

The Other One

Paulius Kajokas

A Novel

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*You are not being haunted by a being —
you are witnessing the return of the probability version of yourself
that could not complete the incarnation.*

CHAPTER I — December 21, Evening

Kelly had never enjoyed getting ready for corporate parties.

Not because she disliked people. She could handle people when necessary. She could smile through small talk, laugh at the right places, ask polite questions about someone's holiday plans, and pretend she remembered the names of spouses she had only met once beside a lukewarm buffet table.

Same hotel ballroom. Same blinking lights. Same paper-thin cheer from coworkers who spent eleven months avoiding eye contact in elevators and then, for one heavily decorated evening in December, behaved as if they were all one large, affectionate family.

Tonight, though, something felt off.

Not fear. Not excitement.

A faint static humming under her ribs.

Kelly stood in the bathroom wrapped in steam, one hand pressed against the edge of the sink, listening to the pipes tick inside the wall. The sound was ordinary. The apartment was ordinary. The playlist coming from her phone was some generic algorithm-picked Christmas mix she hadn't chosen but hadn't bothered to change.

Still, the feeling stayed.

She shook it off and stepped out of the shower, tightening the towel around herself. Steam fogged the mirror completely, turning the glass into a pale, blurred surface. She wiped a streak through it with her palm, leaving a crooked slash across the condensation.

Her reflection stared back through the opening.

Damp hair on her shoulders. Tired eyes no concealer could fully erase. Skin still flushed from the shower. A face that looked calm only because she had practiced calm for years.

"Get it together," she murmured.

She dried her hair slowly, more carefully than usual, as if precision might settle whatever had begun crawling beneath her skin. Foundation. Mascara. A little color in her cheeks. Red lipstick.

She hesitated with the tube still in her hand.

"Too much?"

Her reflection didn't answer.

Her phone buzzed on the counter.

[Mia] - 6:45 PM
U coming 2night right?? Don't bail again

Kelly smiled despite herself while curling the last section of her hair.

[Kelly] - 6:46 PM
Yeah yeah, I'm going. Don't let them start the ugly sweater contest without me.

She set the phone down, slipped into her black dress, and turned sideways in the mirror.

Simple. Elegant. Safe.

The safe choice had always suited her. Not too much skin. Not too formal. Nothing that invited comments from men who thought December champagne made them interesting. Nothing that made her mother's voice appear in her head with questions about whether she was taking care of herself, dating anyone nice, eating enough, sleeping enough, being careful enough.

Another buzz.

[Mia] - 6:55 PM
lmao they already started. U should see Dave's sweater. Looks like xmas vomit

Kelly snorted softly.

[Kelly] - 6:56 PM
That's somehow exactly what I expected from Dave.

She checked the time.

7:00 PM.

A comfortable buffer.

The hotel was only twenty-five minutes away, thirty if traffic was ugly. She had no reason to hurry. No reason to feel that odd pull in her stomach, like she was already late to something she didn't remember agreeing to.

A cold draft slid across the back of her neck.

Kelly turned.

The bathroom door stood half open. Beyond it, the hallway was dim and still. The apartment had that early winter quiet she usually liked: radiator warmth, muffled street noise, the faint hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen.

Nothing moved.

She rubbed her arms. “Just nerves.”

Coat. Purse. Phone.

She checked the stove even though she hadn’t used it. Checked the balcony latch. Checked the front door chain before she opened it, then felt ridiculous and unhooked it.

Another buzz came just as she reached for the knob.

Not Mia.

[Unknown] – 6:55 PM
See u tonight.

Kelly froze.

The message was short. Plain. Almost casual.

Too weighted.

She stared at it for several seconds, waiting for the meaning to rearrange itself into something harmless.

Probably someone from the office fooling around, she told herself. Someone who got her number from a group chat. Someone already drunk enough to think mysterious was the same thing as charming.

Still, her thumb hovered over the screen.

Who is this?

