it. She'd hidden it. Somewhere.

"I'll talk to Tom," I said, already moving toward the car. "After I drop you off."

Tessa frowned. "Let me come."

"No," I replied. "This needs to be private."

She sighed, shoulders dropping. "Fine. Whatever you say, magic fingers."

All I could think about was that footage, sitting somewhere in the dark, and the fact that if I didn't find it soon, Kim would be gone.



Chapter 289: Chapter 289

That sleazy bastard Tom wasn't answering my texts. The fake account he used to stalk Kim, to learn where she worked, stayed silent. I didn't have his phone number, so I was stuck there, staring at my phone like an idiot. He was probably staying with his step-mother, but I had no idea where she lived. I tried calling Anotta too. No answer. Of course. Everything lining up just perfectly to screw me over.

I sat in my car, engine off, parked on the side of the road, hands resting uselessly on the steering wheel while my thoughts went in circles. Nothing came to mind. Nothing useful. Just noise and frustration.

Fuck.

Kim's letter. The ultrasound image. The baby. All of it tangled together in my head until I could barely breathe. How did I let her just walk away like that? Why didn't she trust me enough to stay?

No. That wasn't it.

She did trust me. That was the worst part. She trusted me enough to think I didn't deserve to be dragged through hell with her, so she chose the easy exit and ran straight into Carrie's arms. Sacrificed herself and thought she was saving me.

God damn it.

My phone buzzed in my hand. Ivy.

I answered before it could ring again. "Ivy, hey."

"Hey," she said. "What was that back there? At the coffee shop?"

"Don't worry about it," I replied, rubbing my temple. "Just... stay away from Carrie, okay?"

"Why?" she asked. "Because of him? That guy?"

"What guy?" I straightened up immediately.

"Tim, I think," she said. "He didn't sit with us, but I caught him staring. Like, full-on staring at my chest. Super weird."

"Tom," I muttered. My grip tightened on the phone. "Did he say where he was going?"

"No," she said, then paused. "But I heard him on the phone before he left. He said he reserved a table somewhere called Ducky."

"Ducky?" I repeated.

"Yeah. D-U-C-K-Y," she spelled it out. "It's that new coffee place inside the shopping mall. Super popular brand. They've got a discount thing going on, so it's almost impossible to find a table unless you reserve."

I exhaled slowly. Finally. A direction.

"Alright," I said. "Thank you, Ivy."

"Evan," she said carefully. "What is going on? How do you even know Carrie? And who is that guy, really?"

"I'll explain later," I replied. "Just... for now, stay away from both Carrie and Tom. Promise me."

"O-okay," she said, uncertainty clear in her voice. "I don't really get what's happening, but... okay."

"I mean it," I added. "I'll tell you everything. Just not right now."

"Fine," she said with a small huff. "Be a mysterious jerk. I'm hanging up. My mom's waiting for me. Bye."

"Bye."

The engine purred to life and I pulled away from the curb.

The weather was clearing by the second, and that wasn't a good sign. The snow had thinned into a light, lazy fall, barely sticking to the windshield anymore. The wind picked up slightly, sharp and cold, but it felt cleaner, freer. Too free.

I didn't have much time. If the weather fully cleared, Carrie would leave with Kim. And if that happened, she'd be gone for good.

I pushed through a red light, the tires slipping just enough on the ice to make the steering wheel jerk in my hands. My heart jumped into my throat.

"Fuck—"

I eased off the gas, steadying the car. Causing an accident now would end everything. I slowed down, forcing myself to breathe, even as my pulse hammered against my ribs.

The dashboard lit up again. Incoming call.

Cora.

I tapped the button and answered. "Cora, hey. What's up?"

"U-um..." she started, voice soft and hesitant. "Hey. So... m-my sister has a family meeting at her college."

"Oh," I said, turning left at the intersection. "That's... nice."

"It's one of those things where family m-members visit," she explained. "They... do activities and watch the volleyball game."

"That sounds sweet."

"I..." She hesitated, then rushed it out. "I don't want to go alone. People make me nervous."

I tightened my grip on the wheel. "Okay," I said carefully. "You want me to come with you?"

