



# After Our Kiss

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** I was thirteen when I was kidnapped. Fourteen when he helped me escape. Twenty-three before I ever saw him again. His face is all over the news: he's a wanted man, now. Maybe my memory played tricks on me... but he looks so different. The boy who saved me years ago had a shy smile and dark, soulful eyes full of secrets. This man has a hard jaw and a harder mouth. Lips that could never whisper sweet promises. I knew him as a hero—my savior. I refuse to believe he could become a villain. Not him. Then he abducts me, proving me wrong. He tells me he's going to take me apart and put me back together again. Make me what he needs me to be: a plaything for a monster. It's the fate I escaped when I was fourteen. And that's when I finally understand. He was never my hero. He's the man who's going to break me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 74

# Page 1

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- Prologue -

Georgia Mary King

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I was thirteen years old when I was kidnapped.

It didn't happen the way I'd been warned about—there was no shady van full of candy, no car pulling up alongside me while I tied my shoe. Years later that would be the part that left me with a constant sense of dread.

Life isn't the same once you realize you're never really safe.

Not even in your own bed.

I was lying under the covers when the knock came at my door. Startled, I slammed my laptop shut. The motion sent corn chips scattering all over my sheet and pillow. I didn't want my mother to know I was still awake at three in the morning, because it wasn't like I had a reason. I was just browsing the internet.

I couldn't know that time was about to become a precious commodity.

There was no second knock, just the door sliding open on its perfectly oiled hinges. That was how he came for me in the dark—a phantom who heralded no warning, and a man who left no mark...no evidence.

My eyesight was blurry from staring at the blue screen of my laptop. I couldn't see who was in my room. I didn't feel the intuition that I was in danger...that little flame of realfear...until my attacker covered my mouth with something that smelled strongly of hospital hallways.

Then it was too late to do anything.

There was only the cotton-weight of unconsciousness.

## Page 2

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- Chapter One -

Georgia Mary King

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I awoke abruptly to the sight of myself overhead.

A mirror? I wondered. It was full length, scuffed from top to bottom. There was a section near the top, right over my face that I swear was covered in claw marks. In a heartbeat I recalled everything.

The figure entering my bedroom.

The astringent scent that knocked me out.

The hard, violent arms that pulled me from my sheets.

My reflection showed that I was lying on a pale mattress, wearing the same clothes I'd gone to sleep in; gray sweatpants, a black tank top, no bra. I'd been low on clean pajamas. No matter how many times I told mom she didn't need to wash my things, she insisted. But she rarely followed through.

I wondered if this was her fault, in a way. Had her lack of focus meant she'd forgotten to lock our front door? Had she naively let someone inside? She'd been so lonely without Dad—so lost. She could be hurt, too. There was no guarantee that I was the only victim. Oh, god, Mom. Please be okay.

My eyes mirrored the stillness of my heart. I did not breathe, I didn't beg—except to ask my body to remain strong. I didn't know where I was or what waited for me. I was only sure of the tragedy of it.

“You're awake,” a voice said nearby.

My impulse was to look. Instead, I shut my eyes, scrunching them so they couldn't be pried apart. The stillness went out of me. My lungs thrummed, forcing air between my tightly clenched teeth. Someone is here! Was it the person who'd taken me? I couldn't remember anything about them, my brain heavy as a loaf of bread in the rain.

He—and it was definitely a he—asked, “What are you doing?”

Should I answer? What do I do? I'd been cautioned against danger all my life, but never told what to do once I was deep in it. The closest training I had was seeing an action movie or three where hostages were held at gunpoint. Usually, the kidnappers had demands. The hostages often ended up dead.

Flexing my body, I tested my bonds. Some kind of strap was keeping my wrists locked over my head on top of each other, my feet crossed at the ankle, bound the same. I could wriggle, but nothing more.

I was powerless.

No, I corrected myself. I can't move, but he can't make me talk to him. I don't have to look at his face. Small as they were, those little rebellions gave me a flash of strength.

And then the bed shifted with the weight of the stranger. His shadow fell over me, a hand—warm and rough—brushing over my forehead. “Are you feeling sick from the chloroform?” he whispered. His breath was gentle where it stirred across my cheek.

My eyes shot open.

Skin whiter than a lily, and irises the same shade as a lion's claws. This man... no, a boy—surely not far from my own age—was pretty in a subtle way. All long fingers, longer limbs, with thick, dark hair that swept over his brooding eyes. I'd never known someone in real life who was this handsome. There was sympathy in the subtle tilt of his eyebrows. But I wasn't stupid enough to fall for that.

He'd hurt me.

He'd yanked me from my bed.

I looked at him point blank, and I spit on him.

Jerking back, he released me. “What the hell was that for?” Wiping at his cheek, he stared dubiously at his own palm, then back at me.

Something about his surprise infuriated me. What was that FOR? How could he have the balls to even ask! Thrashing in my bonds, I inhaled, preparing to scream.

His hand slammed over my lips. “Shh!” he hissed, his inky eyes shooting towards one side of the room. It was the first time I actually looked around. The walls were an oatmeal-gray, some spots covered in peeling bird wallpaper. There were no windows, no rugs - nothing but my bed, the ceiling mirror, and a single door with a bolted lock.

“Seriously,” he said, his voice low enough to miss. “Stay quiet. Please. You don't want my dad to come in here sooner than he plans to.”

In the liquid depths of his mysterious eyes, I caught the hint of something swimming. Not anger; the slippery fin of fear. This boy was afraid...for himself, for me?

Lifting my eyebrows, I nodded my head. He understood that I understood, because he slid his hand off of my mouth. Swallowing around my rising nerves, I asked, “Who are you? Was it your dad who kidnapped me, where am I?”

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Glancing again at the door, he sat on the edge of the bed—next to my hip. “I’m not supposed to tell you anything.” I opened my lips to argue, but he got there first. “But I’m going to because you deserve to know. The other one, she didn’t. Now she’s dead.”

I dug my nails into my own palms. The other one? I wasn’t the first girl to be taken by this mad man. “Please, you have to help me get away.”

The pity in his stare gutted me. “I wish I could.”

“You can! Please, you can, just untie me. I’ll leave and never ever say a word about this. I promise. My name is Georgia. Georgia Mary King.” It was how my mother always addressed me. She’d said my full name made it clear I was no joke, and that if I wanted to be taken seriously, I should state it with pride. “I’m all my mother has. She already lost Dad, she can’t lose me too, please!”

He didn’t disguise the sympathy in his eyes. But I think he wanted to.

There was a sound from just behind the door. Together, we both twisted to stare. The lock was grinding, the knob shifting. Someone was coming.

“Please,” I whimpered.

He stood, and with his weight gone from the bed, I felt myself fading. “Don’t fight him. It’ll be easier.”

A pathetic, strained sob floated out of me. I didn’t recognize the sound of my own



voice. “No. No, please, stay. Help me! Just help me!” He wasn't looking at me anymore... like he couldn't manage it. I realized with a cold jolt that he hadn't told me his name.

Then the door opened, and I saw him.

He had to duck in order to enter the room. The shirt that bulged over his torso was unsettling in its angelic whiteness; it belonged on someone in a laundry detergent commercial, not on the man who'd dragged me from my bedroom in the middle of the night. But this was surely him. I knew it the way you remembered snippets of a nightmare, except I wasn't waking up.

Soft, baby blue eyes rested on me. They bounced over to the young man, then they were on me again—too hungry to be gone for long. “Good,” he said, “You're awake. I was worried when you slept through the tenth hour. Thought I'd used too much stuff on you, but looks like everything turned out right as rain.”

I wanted so badly to be brave. Instead, I trembled on the bed, too limp to yank at my bonds like I had before. And speaking, yelling? Moving my tongue was as likely as me moving the planets in the sky.

In the corner, the teen stood taller. “I was only checking on her, Dad.”

His father motioned to the open door behind him. “Get out. Right now.”

The nameless boy scanned my face. I willed him to save me... to do something to keep this horrific stranger from hurting me. I had the most insane idea that as long as this kid was here, his dad wouldn't touch me.

Then he was gone, shutting the door as he went.

No. No, no, no. I repeated the word internally until the man was beside me. He cocked his head like a giant bird, allowing the ever lengthening quiet to form spider-silk strings that cocooned me into paralysis. I hated anticipating what he'd do or say. My imagination was vibrant with wicked horrors.

He sat on the end of the bed, making the springs squeak. He brushed his fingertips over my naked toes. Marbles rolled through my guts; I dry heaved, and he just laughed. "My name's Facile Adams. I'm very much looking forward to getting to know you, Georgia Mary King."

That he knew who I was left me stunned, but it wasn't what surprised me the most. Why did he tell me his name? It was an amateur move—I'd be able to use this information to help the police track him down. In fact...was that why his son hadn't told me his name? Was he playing it safe, hoping he'd avoid being found out if I couldn't identify him?

Facile smiled at me. His teeth were pearly, but they still reminded me of rusty saw blades; weapons that wanted to slice me up and expose what was under my flesh.

Then I understood. I knew exactly why Facile was so quick to tell me his name.

This man...he had no reason to fear me telling the world what he'd done.

Why would he?

Dead girls can't talk.

He said, "I've been watching you for a week, paying attention to how you drag your feet on your way home every day. I wondered if you were having a rough time. Your mother is a single parent." His lips pulled across his face in a poor imitation of a smile. "She should know it takes a happy home to raise a perfect family. Love your

husband insicknessand health. What did she do that drove your father away?"

