

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sarah pulled into the parking lot of the massive research complex, her fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turned white. The hum of the engine faded as she shut it off, leaving only the muffled sounds of the night around her. The building loomed ahead, its sleek, glass-covered exterior reflecting the glow of the sun. It was the same place she had worked for years, a place of innovation, of science—but now, it felt different. Something about it unsettled her.

She let out a shaky breath and glanced into the rearview mirror, half-expecting to see something—or *someone*—in the backseat. Her heart pounded as she hesitated, her eyes scanning the reflection, searching for the presence of “Other Sarah”.

"Hello?" she whispered. "You there?"

Silence.

Sarah exhaled, her fingers relaxing slightly on the steering wheel. Maybe she was gone. She pulled the car key from the ignition and stepped out. The wind bit at her skin, sending a chill up her spine, but she ignored it. The parking lot was mostly empty, just a few scattered cars from the weekend staff and security. The usual buzz of activity was absent, making the whole area feel eerily deserted.

As she walked toward the entrance, the sound of her own footsteps echoed across the pavement, a stark reminder of how alone she was in this moment. Every few feet, she glanced around, half-expecting something—anything—to jump out at her. But there was nothing.

She reached the glass doors, and they slid open with a soft *hiss*. The inside of the lobby was vast and mostly empty, the high ceilings and polished floors amplifying the emptiness. The ambient hum of the fluorescent lights did little to ease the unease curling in her stomach. She took a breath and approached the security desk, where Steve, the overnight guard, was stationed.

"Hey, Steve," she greeted, forcing a casual tone.

Steve looked up, but something about him seemed off. He was stiff, his hands twitching slightly as he adjusted his uniform. His eyes flicked toward the elevator behind him before darting back to her.

"Doctor, wait," he blurted, stepping forward slightly.

Sarah frowned, slowing her steps. "Excuse me?"

Steve's gaze dropped to the floor. He hesitated, clearly debating something internally. His whole demeanor screamed discomfort.

Sarah followed his glance and noticed it—a *lipstick stain on his cheek*. A smudge of red on the collar of his disheveled uniform. His shirt was untucked on one side, and his tie sat slightly askew, as if he had just thrown it back on in a hurry.

"You can't go in yet," he said, his voice uneven.

Sarah's stomach twisted. "Why?"

Steve fidgeted, his fingers tapping against his belt. "I... um... I can't say."

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, you *can't say*?"

Steve avoided her gaze again, looking anywhere but at her.

Something in Sarah snapped. She had been through too much. She had lost too much. And now, after everything, *this* man—this weak, nervous, pitiful man—was standing in her way? The irritation simmering beneath her skin flared into something more, something darker.

"Weak... man." Something whispered inside her.

Her fingers twitched at her sides. A strange, tingling sensation crawled up her arms. Her head felt light. But instead of fear, something else took root. A *warmth*. A deep, curling satisfaction. Sarah smiled and repeat the word out loud.

"Weak," she said, as the thought slid through her mind like silk, wrapping itself around her thoughts.

Steve flinched slightly. "W-what?"

Sarah barely noticed his reaction. Her body moved on its own, a slow, deliberate step forward.

"You think you have power?" she murmured, her voice calm, yet dripping with something venomous. "Because you're wearing a *fake* badge?"

She reached out and flicked the plastic security ID pinned to his chest. The small action felt electrifying, a thrill sparking through her veins. Steve stiffened, clearly rattled.

"Look at him. Squirming. Weak." The voice in her whispered again.

Sarah's lips parted slightly. For a moment, she thought of pulling away. She could have stopped this. But she didn't. In fact, she pulled him in close.

"I could get you fired," she whispered into his ear.

A sharp pulse of pleasure coursed through her, warm and intoxicating, curling around her senses like a drug. Her breath hitched. The sensation was blissful, almost euphoric.

"Or," she continued, her voice lowering, thick with something sultry, "I could... make it worth your while."

She stepped in even closer, pressing her body just slightly against his. Just enough to feel the sharp, shallow breath he took. Just enough to see his pupils dilate, his face flush. Steve's mouth opened slightly, a weak sound escaping him.

Sarah tilted her head, watching him. "So?"

"O... okay," Steve stammered, his voice barely above a whisper. "G... go in."

Sarah stepped back, a smirk tugging at her lips.

"Good boy."

The words left her mouth before she even processed them. And the second they did, *pleasure* flooded her, a sharp, rolling wave of endorphins surging through every inch of her body. It was *so good*—a rush of euphoria so powerful she nearly gasped aloud. And then, soft, smooth, and familiar, a voice whispered inside her mind.

"Good girl," it said.

Sarah's breath caught in her throat. The pleasure vanished instantly, leaving behind a hollow, sinking feeling in her chest. She looked down at her hands, her vision swimming. What had just happened? Had she really— Her gaze snapped back to Steve, who was still standing there, dazed, his body visibly affected by what had just occurred. "Oh my god. What did I just do?"