"YES!" she blurted out, then immediately cleared her throat. "I mean—yes. If that's okay."

"When is it?"

"Today. Seven."

Seven.

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. Nine in the morning. I still had time before meeting Tom, time to try and force a crack in this whole mess. If I could get him to talk, really talk, maybe he'd tell Carrie he was done. And if he pulled away, Carrie would have no reason to keep Kim around.

Still, it was risky.

But Cora had helped me before. A lot. Even if her methods were... questionable, she'd come through when it mattered. Turning her down now felt wrong.

"Alright," I said finally. "Seven. I'll be there. Send me the location."

"Yes! Yes, I will!" she said, relief flooding her voice. "Th-thank you, Evan. I was really nervous you'd refuse."

"Hey," I said, smiling despite myself. "Anything for you. We're kind of partners in crime, aren't we?"

She laughed softly. "Y-yeah. We are."

That earned me interest points, but I was already maxed out with her. I dismissed the UI with a flick of my fingers and took a right turn. The shopping mall was close now, only a few blocks away.

"Tell your sister I said hi," I added. "I've gotta go, Cora."

"Bye, Evan. Thank you— I mean, thanks."

The call ended.

I turned onto the final street, the mall rising ahead of me through the thinning snow. Glass, steel, and lights. Crowded. Public. Loud.

Perfect.

I parked and shut off the engine, staring at the entrance for a moment.

Alright, Tom.

Time to talk.

I drove down the ramp into the underground parking lot, the ceiling dropping low and concrete pillars flashing past my windows.

I spotted an empty space near the elevators, swung in fast, and parked without caring how crooked it was. The engine died and I was already out, slamming the door shut behind me.

I jogged toward the entrance, boots echoing against the concrete as I shoved through the glass doors and into the mall. Warm air hit my face immediately, thick with perfume, coffee, and fried food. I took the escalators two steps at a time, muttering apologies as I pushed past shoppers and families dragging bags behind them.

At the ground floor, I spun in place, scanning the signs. Then I looked up.

Ducky.

Second floor. Bright logo. Glass railing.

I turned sharply and climbed the next escalator, heart pounding. The coffee shop came into view, all soft lighting, pastel colors, and fake plants trying too hard to look cozy. The hum of conversation and clinking cups filled the air.

And there he was.

Tom.

Fucking Tom.

He was sitting at a table near the center with two women and two men, laughing too loudly, leaning back like he owned the place. He looked relaxed. Comfortable. Untouchable.

That didn't last.

I walked straight toward the table.

His face changed the second he saw me. The color drained, his smile freezing mid-expression. Fear flashed across his eyes before he stood up abruptly.

"Tom!" I said, forcing a grin. "My god, so good to see you here."

"E-Evan..." he stammered. He glanced at his friends, then cleared his throat. "Excuse us for a minute. I'll be right back."

He didn't wait for a response from his friends. He walked fast toward a quieter corner near the wall, and I followed.

The moment we stopped, my smile vanished.

"You fucking bastard," I said low, stepping closer. "You stole Kim from me?"

He bristled, jabbing a finger into my chest. "You stole her from me. She was my girlfriend first."

"Yeah," I shot back. "The girlfriend you kicked out with nowhere to go. Real romantic."

"I tried to convince my mother," he snapped. "She wouldn't listen. But now she has. She saw how miserable I was. She finally agreed."

"The hell with you," I said. "You can't stand up to her for even one second, can you? You hide behind her money and her power like a child."

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "I did my best. And now Kim is with me."

I stepped closer until his back hit the wall.

"Have you touched her?" I asked quietly.

His eyes widened. "No. I tried. She refused. She said she wanted to wait until we left the city."

"Good," I said. "Because she's not leaving."

"She's mine," he whispered, forcing the words out.

The interface flickered into view.

(_____)

Persuasion Attempt: Tom

=====

□□□□□□□□□□

=====

Remaining Chances: 0/1

Fuck me. How would I even persuade him? The boxes were... how many were there again? And I only had one chance. Maybe the Luck skill would activate and... I'd get critical success? Worth a try. Or I could use... other methods.

