

Farmhouse Fiasco [Excerpt]

By Kelly Pawlik

Chapter One

Adelaide pursed her lips and stretched her arm as high as she could reach. The long-handled pink feather duster caught the end of the cobweb. She flicked her wrist as she jumped and snagged enough of the dusty grey tendril to pull it down from the ceiling. The house needed to be perfect.

“What are you up to, baby?” her mother, Belinda, asked as she stepped into their living room. She wore her usual sleeping attire: an oversized T-shirt and a pair of underwear. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and smiled warmly at her daughter.

“Just some light cleaning.” Adelaide moved over to the television as casually as possible to dust the top of the cabinet. She lifted the empty vase on top and dusted underneath it. Wildflowers would cheer up the room, but it was November, so they would be difficult to find.

“Are we expecting guests?” Belinda asked with a laugh. “Darius perhaps?” she teased.

Adelaide paused at the mention of her boyfriend. Darius Belcouer, who moved here from Boston at the end of the summer, made her feel like anything was possible. He asked her to go steady at a party two days ago, on Halloween. She thought it was funny he’d used the words “go steady,” but that quirkiness was part of what she liked about him. Shortly after she agreed, the evening fell into chaos, but she was certain that had more to do with their strange small town of Olympic Vista than it did with Adelaide having her first boyfriend.

“No, I’m just cleaning.” Adelaide tried to maintain her usual even tone. She had already washed and dried the dishes, wiped down the counters, swept, and washed the kitchen floor. The bedrooms were next on her list, but it was only just ten in the morning. The shadow of neglect that shrouded the house lifted with each task. Adelaide hoped it would be enough.

Belinda shifted her weight and cocked her hip. She appraised her daughter.

Adelaide knew that look meant business, but she ignored her mother and continued dusting. How could she explain the pit she felt in her stomach since her friend and neighbour, Kurt, warned Adelaide his mother might have contacted a friend at Child Protective Services about Adelaide’s mom? Adelaide tightened her grip on the plastic-handled duster. Mrs. Zillman had it out for Belinda, and Adelaide was determined to prove her wrong. A clean house was a good first step. And whether

this intruder from Child Protective Services showed up or not, Adelaide would be able to spend her time fretting about it in a dust-free house.

“Adelaide,” Belinda said. “How long have I known you?”

“My whole life, I expect.” Adelaide often tidied up the house. She and her mother had a revolving door of roommates. The current two, Violet and Waylon, had been around for a little while now, and neither was particularly messy, but they never cleaned the common areas. Belinda was far from domestically inclined, which left the cleaning to Adelaide.

Adelaide liked a tidy house, but she usually got pulled away by her friends or the desire to read a book before all the cleaning was finished, so there were often a few tasks that still needed doing.

Adelaide had made too much of a conspicuous effort today.

“Smartypants.” Belinda smirked. “But yes, exactly. I’ve known you since the day you were born. Look, I know Sunday TV isn’t great but...what *is* this?” She gestured around at the sparkling living room. “I know I’m no June Cleaver, but was it that bad?”

Adelaide ignored her mother and moved over to dust a painting on the wall. It had been there for as long as Adelaide could remember. She wasn’t sure if her mother even liked it. The colourful psychedelic swirls of flowers and peace signs looked like the cover of a Jimi Hendrix Experience album.

Adelaide stifled a sneeze as dust floated off the top of the frame and into her nostrils. She focused on the painting and wished this conversation wasn’t happening. She knew it would not end well.

“Adelaide.” Belinda lowered her voice and raised an eyebrow.

“Fine.” Adelaide was cornered. She knew her mother wouldn’t drop it. She continued to dust to avoid eye contact and spoke as quickly as possible.

“Kurt let me know his mom was talking about calling someone at Child Protective Services.”

She sensed her mother freeze, but it was too late. Belinda had insisted on the truth and the words poured out of Adelaide’s mouth. “I don’t know if Mrs. Zillman called them, but I want to make sure everything looks okay. Just in case.” Adelaide gritted her teeth and stole a sideways glance at her mother.