"I'm... I'm sorry," she whispered, barely able to get the words out.

Steve didn't respond. He just stood there, watching her, looking uncertain. Confused. Maybe even a little afraid. Sarah turned and bolted toward the elevator, slamming the button with her palm. She couldn't be here anymore. Couldn't let this happen again. As the elevator doors slid shut, she pressed her back against the wall, gasping for air.

"I have to end this," she said, as she clenched her fists so tightly her nails dug into her palms.

"Before I become her."

Sarah stood in the elevator, her pulse drumming a frantic rhythm in her ears. The soft hum of the machinery filled the cramped space, a constant, dull noise that should have been soothing. Instead, it made her skin crawl. She shifted on her feet, arms crossed tightly over her chest, trying to ignore the creeping sense of unease slithering up her spine.

The reflection in the elevator's metallic walls stared back at her. She barely recognized herself. Her face was pale, eyes slightly sunken, lips pressed into a thin line that barely concealed the fear trembling just beneath the surface. Her normally neat hair was disheveled, wild strands escaping from the loose ponytail she had tied in a hurry. She looked.... "ugly".

She looked like a woman on the edge. A woman losing herself. No. She wasn't losing herself. She refused. Sarah inhaled sharply and closed her eyes. She needed to think, to focus. But her thoughts were a chaotic mess, colliding into one another like crashing waves.

Jack. Patricia.

She saw him—*her*—standing in front of her, fully transformed. Laughing, taunting, reveling in her new form. It hadn't been a man trapped in a woman's body. It hadn't been Jack at all. It had been something else entirely, something *born* from the machine, something that had completely erased the man she once knew and loved. And now, that same force was clawing at her mind, weaving itself into her thoughts like an invasive parasite. Her fingers curled into fists. No. She wouldn't let this happen.

Then there was Brenda. Her sister, her last tether to the real world. The only person she could trust. Brenda had taken her in without question, had listened, had tried to comfort her, even when Sarah had been unable to explain the madness of what was happening.

And what had Sarah done in return? She had stolen her car. She winced. Guilt curdled in her stomach. She had *used* her. She had let herself slip further, justifying it as necessity. Her mind was turning on her, pushing her deeper into something dark, something wrong. And she couldn't stop thinking about her—

"Stupid, worthless sister." The words spilled from her lips, dripping with venom, without thought, without hesitation.

Sarah's eyes widened in horror. A sharp inhale caught in her throat, and she clapped a hand over her mouth, as if she could take the words back, swallow them whole before they stained the air. No. No, no, no. That wasn't her. That wasn't her voice. Her hands flew to her head, fingers gripping her scalp.

"That's not me," she whispered, voice trembling. "That's not me."

A dull, aching pressure spread through her skull, slow and suffocating, like something was curling itself around her brain, squeezing. Her thoughts flickered, erratic, trying to hold onto the rational, the logical, but they were slipping, her own mind betraying her.

"Concentrate," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Focus. Just focus."

A dark whisper slithered again through her mind, honey-smooth and taunting. "You're almost there. Just stop fighting it." It said.

Sarah clenched her jaw, shaking her head violently as if she could physically toss it away. No. No, she wasn't listening to it. She *wouldn't*. Her breath came in short gasps, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She needed to focus. The machine. The only thing that could stop this.

Sarah forced herself to push past the sickening voice whispering in the depths of her mind and instead turned her thoughts toward the VR system. She had built it to be revolutionary, to create the most immersive experience possible. But Patricia had found a way to *corrupt* it, to use it against her, against Jack, against *reality itself*.

She had manipulated its core functions, rewritten its very essence. If Sarah had any hope of undoing this, she needed to do the same. She needed to take control of her own technology before it erased her completely. There were two options.

One: She could reprogram the machine to reverse whatever Patricia had done. The molecular resonance system that made the VR world feel so real was the key. If she could map out the neurological and physiological changes, she could construct a counter-program, something to bring her *back*, to bring Jack back.

Two: A full reset. A complete mental wipe. It would be dangerous—impossibly dangerous. She didn't know what it would do to her or Patricia, whether it would erase too much or not enough. But if it came down to that... Sarah's grip on the railing tightened. One way or another, she was getting her mind back.

The elevator slowed, the shift in motion jostling her slightly. The hum of the machinery deepened, signaling that she was approaching her floor.

She lifted her chin, squaring her shoulders.

The doors slid open.

Sarah stepped into the lab, and the air felt different. Heavy. Charged. It wasn't just the hum of the overhead fluorescent lights or the soft whirl of the computers lining the walls—it was something deeper, something oppressive. The lab had always been a place of reason, but now, it felt like a sanctuary of corruption.