Attempting Persuasion

"You don't want to go that route.

I know what you like, Tom. You
don't wanna mess with me."

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding: ☒

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"You don't want to go that route. I know what you like, Tom. You don't wanna mess with me."

"I know," he said weakly. "That's why we're leaving. This city, this country. We're done here."

Persuasion Attempt: Tom

=====

☑☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

=====

Remaining Chances: 1/1-FAILURE

Chapter 290: Chapter 290

No luck. It was only one percent, what was I even waiting for. Damn it.

"I know what you did," I said. "Three years ago."

His face twitched. "What are you talking about?"

"You killed an innocent woman," I said evenly. "And your stepmother buried it."

His confidence cracked, fear and rage mixing together. "Where did you hear that?"

"Did you know she kept the footage?" I pressed. "Dash cam. Clear as day."

He blinked. "She hid it?"

"Leverage," I said. "She never destroys something useful. You step out of line, she owns you."

He shook his head, breaths coming quick and shallow. "You're lying."

"Am I?" I said, keeping my voice low, calm, like we were the only two people in the quiet coffee shop. "Because you look terrified, Tom. Because... you know her better than I do."

He dropped his chin, hair falling forward, hiding his face from me.

Then it came: a low, dry chuckle, an ugly one... like he'd been holding it in too long. He lifted his head slowly, eyes locking onto mine. The fear was still there, buried deep, but now it was coated in something vicious, something that made the air between us feel poisoned.

His lips curled into a slow, filthy smile.

"Oh, Evan," he murmured, voice barely above the music, intimate, like he was telling me a bedtime story. "I'm gonna love fucking Kim. In that same living room. We'll only hear the fire crackling, and her wet pussy taking me in." He leaned in a fraction, close enough that I caught the bitter trace of his coffee breath. "Real slow. Deep. With your

baby kicking inside her belly while I'm buried all the way in. She'll feel every twitch of it, and for just a second she'll think of you—right before she remembers she's mine."

He laughed again, quieter, nastier, and dropped one hand below the table without a shred of shame. I heard the faint rustle of fabric, saw the slow roll of his wrist as he grabbed himself, stroking once, twice, mocking me.

"That kid's gonna call me Daddy," he went on, eyes half-lidded, voice dripping. "Won't even know you ever existed. You'll be air. Nothing. And Kim—I'll take her every morning before work, every night when I get home. Whenever the mood hits. She'll hate it at first, yeah, whisper your name in her head while she cries—but she won't have a choice. She'll spread for me like she's supposed to. And eventually?" He shrugged, still grinning, still moving his hand. "She'll crave it. She'll be my wife. Pregnant, barefoot, waiting for me to come home and fill her up again. I'll even share her. She probably won't want it, but, hey, if I want it, she has to do it. I'll jerk off while they rape my wife... God, saying it makes me hard."

The rage hit me like a freight train.

My fist connected with his jaw before I even registered moving—hard, solid, the crack echoing in the quiet shop. His head snapped sideways, chair scraping back. I was on him in a heartbeat, hands clamping around his throat, slamming him down against the small table. Cups shattered, hot coffee splashing across the floor, the wooden surface groaning under our weight.

"You son of a bitch!" I roared, squeezing until his eyes bulged. "I'll fucking kill you! I'll kill you, you sick cunt—hear me? I'll fucking kill you! I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!"

He wheezed out a wet, choking laugh, fingers clawing uselessly at my wrists.

Footsteps pounded from the back—someone bursting into the chaos. Strong arms hooked under mine from behind, hauling me backward with a fierce yank. "Evan! Stop—let go, now!"

I bucked hard, elbow driving back into ribs. A sharp grunt escaped, and the grip loosened. "Let me fucking go!"

They stumbled, hit the tiled floor hard with a pained gasp. I didn't look—I surged forward again, eyes locked on Tom, ready to finish him.

But he was gone. The barista and another customer had already yanked him up, dragging him toward the front door. His bloody grin flashed one last time before the bell jingled and he vanished into the night.

Only then did I twist around to see who'd tried to stop me.