She almost typed it. Almost.

Then she imagined herself standing alone in the hallway, fully dressed, asking a stranger to explain himself before a corporate Christmas party, and irritation rose over the unease.

“Nope,” she muttered. “Not doing that.”

She locked the phone, tucked it into her purse, and headed out.

The December air bit sharply as she crossed to the waiting rideshare. Snow drifted beneath the streetlamps in slow, loose spirals, catching briefly in her hair before melting. The driver had the heat too high and the radio too low. Some holiday song played under the sound of the wipers, all bells and strings and artificial warmth.

Kelly gave the hotel name, buckled her seat belt, and looked out the window.

The city moved past in streaks: wet pavement, red brake lights, storefront wreaths, strangers walking quickly with their shoulders hunched against the cold. Her phone sat heavy in her purse.

See u tonight.

She tried not to think about it.

At first, traffic barely moved. Then it opened. Then it slowed again. The ride blurred in pieces: a stalled delivery truck, a police car flashing blue against a snowbank, the driver muttering at navigation, the heater breathing stale warmth across her knees.

At some point, Kelly checked the time.

7:18 PM.

Still fine.

She leaned her head against the glass and closed her eyes for what felt like half a minute.

When she opened them, the hotel was already outside the window.

The driver cleared his throat. "Here you go."

Kelly blinked. "Already?"

He glanced back at her in the mirror. "Yeah."

Her phone read 8:18 PM.

For a moment, she simply stared at the numbers.

That wasn't right.

She had checked the time. She knew she had. 7:18. Maybe 7:28. Something like that. Not an hour ago.

"You okay?" the driver asked.

"Yeah," she said quickly, forcing a small laugh. "Sorry. Zoned out."

She stepped out before he could answer.

The hotel entrance glowed warm gold, all polished glass and fake garland, with doormen guiding people inside beneath a striped awning. Laughter spilled through the revolving doors. Music thumped faintly from somewhere deeper in the building.

Kelly adjusted her coat, gripped her purse, and walked in.

The ballroom was exactly what she expected and somehow too much.

Lights looped across the ceiling, reflecting in chrome trays and untouched champagne flutes. A Christmas tree large enough to require a committee glittered beside the far wall. The room buzzed with voices, blinking sweaters, low bass, perfume, heat, and the collective relief of people temporarily free from spreadsheets.

"There YOU are!"

Mia barreled toward her, holding two champagne flutes above her head like trophies rescued from a battlefield. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair slightly unhinged, her eyes bright with the first stage of tipsy enthusiasm.

“Where’ve you been?” Mia demanded, shoving a glass into Kelly’s hand. “You’re late—like, twenty minutes late. It’s 8:21.”

Kelly frowned. “What?”

Mia lifted her brows. “It’s 8:21.”

“I left at seven.” Kelly glanced back toward the ballroom entrance as if the missing time might still be standing there. “The rideshare said—never mind. Must’ve been traffic.”

“Holiday traffic is a hate crime,” Mia declared, already losing interest. She hooked her arm through Kelly’s and tugged her deeper into the ballroom. “Come ON. They’re judging ugly sweaters and you HAVE to see Dave. He’s wearing a crocheted reindeer head that—no joke—blinks.”

Kelly let herself be pulled along.

She clinked her glass against Mia’s and took a sip.

The champagne was syrupy, almost too sweet, but the fizz smoothed the edges of her nerves. She wanted it to help. She wanted the room to swallow the oddness of the taxi ride, the message, the cold draft, the hour that seemed to have folded in half while she wasn’t looking.

The ballroom was loud enough that her thoughts had to elbow their way to the surface.

She didn’t mind.

Noise was easier than thinking.

While Mia vanished into the crowd—already dancing with someone from accounting—Kelly drifted toward the bar. It was packed. Three men in aggressively festive sweaters leaned against it, one wearing a blinking LED necklace, another sporting a Santa beard that looked like it cost nine dollars and exactly zero shame.