The sharp knock on the door made me gasp. Facile's peaceful features contorted into fresh rage. Pushing off the bed, he stormed over and opened the unlocked door. "What?" I heard him growl, though I couldn't see who he was talking to.

Whoever was outside murmured something.

"Shit," Facile spit the word. "Alright. I'll go take care of it." He peeked at me, and then he shrugged his huge body through the doorway.

The door was splayed open. It taunted me.

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From the darkness just outside, the boy entered. The sight of him filled me with relief—would he get me out now? “Hurry,” I hissed. “Untie me while he's gone. You led him away, right? That was on purpose?”

“Yes,” he said flatly. He looked at me; his eyes were more defeated than mine. “But delaying him is all I can do.”

Then he shut the door, sealing us in, cementing the fact I wasn't escaping.

He wasn't saving me.

He was never going to save me.

This guy was terrified of his father. How could someone like that help me at all? “Tell me your name,” I said, and to my shock I laughed. Was I already losing it? “It's not like I can squeal on you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on.” I strained in my ropes. “Your dad is going to kill me.” I saw his bottomless eyes sharpen. Emboldened, I spoke louder. “So tell me who you are. Unless you're scared I might actually get away and you'll have to face some fucking consequences?”

“Conway,” he said, never once looking away from me. “My name is Conway. And I hope you do get to use my identity against me. I'd be thrilled with that. Prison is the least I deserve.”

Stiffening, I tried to make sense of him. It could have been a lie but Conway's words rang with a depressing truth. I sensed his self-hatred. I recognized it because I'd worn the same uniform for years.

One of his hands splayed over the left side of his face. "I want to help you, Georgia. Trust me. I hate all of this. It's not as simple as getting out of this room, though."

I leaned a hair closer, as much as I could. Information was better than food and I was starving. "What's stopping us?"

He looked at the ceiling, perhaps wondering if it was a bad idea to tell me more. Were we really on the same side? Could he be an ally? "This house is in the middle of nowhere. There's no one around for miles. Dad has the only car, he keeps it locked up in the garage, and Lonnie is always watching."

"Lonnie?"

"My younger brother." His arm fell to his side. "He worships our father. He'll make sure no one escapes. Georgia, the best we can hope for is to keep my father from harming you. If you don't do anything stupid—" He stopped himself, recognizing that what he was saying was ridiculously offensive.

I kept my expression steady. "Okay. If we need time, then let's create time." I swallowed, wanting my voice to come out with levity on the next word. "Conway." It worked. His name from my tongue made the boy lock up and stare at me. "Tell me how to stay alive."

- Chapter Two -

Georgia Mary King

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Most of my fluid existence was spent in that room.

Facile kept the lights off at all times. I wasn't given much food, and water came only when it was absolutely necessary. It was frightening how he knew the exact edge to balance me on, keeping me weak but alive. I wouldn't starve to death, I wouldn't dehydrate; he'd always come at the last moment to hand-feed me some oatmeal or dribble water onto my parched lips.

After the first month, I wished he would kill me.

I only knew a month had passed because Conway told me. It could have been night or day, but as I was lying there in the sweat stained bed, reeking of my own staleness, a crack of light came through the door. It was brief—open, then shut.

Conway's voice whispered beside my ear. "I brought you something."

Pathetically, I sobbed. "Let me go, please, just get me out of here."

His hand cupped my cheek, his touch made warmer by my blind senses. The edge of something hard perched on my mouth. "Drink," he told me. "You need calories. Dad hasn't fed you much in four weeks. He's acting more insane than usual."

Carefully I swallowed; it wasn't just water, it was sugary lemonade. Gulping greedily, I took in too much. I struggled to sit up as I choked. Conway couldn't help me with the straps keeping me down; I sensed his panic, it rivaled my own as I worked to get oxygen into my fluid filled lungs.

For the first time since I'd awoke in this place, my wrists were freed.

Conway forced me into a sitting position. He rubbed my back as I hacked. Sucking in air, I listened to his calming voice, rocked into his kind touch. In the blackness I could pretend, for just a moment, that I wasn't a prisoner.

I rubbed the raw skin on my inner arms and hissed.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, tracing his hands down my naked shoulders until he touched my sore spots. I jerked in pain, and when I did, he growled. “I hate that asshole so much. I'll bring some antiseptic next time to make sure these don't get infected.”

“Wait,” I gasped, pushing at him, reaching for my ankles. “Untie me! You can get me out of here!”

“No, not yet. It's not safe yet.” He fumbled for my fingers. I knew he was going to tie me back up but when I yanked at him, my muscles were as useful as overcooked spaghetti. “Don't, Georgia, please.” He guided me down onto the mattress. “He'll know. I have to put the straps on again.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I tasted the salt, shaking as I began to cry. “Four weeks?” I asked softly. “That's how long it's been? I'm never getting out of here. You're letting me die in this bed.” Mom, I'm so sorry. I don't want to leave you alone. I don't know what to do.

He froze where he was clasping my wrists. His fingers drifted down my sensitive skin until they vanished. “I won't let you die here. It's okay if I don't tie you back up, for now. Dad won't check on you until morning. We have some hours.”

So it's the middle of the night. Knowing how long I'd been here, what time it was, it gave me something to grab at. The ground was under my feet again. I can live through this. Conway wasn't my enemy. He wanted to help me.

If I was stupid to believe in him... so be it.

What else did I have to grasp in the dark but naive hope?

His body rested beside mine. I could move my arms, but I was hesitant. Freedom was funny after such a long time without it. Warily, I pulled my hands down to my sides. As I moved, my elbow bumped something firm and hot—Conway's hip. “Sorry,” I said quickly, “I can't see at all.”

He tensed up. “It's okay. I... don't worry.”

I waited, but when he said no more, I brought my hands to my face. Exploring my skin, I traced the contour of my cheeks, the bridge of my nose. I wanted to make sure I was still here- all of me.

Down I moved, feeling my collarbone and my ribs. Those were more notable than they'd ever been. I'd lost a ton of weight. “Is there more lemonade?” I asked eagerly. Conway handed me the bottle. Sitting up again, I hunched over my knees and drank until I was sucking the drops from the rim. Fuck, it burned so good in my throat. The sugar gave my brain the energy it needed to function again. “Why is he starving me? Why torture me and not...”

I didn't want to say the word. It had been on my mind since day one—the harshly



whispered fear that all parents warn their daughters against.

Why hadn't Facile raped me?

Conway was quiet. I knew he'd picked up my meaning. Cloth scraped; he'd shifted on the bed. Was he wearing jeans? I tried to picture it, resisting the urge to reach out and know for sure. "Dad wants you to be pliable. If you're weak, hungry, he can make you do what he wants. He can reward you."

"Like I'm a hungry dog," I scoffed. It was disgusting.

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“Exactly like that.”

Turning the bottle in my hands, I considered my next question. “Thank you for this. Will you... come back and bring me more?”

He moved again, his body taking up enough of the mattress that he rubbed against my thigh. I twitched, putting my hand down nervously—it landed on top of his. Those fingers were thick with strength a teenager shouldn't have. I wanted to believe it was caused by something innocent like yard work.

Conway didn't pull away.

I did.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, clasping my hands in my lap.

“Don't be.” His voice was creamy enough that I could have rubbed it into my skin or coated it on my tongue. This hot beacon inside of me was new—it flared at the richness that Conway brought to my world. “I'll bring you food when I can. It's the least I can do.”

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On month number three, he didn't just bring food.

He brought me a book.

Flicking on a small flashlight, Conway exposed the pages to us both. “It’s The Call of the Wild,” he said.

I knew the book. I’d read it before, but I grabbed it like I’d never seen such a treasure. A book was something I’d been craving mental stimulation.

Together we read, and quickly, I learned that Conway loved books as much as I did—maybe more. He knew this one by heart. In the hours when we were alone and I was untied, we huddled in the single beam of light, moths drawn to a flame, and we read about a cold wilderness that was more appealing than my prison.

Sometimes, we sat on the floor. Other times, we lay pressed together at our elbows on the mattress. Like this, Conway would hold the book above us, allowing me to aim the light. If I wobbled, it would bounce off the mirror and blind us. It made us snort with laughter. It was so stupid; I adored it.

Conway made me feel safe. Normal. Lying together like this, I could feel his wiry muscles; take deep pulls of his musky scent. He reminded me a lot of Thornton, the kind master in the book. Did that mean I was Buck, the dog that’d been fished away from his comfy world and thrown into icy madness?

Picturing myself as a bold animal made stronger by a comforting hand like Conway’s turned me fuzzy. It was a good feeling and a weird one. If I’m Buck, then Facile must be The Man who beats him with a club until he breaks.

One evening, Conway brought a new book.

“It’s called The Valley of the Horses,” he said, sitting lotus-style on the bed. I was doing light jumping jacks in the flashlight’s halo. If I didn’t move around, I’d grow weaker. It was what Facile wanted—for me to change into a figment of my former self—so I railed against it.

Lately, the awful man had taken to coming into my room during the day. All he did was stare at me with his infuriating smile. Waiting for him to do something was part of the torture.

“Come and sit down,” Conway said, his eyes flashing in the dark. He was watching me with more intensity than usual. His eyes held a laser focus that turned his pupils into tiny specks. “Read this with me.”

I sank beside him and took a swig from the lemonade he'd brought. “This is book two of a series,” I said, reading the inside of the cover. “You don't have the first?”

He shifted side to side. “After my mother died, Dad brought us here. He didn't want any of her things. I managed to sneak off with a few of her books, but not all of them.”

“Oh.” I shut the book gently. “I'm so sorry, I didn't know about your mom.”