Sophia. The security girl, tight ponytail half-undone now, sprawled on the floor with one hand pressed to her side. Her dark eyes locked on mine—anger flaring hot, mixed with something like shock, or maybe hurt.

But I didn't fucking care.

The shop went dead silent except for my ragged breathing and the low music still playing overhead. Everyone backed away, giving me a wide circle. My chest heaved. Blood thrummed in my ears.

I turned to the nearest empty table and drove my fist into it—once, twice, three times, four. Wood cracked. Pain exploded up my arm, but the adrenaline burned it away. Blood smeared across my knuckles, dripping onto the floor. I stood there panting, fists trembling, staring at the door he'd disappeared through.

"It's on, you fucking cunt," I whispered to the empty air. "Watch me take your little 'mommy' from you."

♥◻♥◻♥◻

I couldn't sit still after what he said. I paced the penthouse balcony with my hands locked behind my back, boots scraping softly against the stone tiles. Tom. That spineless piece of shit. He was already on thin ice, but after what he pulled in the mall, after the things he dared to imply, he was finished. Completely finished. There were only two names bouncing around my head now, over and over, like a bad echo. Tom. Carrie.

I tried tailing him after we left the mall, but he vanished into the crowd the second things went south. He ran. Of course he did. Tucked his tail and disappeared the moment pressure showed up. Typical.

I pulled my phone from my back pocket and checked the time. Eleven. I still had a window before I needed to show up at Esme's family thing with Cora. And the weather was not on my side anymore. The snow was gone. The wind had died down. The sky was clearing fast, way too fast. Every minute that passed made it easier for Carrie to move Kim out of the city.

"You wait," I muttered under my breath, still pacing. "Just wait."

"Master," Minne said softly as the glass door slid open behind me. "You'll catch a cold. Please come inside."

"I'm fine," I replied without stopping. "You go in."

"O-okay," she said quietly, retreating back inside.

Carrie Beldenway. I needed to know where she lived. Where she actually stayed when she didn't want eyes on her. And Tom would be there too. He had to be. He didn't have the spine to live on his own.

For a moment, I considered calling Cora. She could probably find an address in minutes if she wanted to... probably? Eh, maybe not. But the thought made my stomach twist. I didn't want to turn this into some unspoken transaction. I didn't agree to help her because I wanted leverage. I did it because she asked. Dragging her into this now felt wrong.

"No," I muttered. "Not Cora."

I stopped pacing.

Wait.

Something Tom said earlier clawed its way back into my head. Not the insults, not the threats. The phrasing. The setting. I replayed his words slowly, carefully, stripping them down to the details that mattered.

"In that same living room. We'll only hear the fire crackling..."

My blood went cold.

Not the city. Not a penthouse. The summer house.

The one we stayed at months ago. The one outside the city. Remote. Isolated. Where the rain trapped us inside for days. Where Tom suddenly "had to leave" in the middle of the trip, disappearing without explanation.

Fireplace. Same living room. Same place.

That was it.

"Fuck," I whispered.

I spun around and rushed inside, sliding the balcony door shut behind me. Minne yelped softly as I passed her, nearly colliding with the tray in her hands.

"Master?" she asked. "I was bringing you tea."

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, already grabbing my jacket. "I know where they are."

She froze. "Where... where they live?"

"Yes," I said, fishing my keys from the counter. "I'm going there."

"Master, please don't go alone," she said, panic creeping into her voice. "What if something happens?"

I stopped, turned back, and walked to her. I kissed her forehead gently, then held her shoulders so she had to look at me.

"I'll bring Kim back," I said firmly. "I swear it. And when I do, we'll talk. About everything you told me before. About the future."

Her eyes softened. "Please be safe."

"I will," I said. "I promise."

I called the valet as I left the penthouse and headed for the elevator. He answered on the second ring.

"Get my car ready," I said. "I'm in a hurry."

"Yes, Mr. Marlowe. One minute."

The elevator ride felt too slow. Every second stretched. The doors finally opened and I jogged through the lobby, out into the open air just as my car rolled up front. I nodded once to the valet, slid inside, and slammed the door shut.

The engine purred. I floored it.

"I'm coming," I muttered. "Just hang on."