Kelly slipped into a small open space between them.

“Hey there,” one of the men said with the practiced ease of someone already halfway through his drink. He flashed an easy grin.

Kelly answered with a polite, noncommittal smile—enough to be courteous, not enough to be encouraging.

The bartender popped a fresh bottle of champagne, the cork bouncing softly off a lighting fixture overhead. He filled the waiting flutes, and Kelly reached for the glass set in front of her.

As she did, the friend of the grinning guy leaned in just a little.

Close enough that she could feel the warmth of his presence. Close enough that she knew he was about to speak.

“New face?” he asked, tilting his head with a half-smile.

“No,” Kelly said, lifting her glass. “Just... quieter than most.”

He laughed softly. “Mystery type, huh?”

“Something like that.”

She gave him a small shrug—just enough to close the conversation politely—and stepped away toward an empty cocktail table tucked near the edge of the dance floor.

Every bass note vibrated faintly through the metal chair, pulsing up her spine. From here, the room looked almost surreal: people glowing in Christmas lights, half-tipsy conversations overlapping, holiday sweaters blinking like malfunctioning signals.

Mia was already in the center of it all, dancing with abandon, halfway between joyful and catastrophic—the kind of drunk that guaranteed several apologetic voice notes the next morning.

Kelly let out a quiet breath, perched her elbow on the table, and sipped slowly.

The champagne softened into a distant hum inside her. The crowd blurred into a warm, chaotic haze. For a few minutes, she almost managed to settle. Almost managed to believe the evening would become ordinary after all.

Then—without warning—a shadow fell across the table.

Someone sat down across from her.

She didn’t need to look to know it was one of the guys from the bar; she recognized the slightly uneven posture, the festive-but-overworn sweater, the way he carried himself like he wasn’t sure if he belonged here or didn’t care.

He set down a drink in front of her.

“Thought you might want something that actually tastes good,” he said.

A holiday cocktail.

Deep red. Mint leaf on the rim. Sugar crusted along the edge like frost.

Kelly looked from the drink to him.

Up close, he was harder to place than he should have been. Late twenties, maybe early thirties. Dark hair. A face that seemed familiar only when she wasn’t looking directly at it. His sweater was plain compared to the others, dark green with a single stitched snowflake near the collarbone. No blinking lights. No irony. No forced cheer.

There was something almost careful about him.

“Thanks,” Kelly said, though her fingers stayed above the glass.

He noticed. His mouth curved slightly, not offended. Almost amused.

“No pressure.”

That should have reassured her.

It didn’t.

Still, curiosity—or politeness, that old trap—won.

She wrapped her fingers around the cold stem.

“No problem,” he said. “I’m Rick, by the way.”

The name hit her with a strange flicker of awareness.

Not recognition exactly. Not memory.

Something lower.

A tiny shift under the ribs, like a locked drawer moving somewhere deep inside her.

Heat crept up her neck, a sudden flush she hoped wasn’t visible.

“Kelly,” she said.

“I know.”

The words landed too softly.

She blinked. “You know?”

Rick smiled, easy and quick. “Mia said your name earlier. Loudly. Very loudly.”

Kelly looked toward the dance floor, where Mia was currently yelling lyrics with the confidence of someone who knew only every third word. That explanation made sense.

Mostly.

“Right,” Kelly said. “That sounds like Mia.”

She took a sip—too quick—and the drink slid down her throat in a warm, heavy wave.

Stronger than she expected.

Rick watched her over the rim of his own glass, amusement tugging at one corner of his mouth.

“Careful,” he said softly. “That one sneaks up on you.”

“Yeah,” she exhaled, the warmth settling through her limbs. “I can feel that already.”

He leaned back, relaxed in a way that didn’t match the noise around them. Conversation slipped into place easily—little things at first. How long they’d each been with the company. Their mutual disdain for the party playlist. Her unapologetic ranking of Christmas movies.