Shrugging his wide shoulders up, Conway took the book from me. “I haven't read this one yet. I thought you'd like it, though, because it has horses.”

I bit back a giggle. “Do you think girls naturally like horses or something?”

To my amazement, he blushed red up to his temples. “I didn't mean...”

I brought our bodies closer together on the mattress. “Shut up and read it to me.” He regarded me with one eyebrow arched. “For your information, I actually do like horses. Don't rub it in.”

We read together in the shadows, his voice low, emotive. At times I'd take over so that, soon, we were seamlessly tearing through the pages. It was a book about a hard world and what it takes to survive, much like *The Call of the Wild*.

We didn't know it was also a romance.

Both of us laughed nervously when the characters began to fall for each other. It wasn't until they began having descriptive sex that our voices went tight in our throats. Conway was reading, and suddenly, he just stopped. “What's wrong?” I asked, knowing full well.

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He couldn't look at me. His fingertips slid over the raised text on the book's cover. "Maybe we shouldn't keep reading this one."

"Why, because they're banging?" I said it bluntly to get a reaction. I got one; Conway snapped his face towards mine with his eyes wide, and his soft-looking lips parted. After going months feeling like I had no power, this new ability made me swell like a wave. I wanted to crash down on Conway and make him bow before me. I'd never felt like this—all warm and wiggly and wicked to my core.

Narrowing his gaze, he considered me seriously. "How old are you, Georgia?"

"Thirteen." I paused. "Wait, what day is it?"

"November tenth."

My stomach dropped. "My birthday was the 2nd. Guess I'm fourteen, now."

He didn't twitch an eyelash. "Sorry about your birthday. Maybe I can sneak you some cake next time."

"For real?"

"Sure. What's your favorite kind?"

Cracking a smile, I kicked my feet. "Strawberries and cream. Mom used to get me this really cheap kind every year, from this awful grocery store, but I loved it."

“Then I’ll do that.”

Little wings flapped in my chest. It was such a stupid thing to offer. But I loved him for it. “Promise?”

He held out his pinky finger, wrapping it in mine. We both squeezed. “Promise.”

Biting my lip, I tucked my hands in my lap. “Your turn. How old are you?”

“Fourteen. I’m only two months older than you.”

Beneath our silence was something new. It beat like a heart, an ever-growing pressure that shot upwards in a peak I couldn’t anticipate. It had to go somewhere, because if it didn’t, I’d go mad from dissatisfaction. “Have you ever done any of this?” I whispered, waving at the pages.

He shook his head. “No. Have—”

“No,” I said quickly. Chewing the corner of my lip, I examined my knees. “I’ve never even kissed someone.” I hadn’t cared about boys or dating. None of the guys at school had caught my eye. I’d always figured when I was older, dating would make sense. I’d find a guy I could connect with. But what if I never did?

Conway leaned closer. “Why are you frowning?”

“Because I just realized I might die before I kiss anyone,” I said, holding back a wave of tears. Rubbing my eyes vigorously, I smiled up at him through my own fear. “What if I never get to experience that? Can you imagine?”

His hair was casting his face in shadow. “You won’t die before your first kiss, Georgia.”

“I might. You can't say I won't, you can't know.” I stared at him closely, trying to read his expression. I noticed how lacquered his lips looked. I saw the hard lines of muscle just beginning to grow across his chest and arms, places his tight shirt didn't hide.

When I swallowed, I pushed my knees together. The book fell from my lap and hit the floor. Neither of us moved to get it. “Conway,” I said softly. “You could do it.”

The knob in his throat shifted. “Do what?”

“Kiss me.” My eyes were getting dry but I didn't dare blink. “You could be my first.”

“Georgia...”

“Please.”

“What if I'm bad at it?” he asked honestly.

A flash of empathy rocked my whole body. Conway was actually worried about being the first boy to kiss me. It was sweet—it made me want him more. “If it's bad, it's okay. I'll take that over never getting to do it at all.”

His hands slid down my shoulders. He was barely touching me, as if he expected me to disintegrate if he went too fast. The black of his irises was rich. It drew me in. I was floating in the Milky Way with nothing tethering me to solid ground but this stranger-



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this kind boy who was a victim like me.

Conway kissed me gently. He tasted like lemonade, the flavor entering my taste buds and shooting to my brain. I'd eavesdropped on older girls at school when they giggled about their boyfriends. The main complaint was too much tongue.

He was pure finesse, never daring to use anything but his soft lips on mine. Not even a hint of his teeth rubbed across my mouth. Were all first kisses this magical? Or was it enhanced by the spice of danger... the erotic nature of the book we'd shared?

It was over too fast. He leaned away, his breath quick and shallow. "Was it alright?"

Touching my own lips, I shivered. "I used to hate watching people make out in the park. Now I understand why they couldn't control themselves."

With my nights full of Conway, my captivity became bearable. I'd now done six months, so surely I could do seven. Or eight...even a year. I could manage it all as long as I believed my freedom was on the horizon- as long as I had my unlikely hero at my side.

On day 187, I met Lonnie.

- Chapter Three -

Georgia Mary King

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The lights flicked on and blinded me.

Groaning, I shut my eyes. It took a second for me to adjust enough to see the figure standing in the doorway. His lips were pink and full, stuck in a half smile that made my veins pump quicker. Wearing dark jeans and a gray sweater that was one size too big, I noticed how thin his wrists were; how jagged his collarbone was where it peeked through the wide neck hole.

“Hi,” he said, closing the door. I heard it lock. “I’m Lonnie.”

Conway had said he was the older brother, which meant Lonnie couldn’t have been more than eleven or twelve. He was a frail kid—nothing like his father.

Except in his powder blue eyes. They had the same hungry way of looking at me.

“You’re Georgia, right?”

I didn’t reply.

“Georgia, like the peach,” he said, laughing at his own commentary. In three steps he was next to my bed. He hovered over me, arms folded at the small of his back as he

squinted. He didn't stop smiling while he inspected my bare feet, my thinning legs, my concave belly, and finally... my face. "You really do look so much like her."

I tensed up. "Who?"

"My sister." His features screwed up, eradicating the pretend politeness. Underneath I saw his confusion, his lips twitching like he'd tasted something foul. "That's probably why Dad took you, if I had a guess."

His sister? Conway hadn't mentioned any siblings besides Lonnie. The dread in me grew legs, stomping over my chest so that breathing became difficult. The idea that I'd been taken because I looked like someone else, and not just some random attack, was chilling. Madness was one thing, being kidnapped with intent... that was something else.

From his pocket, he pulled out half of a chocolate bar. The sight of it made my stomach rumble. If Conway hadn't been slipping me food, I'd have started drooling. As it was, it only felt like my stomach was gnawing at itself. "You must be starving by now."

"Yes," I lied.

Lonnie brought it close, dangling it over my nose by a corner between two fingers. It swung like a blade ready to slice me in two. "Want some?"

Keeping my attention on him, I wet my lips. "Don't waste your time."

"What?" He stopped swinging the chocolate.

"You're here because you want something. I'm not going to give it to you in exchange for some chocolate."

His face went slack. I'd stunned him—I enjoyed that. “You're not supposed to talk back.”

“Says who?”

“Dad. He says when we own something, it does what we say.” Lonnie twisted the chocolate around, holding it flat in his palm. “Don't bother acting tough.” His fingers clamped together, crushing the candy into brown smears that squished between the gaps in his fist. “Everyone breaks for him. Everyone.”

Chocolate dripped onto my knee. I flinched, but didn't look away from him. “You don't know me.”

His grin was the jagged edge of an aluminum tin that had been split apart by an ancient can opener. Bracing his filthy hands on either side of my legs, he lowered his mouth, licking at the chocolate that had landed on me. This was perverse; it threw me off, some of my courage fading.

Lonnie didn't behave like a kid. What had he witnessed that had warped him?

Each individual taste bud scratched on my skin. He kept going, leaning across my body as he slobbered over my knee. I was hyperventilating and ready to gag. No one had touched me like this in my life. How far will he go?

Lonnie smirked up at me from the base of the bed, his hair spilling over his forehead. Patiently, he ran his tongue over the top row of his teeth. He was wearing braces. “If you're nice to me,” he whispered, “I'll untie you for a bit.”

My heart punched against my ribs. “Nice how?”

I saw his brief hesitation. He didn't know what he wanted me to do, not exactly,

anyway. This was all spontaneous exploration as he learned the path his father walked. I was just the toy to try out his skills on.

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Standing up, he touched my ankle gingerly. Was I the first girl he'd ever put his hands on? "I want to see you naked. Take your clothes off for me."

I can use his inexperience against him. Swallowing, I nodded slowly. "Untie me and I will."

It took thirty-five seconds before he spoke again—I was counting. "If you try anything, I'll kill you."

"I know."

He stared at me again. Did he guess what I was planning? Moving to my shoulder, he bent over me. For an exciting moment he gripped the straps that held me tight as a drumskin. His breath washed over me, getting faster—heavier. "Never mind," he said, letting go. "I'll do it myself."

"What?" I sputtered.

Grabbing the hem of my shirt, Lonnie started to tug. "I don't need your help. You're as useful as you'll ever be, just like this."

"No!" Gasping, I wriggled pointlessly. "Don't touch me! Stop, stop right now!"

"Bitch, I said hold still!"

"Get away from her!" Conway snapped. I hadn't heard the door open. Lonnie spun around, taking his brother's knuckles to his face. Crying out, he crumpled to the floor

while Conway loomed over him. He was shaking; his hair messed up, his eyes wild. He looked across, meeting my stare. Wordlessly he asked if I was okay, and just as silently, I bowed my head in appreciation.