The colour had drained from Belinda’s face.

“That...that...*mitch* is calling CPS on *me*?” Belinda’s face was stony. “With everything that goes on in *that* house?”

It was no secret the Zillman family had their issues. Kurt's father was an angry man. But everyone on Pine Street minded their own business. Except, it seemed, Agatha Zillman.

"I don't know, Mama. Kurt just said— I don't..." Adelaide trailed off. "It's gonna be okay, Mama."

"Get in the car, Adelaide." Belinda's voice was as stony as her face.

"Where are we—"

"Get. In. The. Car."

Adelaide set down the duster and carefully followed her mother out of the room. As Adelaide walked to the front closet, she used her left index finger to pick at the cuticles of her left thumb. It was a nervous habit. She paused only long enough to pull on her shoes.

Belinda marched upstairs and returned a moment later fully dressed and with her purse under her arm. She stalked toward their beat-up blue K-car.

There was a light drizzle, but the ominous grey clouds suggested worse weather would be upon them soon. Mother Nature seemed to be reflecting the foreboding feeling in Adelaide's gut.

Adelaide snatched her raincoat from the hook, pulled the front door closed, locked it behind them, and then scurried to the car.

Belinda had already started the engine. She shoved a mixed tape into the cassette player and spun the volume dial. The rhythmic strumming of AC/DC's "Back in Black" gave way to its opening riff.

Adelaide had only just clicked her seatbelt into place when Belinda shifted from park to reverse. She backed out of the driveway, quickly switched the car into drive, and planted her foot on the gas pedal.

Adelaide dug her fingers into the worn fabric of the front seat.

Her mother never drove this fast. Adelaide desperately wished she had lied about the cleaning. She wished she had said she was inviting Darius over and was trying to impress him.

Belinda kept her eyes on the road but raised her middle finger in a rude salute as they passed the Zillman house.

"People in this town should mind their own damn business," Belinda snapped as she paused briefly at the stop sign.

Adelaide took a deep breath. She hoped no one in the Zillman house had noticed. With any luck, Kurt and his mother would be at church, and Kurt's dad, Gus, would be passed out in his recliner, beer in hand.

The light rain created tiny pock marks on the surface of the pool. Darius had come to understand overcast days were the norm in his new hometown. The November air was chilly, but the Belcouer family pool was heated. Darius continued his breaststroke from one end of the pool to the other.

He felt like he was being watch and glanced at the pool deck where his twin sister, Davia, stared at him.

“Ew,” Davia groaned. “How can you be in there when the weather is like this?”

Darius stopped his lengths to tread water as he responded. “It’s warm. And it’s supposed to be wet in the water, Davia.”

“Whatever.”

Darius swam to the edge of the pool. The pads of his fingers held onto the rough concrete while his legs moved back and forth under the water. His favourite things about his new home were the pool and the pool house. He looked at his sister expectantly. “What is it, Davia?”

“I’m bored.” She heaved a dramatic sigh and exhaled so that her long blond hair fluttered away from her face for a moment.

“You’re always bored,” he replied. He knew it was not exactly true. Back in Boston, there were many people to entertain Davia. She had a big group of friends who were eager to spend time with her. Olympic Vista was a different story, and while Darius felt badly that his sister had not made many new friends, he doubted she’d tried very hard. Besides, she wanted something. She always wanted something.

“That’s not true,” she pouted indignantly.

Darius just shook his head. “Grab your swimsuit. Have a swim.”

“No.” Davia twisted her face into the smile she used when she wanted to get her way. “Why don’t you get dressed and convince Daddy to take us to a matinee in Olympia?”

Darius wondered why Davia didn’t just ask their father herself. She was probably biding her time to ask him for an even bigger favour.

“It’ll never happen,” Darius said. “For one thing, he’s at the office. For another, he doesn’t want to sit through some matinee with us. Convince Mom to...I don’t know...take you shopping at the mall.”

