

Chapter 1.

Charleston, South Carolina, Spring 1968

It was an unseasonably warm morning when Scott decided to step in and save his wife from drowning alone in his house. Unfortunately, Scott was never more insufferable than when he was convinced he was being altruistic.

So Kit sat and attempted to process his announcement. Scott wasn't partial to the kitchen's breakfast nook (too casual, he said) so the two were in the formal dining room, at a table that could easily accommodate twelve.

Though they sat alone, the walls always watched her, cluttered as they were with gilt frames venerating the Branson family to the fourth generation. When she closed her eyes to block out theirs, she could smell the wood floor polish Scott insisted they use at the start of each month, intermixed with scorched coffee from the percolator on the stove. That was all Scott; coffee still made her nauseous.

She watched him eat breakfast. One careful spoonful of shredded wheat after another. He would catch every drip of milk on the bowl's rim lest one spill onto his freshly pressed pants. If they were as clean as they looked, he must be doing his own ironing.

"You know I'm thinking of you here, darling," Scott said.

Kit pulled a face. The nerve to pretend any of this was about her.

"It's only for four weeks."

She sighed and dropped her eyes back to his bowl. There was little to say that he didn't already know.

Actually, the cereal looked good. Perhaps she should eat some too. But Scott had grabbed the last clean dishware in the house. To prepare her own would require reaching into the filthy sink, digging through the baby bottles, to salvage a crusted bowl and spoon that she'd then need to wash. And to relax at the table, she'd have to move the piles of burp clothes and diapers that formed its unceremonious centerpiece. Where to put them? The floor was unswept, the couch cluttered with the rest of the unfolded laundry.

Kit closed her eyes. She'd skip breakfast and go back to bed once he left. Just as she had done yesterday and the day before that. Maybe when she woke up again, the mess would feel less overwhelming.

Maybe.

From the radio in the corner, the familiar chime of the start of the morning news report. “*Good morning Charleston! Today we begin with another sobering update. Thirty-eight American soldiers lost their lives yesterday in the ongoing attacks across South Vietnam. More reports still to come for the week’s total fatalities...*”

“My mother isn’t that bad. And I can’t give up this opportunity.” A slight tremor in his voice now. “You know how long I’ve been waiting for it.”

Kit willed her body to remove her from this conversation. Scott’s ornate dining room loomed large around her, still elegant in its disarray. Though he sat just across from her, his polished oak table made the distance feel like miles. The contrast from her beloved childhood kitchen, with its chipped formica countertop and cheerful yellow wallpaper— a space so small it was impossible to eat without brushing knees with both her parents— meant his house would never feel like home.

The thought of her own family made her finally speak up. “You can’t leave me alone with your mother like this. She hates me. She’ll tear me apart.” He knew how fragile she was. Maybe in a few months, she would feel ready to hold her own. But not right now.

“Kit, look at me.” Scott’s voice rose an octave. “This trip is a huge honor. Holden told me that they’re banking me time to focus on my own research after the conference. I may even spend a few weeks at the Hagia Sophia. He strongly implied that it’s the right next step if I want to become a world expert on the early Byzantine.” Scott leaned closer. “And that I’d be an idiot if I don’t accept. Especially after—.”

She couldn’t swallow her wail. “So that’s it then. You’re leaving me. For a *month*. To go to the other side of the world.”

Kit understood Scott wasn’t being unreasonable. She had swept into his life and derailed every careful plan he’d constructed. She owed him this time away and more.

But that didn’t mean she was ready for him to take it.

Scott leaned away from his bowl, crossing his arms. “I considered taking you and baby Martin, I did! Just ask Holden, I almost made a formal request. But he’s right, there’s no time to arrange for passports. The conference is in just ten days, the Chair wasn’t expecting such a last-minute invitation. Honestly, it’s a huge honor that they’re letting me represent the department. To bring my wife along? You’d undermine my authority. I can’t risk coming off as unprofessional”.

Her fingers picked at the burp cloth she had pulled into her lap. “Fine. Leave if you have to, but let me stay here alone. Please don’t involve your mother.”

"I can't leave you home alone. Kit. You *know* I can't do that. You're barely surviving." He gestured vaguely toward the kitchen. "Look at the mess! I'm mortified for my mother to see it. And when did you last eat a real meal? I don't mean canned soup."

Scott took a breath for composure, and Kit braced herself. He was transforming into The Professor, and she, his captive pupil.

"I know going through those physical changes with pregnancy, that horrible birth, was hard. Hell, I'd probably be a little melancholy if I'd gone through all that. But Kit... it's time to pull yourself together. You're acting like the world ended just because you had a baby. That's not a tragedy—you should be glowing! Motherhood is a woman's highest calling. Frankly, it's insulting to see you so upset. And actually, I think it goes deeper. I think you're still sad about your mom. I'm sorry to be insensitive, but you must process that she's gone. You're so worried about being abandoned again that you're afraid to start living."

Well, if he understood her fear of abandonment, then why was he leaving her? A month was too long. He could postpone for next year, what did it matter? She could pull things together by then. The brain fog was overwhelming, but she *could* fight it. Let Scott come back tonight to a clean house, a content baby. He'd see that she was trying.

In Kit's silence, the radio shifted the coverage to race riots turned deadly in Baltimore. Could they turn the damned thing off? Did Scott need to start each day on such a depressing note? The news was never good.

Scott continued his measured bites of breakfast. He wasn't going to budge. Kit sighed. It was time for a compromise. "Then let me hire Valentina. She can watch the baby in the afternoons. I'll go out, get some fresh air like you've suggested. Besides, she's always peering through our windows. I might as well invite her in."

Scott cut her short. "No. I'm not paying anyone to do what my wife should do herself. I want you to hold yourself to a higher standard, this is well within your capabilities. And really, my mother isn't so terrible. With me out of the way, I think you'll finally bond."

Kit forced her eyes upwards from her hands, which had frayed apart the burp cloth's rough edge. "Scott, please don't do this to me. You know I can't live with her."

"Frankly darling, you're barely living *without* her. There's no room for debate. She comes in a week."

"But..."

"*There is no room for debate!*" Scott slammed the hilt of his spoon so forcefully onto the table that Kit jumped. Milk sloshed out of his bowl and into his lap, causing Scott to swear and leap

away, his long legs banging the table. From the back corner of the house, the baby began to wail.

She was rooted to her seat as he hurried to the sink, pushing the bottles out of the way to better blot at his pants. "You're being incredibly short-sighted right now. This is my *career*. The one I've all but paused because of you!" His eyes softened as he watched hers well with tears. "Look, I've tried to give you space to pick yourself up. But the baby was born two months ago. You need to snap out of this. I'm taking the research opportunity, and I need my wife back."

The look he gave her was probably meant to seem loving, but all Kit felt was ice. With the looming presence of Mrs. Branson, her prison walls had just risen another six feet.