“Asshole,” Lonnie groaned.

Conway's attention bounced back to his brother. “Get out.Now.Dad doesn't want anyone in here, and that means you.”

“Oh, but you're special?”

“I said get the hell out!”

“Fine,” Lonnie said, wiping blood from his nose. He stared at it, and when he smiled, his teeth were stained brownish-red. There was havoc in his eyes when he looked at me. “I'll have my turn with her. It's not like she's going anywhere.”

I didn't breathe easier until he was gone.

Conway came to me, quickly freeing me from the straps. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Before I responded, I viciously rubbed the chocolate fingerprints off of my body. Lonnie's touch was a virus that wanted to seep inside, and I needed all the evidence of it gone. My skin was raw and red when I was finished. “I'm... I'm fine. He didn't hurt me, he just...” Scared me. Terrified me. I shrugged helplessly. “That's your younger brother?”

Some tightness vanished from his shoulders. “Lonnie has always been creepy.”

“That's a polite way of phrasing it.” I hesitated. “He told me that I looked like your

sister.” Conway’s kind features hardened with despair. “You didn’t tell me you had a sister.”

“Because I don’t. Not anymore.” He shook himself, as if devilish creatures were hanging from his body, slicing at him as they weighed him down.

“What do you mean? What happened to her?”

“Ask my dad,” he spat. The venom inside of him was bubbling. It made me recoil—just a hair, but he saw and caught himself. “Sorry. I really hate talking about this, is all. I don’t know where she is. Dad won’t say, maybe he doesn’t even know. I’d give anything to find out the truth.”

“That’s awful,” I whispered. It would drive me crazy not to know where my family was. Mom must be so worried about me. “Were you two close?”

“Very much. She used to read to me, especially when mom and dad fought. She’d pull me into this little tree house we’d built in the woods behind our old house, wrap a blanket around us, and we’d pretend everything was fine.” He started to smile, but it melted before it really began. “Georgia...”

I tracked how fast his frown took hold. “What is it?”

“I need to get you out of here.”

“Yeah, I’ve been saying that.”

“I mean now. Right now.”

I sat up straighter. I didn’t have to ask what had changed; the chocolate smear on the floor reminded me of Lonnie’s bloody teeth.



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He looked at the same spot. “I can't predict Dad, but Lonnie is straight forward.” Conway made a fist, and then let it fall loose at his hip. “He won't leave you alone, not after seeing me protect you.”

“I don't understand... why does he care if you stood up for me?”

“That's just how he is. He's always been jealous of me, and if he thinks he can use you to fuck with me—if he hurt you, or worse, I'd never forgive myself.”

My urge to know more about this family's toxic dynamic was overwhelmed by the temptation of finally escaping. Gripping the edge of the bed, I almost fell off as I strained in his direction. “How do we do this?”

Conway tested the door; it was locked, his brother must have done that as he exited. “Dad isn't home. He left to go into town, get supplies. Lonnie will be busy tending to his wound. It has to be now.”

He pulled out a key and unclicked the double bolt. Facile trusted him with a key? How much had that fucker involved his kids in his evil games?

I nearly sprinted past him when he cracked the door. Conway peered out at the things I couldn't see... things I had never seen after months in this one room.

His spine curved like a feral cat's. Reading his body language, my breath bunched in my chest. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and I was sure his fear was centered here—at me. “Georgia, listen. I need you to understand this. I'll keep you safe as I can, but I can't promise trying to free you won't make this worse. If we get caught—”

“Shh.” I grabbed his wrists. His dark eyes kept shying away, so I went a step further and cupped his jaw; it was solid rock. “I believe in you, Conway. But on the off chance this goes badly, you need to know it's not your fault. You didn't bring me here. You didn't kidnap me. Anything you do to help isn't clearing your sins, because you didn't have any to start with.”

He frowned so hard I thought he'd shed tears. In a burst of speed, he yanked me out the door. We were in a dark hallway. Then a sudden, steep staircase appeared. It went up and up and up until my tired legs burned. Had I been in a basement?

Gray walls became beige; I glimpsed a second hallway with a long, yellow rug that was worn down so much that the fibers were thin as cellophane. On one wall, just before a dark wooden staircase that went up to another floor, I noticed a large portrait. Facile's face—even in 2D—stopped me in my tracks.

He pulled me onward, but I looked back. In the same photo was a young boy who had Conway's soulful eyes—they were downcast, his smile shy. Next to him was an older woman with reddish, curly hair. Her smile was just like his... like she knew a secret not meant for this world.

Conway's mother, I realized with shock. In her lap was Lonnie, because who else could that lanky kid be? I didn't care about him. I was interested in the other child—a young girl.

His sister.

Lonnie had said I looked like her. I could see the resemblance in her rounded nose and crinkled, happy eyes. We even had the same hair color.

Then we were outside, and I didn't care about anything but the fresh air. I almost collapsed on the front porch. Conway held me up, scanning the sunny horizon for

anything that would stop us.

Swaying in place, I breathed in huge gulps of sweet air. It was delicious. Had air always tasted this good, had I just never noticed?

All around us was an open field. Sparse brush littered the west; a dirt road stretched in the opposite direction. I had no idea where I was. “Am I still in Virginia?” I whispered, wishing I'd asked for more information sooner.

“You have to run,” he said, ignoring my question. Pointing off towards the trees, Conway ripped me painfully down the splintering steps. “Just go that way. The nearest town will take you three hours, but you'll get there... you'll make it. Run and don't look back. ”

He released me. The air was electric around us—my freedom so close, but running meant leaving behind the boy I'd grown close to. “Conway. Come with me.”

His expression was contorted with regrets. They aged him, and I had a glimpse into the future—at the young man Conway would become. “What you said earlier, about me not having any sins? I wish it was true.”

“It is.” On tiptoe I kissed him; something sweet, something desperate. Beneath hooded eyelashes I smiled up at him. “Only good guys get kisses like that.”

He inhaled sharply, as if I'd caused him pain. When he looked me up and down, I imagined he was imprinting my existence into his mind. Like this was the last time he'd ever see me.

If his plan worked, it would be.

“Go,” he demanded.

I ran for the tree line. I kept on until I was one big, aching muscle. My lungs thrummed, my throat ravaged, my heart threatening to take its last pump of life. For hours I pushed my weak body. But this pain was nothing—I was free.

And I didn't look back.

Just like he'd told me.

- Chapter Four -

Georgia Mary King

Nine Years Later

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Trash. Trash. Water bill. Trash. Sighing, I fanned out my stack of mail. It wasn't like I expected anything really interesting. I just wept for all the trees being repurposed to try and sell me Mike-George's Auto Care and other junk. Hmm, flier for a local book swap meet. That could be interesting-worth hanging on to for now, at least.

Stepping back inside my apartment, I double locked my door without a thought. My third floor barred windows brought in the hazy glow of the streetlights. I could see every corner at once, no matter where I stood. I could have afforded more but it was perfect for me.

Quaint.

Efficient.

Easy to spot danger.

Humming to myself, I opened the drawer under my computer desk. It was where I tossed things I wanted to look at when I had more time to dedicate to them. Usually it was filled with coupons I'd forget to use, or poetry I'd clipped and saved because my

mother had asked me to.

I paused when I dropped the white envelope inside. There was a matching set wrapped in an elastic rubber band in there. They looked no different than my water bill, but they were night and day. A stiff reminder of who I'd been and who I still was.

My story on the news was brief and open ended. No gory details—just a teenage girl escaping a dangerous man. Countless TV personalities asking, “Have you seen Facile Adams? Do you have any information to help solve this case?”

I'd expected phone calls. Hot lines with tips. Even harassment.

I received none of it.

Then, a month after people stopped talking about me, the first letter arrived.

I touched it now, feeling the crinkles from being read and re-read. My mysterious pen pal had never given me their name or home address; just a simple P.O. box. But for a little while, there was someone to talk to about my experience... and about Conway.

I even wondered if it was him writing to me. Except the questions were too focused on things he'd already know. Personal details no one else cared about.

After my mother moved us closer to Memorial Ketter Hospital here in New York, the letters stopped. I hadn't tried to restart communication. I'd had other things to worry about.

A loud knock came at my door. Placing everything carefully back in my desk, I shut it and hurried over to peer through the peephole cautiously. The girl waiting outside was tall, raven haired, and pushing the limits of everyday street-wear with her chocolate colored dress covered in zippers.

Chelsea Casey: fan of a thousand Pinterest boards, organic anything, and petting all the dogs. My one and only very close friend. I knew why she was here, and I groaned as I opened the door. “Hey,” I said, “You're early.”

“Oh no. No, no, no, my dear.” She dropped a plastic bag on my kitchen table. “You said you'd let me take you out. That means we do itmyway.”

“But the party is in two hours!”

“And I'll need every minute to help you get ready,” she said, winking. Strutting to my closet, she threw it open. Putting her hand up, she recoiled in horror. “Maybe I should have gotten here yesterday. Do you really have no other clothes?”

“Of course,” I said, waving at myself. “I have these, too.”

“Hardy harr,” she said, digging through my outfits. “I should have brought some of mine.”

Picturing myself in the avant-garde contraptions she adored, I sank into my couch. “The world isn't ready for that. Or I'm not, anyway.”

“Mm hmm, mm hmm, very—ah! Here, this is perfect!”

“I forgot I had that,” I said, eyeballing the dress she'd yanked free.