“It’s lame there!” she exclaimed. “It’s too small. The food court is tiny. The shops are pathetic. Like, none of my favourites are there! Gawd, Darius! You’re no help at all!” Davia spun on her heel and stomped off to the house.

Darius shrugged and returned his focus to his breaststroke.

The drive from Pine Street to The Diner had been tense. Belinda hadn’t said a word since the stop sign. Then, when they arrived at The Diner and the hostess asked if they wanted a table for two, Belinda just nodded sharply, once. Adelaide thought her mother had calmed down a bit once they had taken their seats, but Belinda was still tense, like a cat ready to pounce. Adelaide was not much better. She felt like a Slinkie that had been pulled too far.

Belinda had smiled tightly at the waitress when she had ordered food for the both of them.

Since then, Belinda mostly stared out the window while Adelaide picked at her cuticles under the table.

The waitress set two plates of food down on the table. Each one was piled high with scrambled eggs, bacon, fried potatoes, and a small fruit cup. Except for the canned halved cherries, most of the fruit was the same colour, making the canned peaches almost indistinguishable from the canned pears.

“Thank you,” Adelaide said to the waitress.

“Enjoy, dear.” She gave a quick nod and bustled off to another table.

“See? Isn’t this nice?” Belinda ripped open another sugar packet and poured it into her coffee. Her hands shook.

“Yes, Mama.” Adelaide looked at the plates of food and wondered what they would go without this week to afford this bill. She picked up her fork and took a bite of the eggs. They were warm and perfectly seasoned.

The Diner was busy. Most of the tables were occupied. A variety of patrons sat on the red patent-leather bench seats: families with small children, an older couple sipping coffee, groups of teenagers. Most of them were deep in conversation, enjoying the inexpensive platters of food and steaming beverages served at the small town’s only diner.

“If I couldn’t take proper care of you, I certainly couldn’t take you to The Diner for breakfast.” Belinda smiled tightly. “And here we are.”

Adelaide did not follow her mother's logic, but she nodded and forced a smile. "Thank you, Mama. The eggs are very good."

Belinda beamed back, but there was something in her eyes that told Adelaide she was deeply hurt. Adelaide wished she hadn't told her the truth.

Belinda turned and looked out of the window while she sipped her coffee.

A group of people chatted animatedly in the booth behind Adelaide. She turned her head slightly and saw it was a group of people in their early teens, just a few years older than herself.

"I'm telling you—the place is haunted!" a boy exclaimed.

"There are *no* ghosts there," another argued.

"Not a ghost exactly," the first boy said.

"Then you're a liar. Haunting equals ghost. End of story."

"No, no! It's this floating pumpkin head with a scythe. Like a super angry spirit," the first boy explained.

Adelaide's ears prickled, and she listened intently. She lifted a forkful of eggs to her mouth and took a bite.

"Dude, Halloween is *over*," a girl said with a chuckle.

"Halloween or not, that's what he saw," the first boy said.

The others around the table groaned.

"You didn't even see it yourself?" the second boy scoffed.

"Come on, I don't need to. It's not like it was my brother. It was his friend and there's no way he'd lie to me," the first boy continued. "And you know if something like that was happening it'd be *there*."

"Erikson Farms is messed up," the girl agreed. "A guy from school said he was out there one night poking around and got shot."

"Got shot?" the first boy scoffed. "There were no shootings."

"Fine. Got shot *at*. But still."

"Maybe he shouldn't have been sneaking around," the second boy suggested.

"Like you've never done it," the girl teased.

In the reflection of the restaurant window, Adelaide saw the girl swat the boy next to her.

"The eggs are good, you said?" Belinda asked.

Adelaide nodded and focused her attention back on her mother. "You should try yours," Adelaide suggested before she took another bite.

“I will, baby.” There was a familiar sadness to Belinda’s tone.

Adelaide tried not to think about the days to come. When Belinda got like this, she often spiralled into a deep depression. One time, she stayed in bed for a week.

Adelaide turned her thoughts to Erikson Farms. She smiled at the thought of telling Darius there was a new adventure on the horizon.

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