Her eyes locked onto the machine in the center of the room. The second VR unit, an identical twin to the one in her basement, stood tall, surrounded by a semi-circle of glowing monitors and blinking status lights. A sleek, clinical design meant to be the pinnacle of technology, but now it felt more like a shrine—a gateway to something dark.

Then she saw her.

Patricia.

Sitting like a queen in one of the lab's chairs, legs crossed elegantly, posture relaxed, exuding an air of effortless dominance. The sight of her sent an immediate wave of unease through Sarah's body. She wanted to run, to back out of the lab before Patricia noticed her. But it was too late. The moment she had stepped in, Patricia had felt her presence.

Patricia's head turned sharply, her luscious waves of thick platinum blonde hair cascading over one bare shoulder as her piercing, seductive eyes locked onto Sarah's. And just like that, Sarah felt her entire body weaken.

Her legs trembled. Her breath caught in her throat. Her stomach twisted, not just in fear, but in dread. This was no longer her husband. No longer Jack. Sarah felt like a gazelle caught in the gaze of a lioness.

Patricia uncrossed her legs with an agonizing slowness, standing to her full height, the red dress hugging every sinful curve of her body. She took a step forward, and Sarah swore she could feel the very air thicken with each calculated movement. It wasn't just beauty—it was power, an overwhelming force of nature wrapped in the form of a woman too perfect to exist.

Then Sarah noticed them. Two lab assistants stood on either side of the machine. Or rather, what was left of them. They weren't just working—they were moving without thought, fingers flying across keyboards, eyes blank and glassy. There was no hesitation in their actions, no humanity in their expressions. Their movements were too smooth, too synchronized, like puppets on invisible strings.

Sarah's stomach twisted further. This wasn't just control. This was possession. Her eyes darted to a third lab assistant. A woman, awake, aware, and terrified. She thrashed violently against the restraints of the VR machine as the two blank-faced assistants worked in unison to secure her into the chair.

"Let me go!" she screamed, voice high and desperate. "Please! Doctor! Help me!"

Sarah's head snapped toward Patricia, horror rising in her throat. Patricia just smiled. Sarah felt an overwhelming weight pressing down on her, a sensation so heavy it made her chest tighten. Everything was collapsing in on her all at once.

Her husband, lost to something monstrous.

Her life's work, twisted into something unrecognizable.

Her own mind and body, betraying her.

And then the worst realization of all—her family, her friends, all of them at risk. If she failed, if she gave in, she would become the very thing she hated the most. Something cruel, wicked, and... beautiful.

Patricia's smirk deepened as she watched Sarah struggle. Her hands moved to her own body, teasingly grazing the curve of her waist, the swell of her hips. She was performing, relishing in the torment she was inflicting, in the power she held over Sarah without even touching her.

Sarah wanted to look away. But she couldn't.

The red dress clung to Patricia's body like it was painted onto her skin, the fabric stretching and hugging every perfect, impossibly voluptuous curve. As she moved, the hemline rode up just slightly, exposing more of her flawless, silky thighs. Patricia's lips parted slightly, her eyes heavy-lidded and knowing. She flipped her hair back, letting the waves spill over her shoulders, and let out a soft, satisfied sigh as her hands roamed slowly over herself, paying careful attention to her sizable breasts.

Sarah's fingers twitched at her sides. She hated her. She wanted her. No, that wasn't right. She wanted to be her. She felt it surge inside her—jealousy, admiration, hunger, resentment. How easy it would be to just kneel. To let go. To let herself change. To become what Patricia wanted her to be. Her sexy, wicked bestie.

Sarah clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms, forcing herself back to reality. No. She would not let this happen.

Patricia's voice, smooth as silk, slid through the air. "Oh, dear," she purred, tilting her head. "He let you in early." She sighed, trailing a perfectly manicured nail around an erect nipple that pushed out at the fabric of her dress. "Mmm. No matter. Watch this."

Then, with a casual flick of her wrist, she commanded. The two lifeless assistants moved instantly, fingers dancing across the keyboards, inputting a string of rapid-fire commands. The machine roared to life, screens flashing, data scrolling in a blur of colors and numbers.

Sarah barely had time to process before the terrified assistant strapped in the chair began to scream again.

"Doctor!" she wailed, thrashing harder. "Please! Help me!"

And for the briefest, most terrible moment— Sarah felt nothing. No fear. No urgency. Just a quiet, foreign satisfaction curling in the pit of her stomach. The sight of the woman begging felt... strangely pleasurable. Sarah's lips parted slightly, a shiver running through her.

No. No, this was wrong. She ripped herself away from the feeling, blinking rapidly as she forced her gaze back to Patricia, the fear crashing back into her like a tidal wave.

"Stop it!" Sarah's voice cracked, her breathing uneven.

Patricia just smiled, that slow, indulgent, wicked smile that made Sarah's insides twist in a way she couldn't explain. The machine whirred louder. The woman in the chair screamed.

Sarah's pulse raced. Patricia's laughter rang out in the lab.