She spun it in a circle. “It's sexy. Why have I never seen it?” Pausing, she fiddled with the zipper, revealing a piece of paper. “It still has the tag on! Have youneverworn this?”

Flopping backwards, I pushed a pillow to my face. “I bought it in a fever dream of an online sale. It's not something I ever expected to really wear.”

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Chelsea parked herself on the arm of the couch. “Well, tonight my dear Georgia-Bear, everyone...” She knocked the pillow off so I could see her giant grin. “Is going to see you in it and fall to pieces.”

\*\*\*\*

The white dress clung to my curves. Even with all the running I did, it was a struggle to keep off the extra padding my eating habits created. Chelsea had once promised me—after she'd walked in on me elbow deep in bags of chips—that she knew the perfect diet.

I never bothered to explain to my friend that I didn't care if I was thin or not. Vanity couldn't have fit inside my issue-packed brain if it tried. Eating wasn't a compulsion. I did it by choice. I did it with glee.

After living multiple months with someone controlling what I ate, I appreciated being able to walk over to my cupboard and pull out whatever the hell I wanted. If living my life to the fullest meant getting soft around my edges, so what? Squishy puppies are incredibly popular on Instagram for a reason.

Chelsea parked her car next to a meter. “Sorry, we have to walk a little. There'll be no street parking left around the party at this hour.”

“It's okay, I don't mind.” She'd tried to make me wear heels, but I'd drawn the line and slipped on my favorite pearl colored flats. Traveling wouldn't be painful. For me, anyway. She'd picked out some ankle-breaking gold stilettos for herself.



At the top of the sidewalk was a small electronics store, the front window full of televisions playing different channels. We were waiting for the light to turn green when I heard a snippet from the news station. "...Police believe they've found their prime suspect responsible for the abduction of multiple women."

Unsettled by how close to home that hit, I turned to watch. It was only a bit of grainy footage. It showed a broad shouldered man ducking into a white van outside of a gas station. His dark eyes were uncomfortably familiar. It can't be him. Impossible. The video was too brief to be certain.

Then they flashed another shot, zooming in.

Nine years had done a number on Conway. The boy was now a man, his cheeks hollowed like a male model's, but his neck was thick, his arms too muscular to work a runway. He wasn't moving on the screen, but as he stared back at me, I imagined his serious face lighting up in a smile. I imagined our secret kiss in the dark.

The news anchor—a blonde woman in a red jacket—said, "This video is all we have of the suspicious man. Police Chief Markus is asking anyone with info to please come forward to identify him. If you see—"

"Is something wrong?"

I snapped my attention back to Chelsea. "It's just... this stuff on the TV."

She squinted at the screen, making a face. "Everything on the news these days is gross. Come on, we're supposed to be helping you loosen up, and this," she jerked her thumb at the host chatting away, "this is just going to make you miserable."

It's not like she's wrong, I thought. Besides, what do I even say? "Hey, this suspicious man the police are looking for? He's the boy who saved my life! How weird, huh?"

Think he's single?"

Chelsea knew nothing about my kidnapping. My therapist had done a good job convincing me to talk to people about what I'd been through. She meant well, but when the first guy I'd tried seriously dating had listened to my tale, gone sickly green, then never called me again... I'd stopped bothering to let anyone into that part of my life.

I wished I could block myself away from it.

With a nervous look back at the store, I followed my friend down the street. My thoughts were still back in front of the televisions. Conway is actually alive. That thrilled me—I'd spent years wondering about him.

The police had never arrested his father, and no one could find head or tail of his boys. They hadn't even been able to find the body of the girl I'd stated again and again Facile had murdered. I knew it was true! Conway wouldn't lie about that!

But they'd dug up nothing.

No body.

No kidnapper.

Nothing but an empty house and a bed covered in straps in the basement. They believed me, but that didn't help me feel safe. I was part of an open case that everyone had forgotten about. Everyone but me.

"Come on," Chelsea laughed. "This guy throws the best parties." The house at the end of the street was two floors of lights and blaring music. People hooted on the grass out front, red solo cups abundant in every hand. I felt like an alien.

Wandering around after my friend, I began to regret my attempt at this whole “being social” thing. Did I really need to make new friends or meet guys? What was wrong with being single? I could get some cats, or a cute dog, and spend my days traveling.

I could watch Netflix on my couch while ordering from Yelp more than once a day.

That sounded amazing, actually.

“Oh!” Chelsea gushed, giving me a shove. “That's Cody Masters, he's down here from Silicon Valley. He's got a startup!”

I couldn't not roll my eyes. “Chelsea, that's...” She stared at me pointedly. “...fun! So, so fun. Go say hello.”

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“Are you sure?” she asked, already backing up.

Laughing, I grabbed a red cup from one of the many tables and filled it with rum and coke. “See me making a drink? I'm sure. Let's mingle and talk about it later.”

Clasping her hands, she bounced off to go talk to Mister Startup. I watched her lips move, saw his spread in a grin, and when she giggled I was sure I'd be taking a taxi home alone. Ah, but my purse is in her car. I should have brought it inside. I could have played on my phone in the corner and ignored everyone.

No. Chelsea wants me to mingle. She meant well, and considering how many times I'd tried to fix her life, I owed her some effort. Sipping my drink was only so fun. Swaying to the ever changing, forgettable techno beat wasn't engaging me, either.

Parties have always made me feel lonely. And my mind was still fixating on the video footage of Conway. Maybe I'm wrong and it wasn't him. It wasn't a leap to think I could be jumping at shadows. I'd done it before. But I wanted to be right. I wanted that man to be the boy I'd known in another lifetime.

Reaching up, I grazed the back of my neck, touching the skin my long hair hid. Conway had left an impact on my heart. Tomorrow, I'll go to the police and see what they can tell me. If the man they wanted was really him...then I needed to know why. The news said he was suspected of kidnapping girls. But that was ridiculous. I knew him. He'd never do something like that.

He could never be his father.

Taking my red solo cup on a tour of the big house, I scanned all the strangers. They'd formed groups; mixing in and starting a conversation would be hard. I'd finished my drink, and was debating on getting another, when a new problem popped up.

Damn, I need to pee. Wandering up the stairs, I found the bathroom easily—there was a huge line of people waiting for it. Rocking side to side, I groaned. Maybe I should take this as a sign to just leave. Chelsea wouldn't even know. But my bladder couldn't make it all the way to my apartment, let alone a store that might let me use their restroom. Back home, you could have knocked on anyone's house, and they'd have let you use their bathroom and given you a cup of coffee.

I miss Virginia. I missed... a lot of things.

“There's another bathroom around back,” a guy behind me said, gesturing. “In the guest house. I can show you?”

He was around my height, his hair the color of summer wheat. Nice enough looking. Chelsea would dig his type. I was more interested in what he'd just suggested. “That'd be great, thanks,” I said, smiling sheepishly.

“I'm Jason, by the way.” He hopped down the stairs.

“Georgia,” I said, chasing him past rows of people. The crowd thinned towards the back of the house, and when we exited into a large yard surrounded by stubby pine trees and brick walls, we were alone.

Jason glanced back with a bright smile. “Are you cold? You don't have a jacket.”

“My friend's idea,” I said, rolling my eyes. “She thought a jacket would hide my—” I shut up, realizing that talking about my “assets” would sound egotistical. And I wasn't. I'd have been just as happy in a plastic garbage bag and left alone.

Pursing his lips, Jason pointed at a small building across the yard. His breath was visible in the cool night air. “Here it is.” He opened the door for me, flicking on the light. It was cozy; a small shag rug, Ikea furniture, one of those giant arching lamps that I was always afraid I’d tip over if I blew on it.

“Is this your house?” I asked, ducking under his arm and entering the building.

“No.” He shut the door behind us. “Paul owns it all, I’ve just been here a bunch of times. Bathroom is over there.”

It wasn’t easy to miss, being the only other door. This place didn’t even have a closet. Ducking into the bathroom, I shut myself inside and sighed happily. Of course, the one interaction I have is with a guy showing me where to find a toilet. Chelsea would laugh at that later.

Cleaning up, I dried my hands and fixed my hair in the mirror. It wasn’t like I could do much with it, the reddish, thick strands were in a perpetual state between frizzy and stiff.

When I stepped out, Jason was sitting on the small white couch, his feet on the glass table. There were some books in a stack, one of them—a copy of *The Great Gatsby*—was now in his hand. He was holding a pose, as if I’d caught him in the moment of being intellectual. Right then I knew he was fake.

That doesn’t make him a bad person, I reminded myself. I knew all about acting fake. I did it a lot to get through the day. Smiling, I cleared my throat. “All set.”

“Oh, great!” Dropping the novel, he stretched his arms across the back of the couch. “So, Georgia. Anyone ever make any jokes about you being a state incepting another state?” He made the iconic *Wow* sound from the movie *Inception*.

I covered my mouth. “Hah, nope. I usually get better jokes than that.”

He laughed loudly, throwing back his head. When he considered me again, his eyes were warm... twinkling. “Hey. Come sit over here, let's get to know each other.”

My stomach plummeted. “I'd like to get back to the party.”

“The party isn't going anywhere.” Jason unfurled from the couch, swaying towards me. I became super aware of my distance from the door... how his body was blocking me. “In fact, there's a better one right here, babe.”

“Jason, I'm not interested. Sorry.” Why the fuck was I apologizing? Tensing my body, I gave him a sharp frown. “Let's just get out of here.”

His head tipped lower. I was reminded of a lion as it prowled. “Relax, doll. I only want to show you a good time. And you should be thanking me. I helped you out, right?”