“Die Hard is definitely a Christmas movie,” Rick insisted.

Kelly shook her head. “No. It’s an action movie that happens to have a Christmas decoration problem.”

“That’s a tragic misunderstanding of cinema.”

“That’s a tragic misunderstanding of Christmas.”

He laughed, and for a moment she found herself laughing too.

It felt light.

Easier than conversations were supposed to feel. Too easy, maybe.

Rick had a way of making silence feel intentional rather than awkward. He didn't rush to fill every pause. He watched her as if listening to more than her words, as if some deeper layer of the conversation interested him more than the surface.

Slowly—so slowly she didn't notice it at first—the cocktail in her hand began to blur the air around her edges.

Warmth lifted through her.

Softened her.

Her shoulders loosened, tension unwinding one subtle coil at a time. Even her thoughts felt smoothed at the corners, as if wrapped in something warm and numbing.

She laughed at something Rick said.

She wasn't sure which part had been the joke.

Maybe all of it.

Maybe none of it.

Her cocktail was nearly empty.

Rick's gaze dropped to the glass, then returned to her face.

"Wanna dance?" he asked, rising a moment faster than her eyes could adjust.

Kelly opened her mouth to say no.

Or maybe to say she needed water.

Or that she should find Mia.

What came out instead was, "Sure."

The syllable slid off her tongue with a strange, weightless ease.

He offered his hand.

She looked at it.

For one second, the room narrowed to that hand—pale skin, long fingers, a faint scar near the thumb she felt certain she had seen before, though she knew she hadn't.

Then she took it.

They stepped back into the blur of lights.

Color and movement melted together. The ceiling lights spiraled. The floor seemed to breathe beneath her feet. Rick's hand touched her waist—or maybe it was someone else's—while the music thickened into a heavy throb.

Faces swayed and reshaped in her peripheral vision.

Mia flickered somewhere in the crowd like a distant lighthouse.

The ground beneath Kelly tilted, not sharply, but with the slow, inevitable shift of a dream changing direction.

She tried to focus on Rick's face.

Dark hair. Soft mouth. Eyes she could not seem to hold in place.

Every time she looked directly at him, something blurred. Every time she looked away, she felt him more clearly.

A small sound caught in her throat, too soft to be a gasp, too quick to be controlled.

"Kelly?" Rick said.

His voice sounded close.

Too close.

She tried to answer, but the music dropped away. Not faded. Dropped. Like someone had closed a door between her and the world.

The lights stretched into long golden lines.

Mia's laughter became distant.

Her own hand felt far from her body.

Rick leaned in.

For one impossible second, his expression changed—not into something monstrous, not exactly, but into something painfully familiar. Something lost. Something waiting.

"I found you," he whispered.

Or maybe he didn't.

Maybe the words never touched the air.

Maybe they formed inside her.

And then—

The world folded in on itself.

No flash.

No fall.

No pain.

Just a gentle, muffled dark, as if someone had lowered a curtain over her senses and whispered:

Enough.

Meanwhile—unseen by her—

Kelly's purse sat on the small, cocktail-sticky table where she'd left it.

The room roared around it: laughter, clinking glasses, the thump of overworked speakers, Dave's blinking reindeer sweater flashing red and green through the crowd. No one noticed the black purse tucked beside a sweating

champagne flute. No one noticed the way the phone inside began to tremble softly.

First a single vibration.

Then another.

[Unknown] - 9:56 PM
Don't lose me again.

A pause followed—barely a breath between messages.

[Unknown] - 9:57 PM
I'm close.

Another vibration, sharper this time.

[Unknown] - 9:58 PM
u feel it?

The final two came almost on top of each other, like someone leaning closer to whisper through the screen.

[Unknown] - 10:02 PM
Kell...?

[Unknown] - 10:03 PM
I'm here.

The screen lit the inside of the purse in a pale, ghostly glow—unnoticed, unanswered—as the rest of Kelly's world slipped quietly out from under her.