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“All you did was show me to the bathroom,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Now I'm ready to show you more.”

We moved at the same time. He jumped at me, and I darted for the exit. Jason's arm curled around my throat, tossing me to the floor. I hit hard enough that my skull was ringing—the vibrations numbing my ears.

“Learn to have some fun,” he said, sitting on me.

Rolling, I struggled to keep his hands off of my chest. “Stop it!” I screamed, “Help! Help me!”

No one could hear over the music outside. The party was roaring, rocking, and drowning out my plea. Shoving my knee up, I caught him in the groin. His eyes watered, but he didn't climb off, he simply slapped me. “Fucking hell!” he said, cupping his crotch. “You're psycho!”

He'd hit me hard enough that my gaze had shifted to the left wall. It was nice, not having to look at him.

Jason's weight vanished. I drew in air, desperate to breathe. I'd thought he'd stood up, but I turned and saw he'd been yanked off of me. A broad figure dressed in faded jeans and a glossy brown bomber jacket had Jason in a headlock. I couldn't see the new man's face.

“Let me down, asshole!” Jason shouted.



Mr. Stranger obliged. He threw my would-be rapist to the ground. Hard.

“Fuck,” Jason gasped, hunched on his hands and knees. He started to lift his head, but the other man jammed a knee into his temple; he collapsed, out cold.

Quickly I got to my feet. “Thank you. If you hadn't showed up, I think he would have—forget it. All that matters is that he didn't get that far. You saved me.”

It was semi-dark in the guesthouse, but that didn't prevent me from studying the man's face when he turned. Eyes like a furnace that had long gone cold. Severe cheekbones covered in rough stubble that stopped just before his angular chin. His lips were thinned out by how hard he was pressing his molars together.

Once upon a time, those same lips had been soft as butter.

My heart shuddered. “Conway?”

This reunion was one I'd dreamed about over the years. I'd wake up in a sweat; sometimes I'd be sweltering, wriggling in my sheets as I imagined my long ago hero as a full-grown man. My imagination hadn't been kind enough. Conway was gorgeous.

But I already knew that. I'd seen him a couple hours ago on the news. Goosebumps went up my neck. “The police,” I said softly. “They're looking for you.”

In a split second he went from statue to cheetah. He was on top of me, muscular arms controlling my struggles, a wide hand capturing my mouth so I couldn't scream. Lightheaded from his speed—his close proximity—I didn't even fight. Nostalgia washed over me. I'd lived this exact moment when I was thirteen.

Back then it had been another man who'd pressed chloroform to my nose. Conway

did it with similar precision. Forced to inhale, my eyelids fluttered, weighted down by the drug. I was a comet burning in the atmosphere; plummeting so hard I could pierce the earth's crust and land next to Hades.

The last thing I saw as I faded away were Conway's black pupils.

If I did end up in hell, at least I'd find him there.

- Chapter Five -

Georgia Mary King

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I woke up thinking about horses.

Coughing, I rocked sideways, trying to remember what I'd been doing before I passed out. Had Chelsea coaxed me into too many shots? Anyshot was too many, but I'd agreed to have fun on her terms.

White noise throbbed in my skull. It rolled behind my eye sockets when I opened them. My body was shifting even though I wasn't moving. I really DID drink too much, ugh.

Overhead was a dirty ivory ceiling. Blinking, I carefully turned to keep my headache from assaulting me. I was lying on my side on a smooth floor that matched the walls. The only light came from two laptop-sized, tinted windows at the end of the room.

No. This isn't a room. The walls rumbled—the ground under me jolted, and I cried out as my brain flexed in sympathy. I went to rub my dry eyes; that was when I noticed my hands were bound together in front of me by a strip of plastic.

I remembered everything.

Conway! He'd knocked me out. He'd taken me. This wasn't a house, it sounded and

felt like a car. A van. I'm in a fucking van. Oh god. What was going on? Rolling back and forth, I saw that my ankles were bound the same as my wrists.

“Hello?” I croaked—my voice was weak. I needed water. Ignoring how much it hurt, I swallowed and tried again. “Hello! Help! Can anyone hear me? I need help!”

The van squeaked to a halt.

For a while, nothing moved. I strained to hear every sound, picking out what I could. The right-handle wriggled; even though I expected it to be Conway who opened the van doors, I wasn't ready for him to appear.

Half of his face peered inside. He took me in carefully, like I was a wild lion he'd locked up. Then he entered, shutting the door quietly behind him and making me remember all those times he'd done the exact same thing.

Too late, I knew I'd missed my opportunity to scream. The sound could have escaped through the crack. Scooting my knees under me, I sat up, readying myself for his approach.

“It's been awhile.” His voice was a rich vein of silver running through the earth's crust. There was more of a pleasant timber than he'd had as a teenager.

“I wondered what happened to you,” I said, shaking my head. “When the police investigated, they found no trace of anyone. I hoped you were okay. I searched for you online, off and on until...” Until my therapist convinced me to stop. She'd said it wasn't healthy.

He hadn't moved from the rear of the van. He was wearing the same jeans, but the brown jacket was gone. A thin, gray ribbed t-shirt put his muscular body on display. His arms were exposed; both were covered in elegant, shiny black ink.

And scars.

So many scars.

Conway saw where I was looking. The edge of his cruel smile belonged to someone else. It reminded me of his father, and the comparison made me ill. “You searched for me? Funny that I found you first.”

“Conway, what's going on?” I lifted my bound hands in front of me. “You were on the news. They said you'd abducted a bunch of women, I didn't believe it—”

“But now you do,” he cut me off. One scuffed boot came my way, then another. He was nearly on top of me. “You were always smart, Georgia.” Him speaking my name caused a ripple inside of me. “Put the pieces together. The police are looking for me because I'm a bad fucking person.”

“You're not,” I said quickly. “I know you, Conway. You risked everything to help me. You saved me! And you did it again last night!” I was trying to appeal to the part of his humanity I knew was there. “Whatever is going on, we can talk this through. Just... just untie me. And we'll talk.”

His left hand swept upwards; a chunk of his pinky finger was missing. Ruffling his hair, he knelt in front of me. His nearness brought his scent to my nose—smoke and sage. “I didn't save you last night. I just got rid of someone who was in my way.”

A hairline of doubt cracked my confidence. “No. He was hurting me, and you stopped him.”

“If I'd arrived a half hour later, and he'd already fucked you...” He said it so coldly that my heart began to crust with ice. “You'd still be right here, tied up in this van. Don't mistake timing with heroism.”

That was when I really, truly saw him. The tattoos, the scars, the muscles... the fierceness in his black eyes, how he held himself with a natural dominance. Even if there was more going on here, I had to stop doubting that Conway was capable of hurting me.

He'd wound plastic around my limbs.

He'd thrown me in a van.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

The boy who'd smiled shyly at me in the dark was gone. It was time for facts, and the biggest fucking fact was this:

Conway had kidnapped me.

Shifting on the floor, I stared just past his ear. "People will look for me. There were witnesses all over that party."

"They saw you. Not me."

He was right, but I was just talking at this point. "My friend Chelsea will know I'm missing, she'll report it." Five, six feet at most. If I move fast enough...

"Let her. The police don't treat missing women the way they do little girls. Even if they take her report seriously, it doesn't matter. No one will find us."

My attention bounced back to his face. His intensity burned. "And why's that?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

I leaned towards him. He flared his nostrils, like he was angry—or like he'd gotten a whiff of me and wanted more. "The old you would have told me where we're going. You didn't like seeing me lost and scared."

He hadn't blinked during our entire talk. "I'm not the boy you knew nine years ago, Georgia."

“That's alright,” I said, squaring my shoulders. “I'm not that same girl.” My forehead rocked into his, sparks exploding between my eyes and along my temples. But I didn't care because I'd stunned him, giving myself a chance to run.

For the first six months that I was home after escaping Facile, my mother didn't push me into anything. Not going outside, not seeing friends, not attending school... she just let me be. But when I turned fifteen and was still sleeping with the lights on—and triple checking the house locks—she insisted I do something about my fears. Something practical.

I humored her and endured three years of self defense classes. My instructor encouraged me to run, so I began running each day. When I returned to school I joined the track team. To this day, I kept up with the routine. All that exercise hadn't healed me.

But it had made me strong.

Gasping, I shoved forward, stumbling on my tied feet. I was half-hopping to the van doors, my bare knees scraping painfully on the floor. Go, go, go! I screamed at myself, fumbling with the handles.

Behind me, Conway approached like a speeding train.

The handle went down under my clawing fingers. In a great heave I threw myself outside, eating sand, some of it getting in my eyes. I didn't care—I screeched. “Help me! Someone help me!”

Hands yanked me up, tossing me back into the van. Even though my eyes were watering to get rid of all the grit in them, I still saw the landscape outside. It was just one long strip of road, pine trees going orange under a bold October sun.



There was no one around to hear me.

“Not a bad attempt,” he said. He didn't shut the door. He hovered next to it, the open sky taunting me. Conway touched the bridge of his nose gingerly. “Thought you'd broken something for a second.”

Rolling onto my knees, I spit out phlegm mixed with sand; my mouth tasted terrible. “I wish I had!” A nuclear bomb went off inside, my words flying carelessly. “What's wrong with you? You hated your father, remember? Now you're doing the exact kind of shit he used to! Why? Tell me why?”

All emotion slid from his features. “Why, or why you?”

My pulse quickened. “Why me.”

Surveying me long and hard, he said, “You need water. I'll be right back.”

“What? No, tell me why you kidnapped me!”

But he was gone, stepping out and shutting the door. I didn't have to wait more than a minute; Conway returned with a bottle in his hands. What else did he have with him at the front of the van? Crouching, he tipped it towards me. “Drink.”

Eyeing it, I curled my fingers together in one big fist. “Did you drug it?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” I said, though I took the bottle anyway. Sipping from it, I shut my swollen eyes and sighed. I'd been parched, but the situation had made it easy to ignore my body's needs. I drank until Conway took the water away.

“Look up at the ceiling,” he commanded.

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“I'm not doing anything you say. I'm not a willing captive, asshole.”

His hand was like iron when he gripped my chin. With ease, he tipped my head back, splashing water into my face. “You've got sand in your eyes. If we don't wash it out, it could do permanent damage.”

Coughing, I turned away when he let me go. Blinking furiously, I silently admitted that my eyes felt much better now. One act of kindness didn't make up for what he'd done to me, though.

My vision was blurry as I looked back at him. Conway was crouched with his forearms resting on his knees. Then I noticed he was looking downwards. Following his gaze, I saw that the water had turned my white dress transparent. Chelsea had convinced me not to wear a bra because it was backless, and bra straps were “tacky” according to her.

I'd used the adhesive skin-colored pasties she'd given me. At some point they'd slid off, sticking to the inside of the dress but not at all hiding my obviously visible nipples.

Conway leveled his stare—we were eye to eye, silently studying each other in this new moment. It reminded me of years ago, sitting with him on a bed as we shared an erotic story.

I glimpsed his lust. He saw me glimpse it.

Suddenly he broke away, standing stiffly; a wooden soldier come to life. “Get

comfortable. This will be a long drive.”

Flushing, I jerked my head to the side, taking my body with it. My arms and knees bunched together; I was a tight ball of humiliated fury. “You honestly can't believe you'll get away with this. Your dad didn't.”

Squeezing the edge of the van door, he hunched his shoulders. “I'm not my dad.”

Then I was alone.

- Chapter Six -

Georgia MaryKing

The van ground to a halt.

There were no lights inside the back of the vehicle, just the smudged orange that leaked through the tinted windows after the few hours that had faded away. Hugging myself violently, I'd fought down waves of carsickness mixed with the effects of being drugged. Conway's swerving finally caused me to puke all over myself. It had mostly been water, but it still smelled awful.

He opened both doors, illuminating me in the darkness. Behind him stretched a wall of glitter; stars that winked at me, a sky I might never see again. Stop thinking like that. You don't know what's going to happen.

That was the worst part of all.

“Hungry?” he asked me.

I gestured at myself, feeling no shame. “I threw up everywhere thanks to your crazy driving. So no, not very hungry. I need clean clothes—and I need to pee.”

His arms stretched the doors open wider. It made his lats flex along his rib cage; I hated how good he looked. “I'm not asking for your list of demands.”

“Unless you want piss to join the mess back here, help me out.”

I couldn't read his face; his front was all shadow, his edges lit up from behind so that parts of his shirt became translucent, like a bird's wings as it flew too close to the sun. What was creating the source of light? “Don't try anything,” he said, half-stepping inside and reaching for me.

Scooting closer, I let him grab my arms. He was strong enough to lift me from the van—I was surprised at how gently he did it. The new Conway and “gentle” went together like peanut butter and sewage.

He balanced me at his side. Ignoring his closeness, I looked around, getting my bearings. We were the lone vehicle parked next to a small building with a single orange light bulb set in the overhang. It was surrounded by stiff grass, two vending machines stuffed in a corner by a faded restroom door-

a self-service rest stop.

Every state had them; it gave me no hint as to where I was.

“Come on,” he said, hooking me by the elbow.

“Wait!” Intentionally I let myself stumble; it was easy with my bindings. “I can't go anywhere like this.”

“Don't fuck around. Walk.”

Digging deep, I channeled my inner toddler and went boneless. Flopping to the ground, I scraped my knee, wincing. “You're asking too much, just untie my ankles. I can't use the restroom like this.”

He glared at me, his eyebrows scrunching together above the bridge of his nose. Conway looked over at the van and then at the sky—was he waiting for something?

Then he shook himself, scooping me up and carrying me towards the restroom.

He's not waiting for someone, I realized with a start. He's hurrying because someone is waiting for him. My stomach knotted up as I imagined who it could be. What if it's not a person, but a departure time - a plane? Fuck, if he got me out of the States, no one would ever find me.

Shaking with paranoia, I was slow to notice how Conway was cradling me against his firm chest. His fingers were pressed into my shoulder and the top of my outer thigh.

Looking upwards, I studied his strong jaw bobbing overhead. His facial hair was the same sable color as his hair. It gave him a wild, devil-may-care appearance. If I brushed it, would it feel like sandpaper? Tingles I didn't anticipate flowed under my skin. No one had ever held me like this, it made me hot as an oven in summer.

But it didn't make me feel safe. Once upon a time, it would have.

Kicking open the restroom door, he set me down inside. "Go. And be quick."

The room was made from mildew-coated tiles and flickering lights (the victim of sparse public funding). The soap container held more pink-residue than actual soap. Above the rotten smelling sink drain was a toaster-sized mirror that had a few major chunks missing. At least the toilet was clean.

Conway stared at me; I stared back. "Well?" he asked.

"I'm not going with you watching me."

"After the stunt you pulled earlier, I'm not leaving you alone."

"Stunt?" I laughed sourly. "Trying to save my life is a stunt?" He said nothing, just

observed me silently. “Conway, I can't escape. This room has no windows. Stand outside the door. Give me a small bit of privacy. I deserve that much.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

His arms knotted over his chest. Whether he agreed or not, he must have realized arguing was a waste of time. “Be quick.” The door drifted shut behind him.

Dropping onto the toilet, I shut my eyes and sighed; I hadn't been able to hold it much longer. How is this happening to me again? If fate existed, it had a fucked up sense of humor.

Cleaning up, I waited to flush—I didn't want him to know I was done. I couldn't escape through the walls, but there could be something here that would help me later.

Moving around as quietly as I could on my tangled ankles and flats, my eyes throbbed from how intently I looked for something. Paper towels, toilet paper, a tiny garbage can... it wasn't striking me as helpful.

I caught my reflection in the mirror—smeared makeup, stained dress, tangled hair. Part of my face was gone where pieces of the mirror had been broken free to reveal the matte foil beneath. That's it. Anxiously I reached up, gently pulling at the glass.

Outside, Conway coughed. “Almost done?”

“Yes!” I managed, popping off a finger sized piece of glass. Hurriedly I wrapped it in layers of toilet paper. It didn't look like much, but to me, it was perfect.

I had a weapon.

Tucking the now safely contained shard into my underwear, I flushed the toilet. Walking would be a challenge but my tied ankles gave me a natural excuse. Conway

wouldn't suspect a thing.

He came in as I was rinsing my hands. In the mirror, I saw him watching me. Could he sense my new confidence? Tossing paper towels into the bin, I faced him. “Okay. Now I'm hungry.”

\*\*\*\*

I very, very carefully knelt down in the back of the van. Surviving would be much more difficult if I sliced myself open with a piece of mirror.

Conway handed me a bag of chips from the vending machine. Then he offered me a small bottle—lemonade. The wave of sorrow that drowned me caught me off guard. Lemonade. Had he given it to me on purpose? Reaching out, I closed my hand on the bottle, studying his face for... for any hint that this wasn't how it seemed. That kidnapping me was a ruse and he'd take me home. We'd worry about how to move on, but we'd do it. Somehow.

He let go of the bottle. “Drink up, we leave in three minutes.”

“What is this?” I whispered, clutching the lemonade.

“A snack.”

I couldn't look at him anymore, so I stared at my fingernails. My voice was a fragile warble. “How can you be so cruel that you'd give me something to remind me of all the ways you protected me?”

Crickets sang outside the open doors. I wished for a car engine, the crunch of tires, but we were the only ones here. The van rocked when he stepped out, his boots disrupting the gravel.

My gaze was blurry with tears. Lifting my chin, I saw the back of his head—the hard lines that bridged between his shoulders and neck muscles. Everything was stiff, but didn't he always look that way?

“It's just lemonade,” he whispered.

I thought about throwing it at him, except I didn't know how long I'd be here, or when we'd stop next. My pride didn't extend past my need to survive.

But I didn't drink it until he was gone.

I wouldn't give him that satisfaction.

- Chapter Seven -

Georgia Mary King

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Why me? Why this again? Why him?

I asked myself those questions until they changed into a tangled mass of barbed wire that shred me where I was weak. I'd always worried about Facile slipping out of the shadows to capture me again. That fear had been an open wound inside of me, one that I'd been told to ignore by each family member and friend as they grew frustrated—ultimately giving up on me - all of them cutting ties.

But you don't fucking ignore when you're bleeding out.

I shouldn't have gone to that party, I berated myself. Wanting to live my life like a normal person was a mistake. In hindsight I saw the many paths I could have taken to avoid this. I could have told Chelsea who Conway was. I could have told her I needed to go to the cops. My regrets tugged on my wound until it became a cavern.

Why is he doing this? Could I have read him so wrong when we were kids?

Squeezing my eyelids shut, I drilled my memories, looking for any hint that the sweet boy who'd read books to me would one day become the monster driving this van. Conway had been a kind soul who did his best to keep his father at bay. He'd punched his own brother to protect me.

What had I missed? Because it had to be something.

If not... then there was another reason he was acting like this. God, I wanted to believe that. It was the same flickering hope I'd clung to nine years ago. I dug my nails into the softness of that wish; if I held too tight, I'd suffocate it.

At some point I fell asleep. I didn't know how long, but the light outside the windows had changed—become brighter. The van wasn't moving, was that what had woken me up? Conway ripped the doors open just as I got to my knees. The hard edge of the mirror dug into my inner thighs.

He nodded at me with his chin. “We're here.”

Here—there was a crisp finality to that word.

I'd tucked myself into the far left corner of the vehicle. He was wearing that shiny bomber jacket of his again. It made him bigger. Sturdier.

He wasn't going to ask if I was ready, or if I was coming; he expected me to go to him. I debated trying to slip the jagged shard out without him seeing—with my knees pulled to my chest, I could do it. I'd be able to slice his throat when he came to grab me.

Picturing his blood spilling all over me was too much. I was a fighter, not a killer.

Scooting on my butt with my legs folding up, then out, I moved like an inchworm. I felt about as brave as one, too. The mirror was wrapped in enough layers of paper that I was sure I'd be fine, but I was still cautious.

Conway slid his elbow around mine, helping me down to the grass. A strong wind wrapped itself in my hair. Salt hit my nose, then the ripe, tangy scent of the ocean.

We were standing on a slope that rolled down to a sandy beach. It had a single, weatherworn dock.

Peeking over my shoulder, I saw the barely-there dirt road that vanished behind a large hill and thick bushes. A rusted wire fence circled off to both sides, multiple faded “Private Property” signs clung to it.

He kicked the van doors shut, then crouched, tossing me over his shoulder fireman style. “Hey!” I shouted.

Ignoring me, he took long strides down the slope. His boots echoed off the wooden boards of the dock. He was taking me towards the ocean, but I was looking at the white van as it became smaller. I'd missed so many chances to get out of this situation. How many more would I have?

My vision spun; he'd flipped me up and over too fast. Clenching my teeth to settle myself, I was relieved when I felt solid wood beneath me, instead of the icy waves. Conway sat across from me in the small boat; he scanned my face, eyebrows arching. “Did you expect me to drown you?” he asked.

“I don't know what to expect from you anymore.”

He untied the rope holding us to the dock with expert speed. He's done this before. Many times, I think. Gripping the thick oars, he grunted, rowing us out into the high tide.

Overhead, the sky was the color of pasty oatmeal. Seagulls shrieked, circling, barely flapping on the wind. Strands of my hair kept lodging in my lips and blocking my vision. I turned in place, taking every landmark in.

The boat wasn't meant for long distance travel. We couldn't be going far. Squinting, I

faced Conway, searching beyond him. There was a dark blob on the horizon; the closer we got, the more I picked out. Some sparse trees... and rocks that angled upwards like dragon spines. “What island is that?”

He navigated without looking at the landmass we were approaching. “That's your new home.”

Shivering, I watched it come into focus. He pulled us up towards a new dock—I spotted another boat, and my heart soared. More boats meant more opportunities to flee. I noted the fence that surrounded the part of the island I could see. It was in the shape of a lopsided horseshoe, blocking all access between the dock and the land beyond.

Not far past that was a house.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

“How many people are living here?” I asked, my voice getting higher. The old home belonged in an episode of Downton Abbey. It was far bigger than it needed to be for this single island. It was also ancient—missing roof shingles, peeling paint, boarded windows. Each time a big wave smashed against the cliff side, I expected the house to crumble from the impact.

His lips twitched into a frown. Suddenly he glanced at the island. I wondered if he wasn't capable of looking at me as he answered. “We'll mostly be alone.”

Our boat glided into the dock. Conway jumped out, tying it securely into place. Constant waves sent the vessel swaying side to side. “Come on,” he said, offering a hand.

I looked back at where we'd come from. With my limbs tied, I couldn't swim the distance. Was it a mile from here to the other shore? I might not be able to make it even WITH my arms and legs free.

“Don't,” he said sharply.

I twisted, catching the distrust in his eyes. And something else—a hazy tension that screamed fear. “What,” I said coolly. “Afraid I'll drown myself before you can have your fun?”

He grabbed for me; I bent away, staying out of reach at the rear of the boat. “Georgia, stop it. Take my hand.”

He's worried I'll do it. I looked down at the swirling water. It had to be freezing this



time of year. “Why do you care if I die?” I stabbed him with a glare. “Are you not planning to kill me, like your dad would have?”

Conway's scowl showed off all his perfect teeth. “No. I'm not going to kill you. Now get up here, before we both get knocked into the damn ocean.”

He could have been lying. The little girl in my past said he wasn't.

I linked my fingers with his. Conway squeezed tight, as if I'd fly away into the sky. Pushing to my feet, I let him help me onto the dock. He held me a second too long, our hips touching, my face pointed up towards his like a flower in the sun.

He turned, the moment gone. “This way,” he mumbled.

With his assistance I made it up the steep path to the chain-link fence. He unlocked it, carrying me through, setting me down to close the gate back up. I watched very closely where he put the key—left rear pocket of his jeans.

His thick arm scooped around my middle. Hugged against his warmth, the only thing shielding me from the salty wind, I let him half-drag me to the front door of the house. The closer I got, the more its worn out state became clear. This house hadn't been maintained for a long time.

We stepped onto the threshold, and as Conway reached for the door, it swung open.

The man who stood inside held the brass knob so tight his knuckles gleamed on his pale skin. It was made starker by his heavy, black sweater. The stranger was the same height as Conway, but he had lighter hair, eyes like stones abandoned at the bottom of a river.

I didn't recognize him until he smiled. The braces were gone, but it was the same,

awful grin that had chased me through my night terrors.

“Welcome home,” he said sweetly.

Lonnie.

- Chapter Eight -

Georgia Mary King

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“No,” I whispered.

Lonnie reached for me; I shrank away, leaning into Conway like I could merge with his body. His grin twitched on the corners. “Come on, is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Don't come near me!” I snapped, watching him with one wild eye. The rest of my face was buried in Conway's shirt.

“Guess you kept that spine of yours all these years,” Lonnie said. He bent down, leveling his attention on me. “Can't wait to see it break.”

I'd begun trembling, the shaking so bad that my teeth chattered. No. No, this isn't happening. It can't be real. Lonnie had spent the least amount of time with me out of his whole family, but he'd scarred me down to my bone marrow.

And he was here—just a foot away.

Conway's arm came down, circling my shoulders. “Stop it,” he said, no room for argument in his tone. “You're scaring her.”

Lonnie shot his eyes up at his brother. Then he stood straight. “That's the fucking idea.”

“You're here to watch, that's all. Remember that.”

“I know what my job is.” Lonnie squinted at me. “I'm wondering if you're the one who's forgotten what he has to do.” Then he backed into the house, making room for us to pass.

My feet were frozen to the wooden step. Conway nudged me; I dug my heels in. “No, please. I can't. I thought I could handle whatever this fucking was but I can't, not with him here!”

To my utter amazement, Conway embraced me. “Shh,” he murmured against my temple, comforting as fresh pancakes. “You have to go inside, Georgia.” Cupping my cheek, he turned me to face him. There was a hint in his sad smile of the boy I used to know. “We both do. We don't have a choice.”

He said we. Stunned into compliance, I let my body go soft. He helped me inside, kicking the door shut with his foot. Through the walls, the ocean and the wind howled. I was shivering as much in here as I had outside.

“I think she's cold,” Lonnie chuckled.

All three of us noticed my nipples standing out against my dress. Flushing, I blocked the view with my arms. “Keep your eyes to yourself, fucking creep.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, oddly polite. Moving from the door, Lonnie approached us. “Say that again. Please.” The undercurrent of a threat was clear.

Conway shifted, blocking me from his brother. “Did anyone come near the island

while I was gone?”

“Not a one.”

“Alright, good. I'm taking her to her room.”

“Just like that?” Lonnie asked.

Conway scooped me up, and I was grateful for it. He turned his back on his brother, walking through the barren front room. The walls were all the same sea foam green color. A single hallway led further inside. Behind us, Lonnie called out, “Dad left a message for you.”

Those comforting arms turned into writhing snakes. They crushed me so hard I whimpered in shock; Conway loosened his hold. He didn't stop facing the mouth of the hallway. “What was it?”

“It was short and simple.” A floorboard creaked as Lonnie followed us. “He said to tell you 'Remember Anna.'”

I should have wondered what that cryptic message meant. Instead, I was too busy feeling sick over the fact that their dad was working with them. Would Facile come here? I bit my tongue to keep myself from sobbing.

Conway's heart thudded in his chest and through my skin. Part of me itched to reach up and comfort him without even knowing the source of his stress. Don't pity him, I reminded myself. He's as bad as his father—worse, for betraying me.

He breathed out, it shifted the hair on my scalp. “I haven't forgotten Anna. I never will.”

Lonnie didn't follow us through the hallway. Conway's boots slid as quietly as they could over the ground, the old wood flooring moaning in spite of his efforts.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

We stepped into a wide room. All the windows had been boarded up, though the work didn't look recent. Had these brothers done it, or someone else?

A staircase stretched up out of view in the far corner. We passed it, heading deeper into the house, neither of us speaking. I was mapping every turn we took, refusing to accept I wouldn't need that info. If I was going to escape, knowing the fastest way out was paramount.

He took a sharp turn, a new hallway opening in front of us. It faded into blackness at the far end, four doors in matching white paint spanning along the walls.

Conway opened the third one on my right. The sound of the mechanical lock grinding brought acid up in my throat. He set me down inside. The light was already on, showcasing a windowless room with nothing in it but a twin bed. No sheets, no blankets, it was forgettable in every sense.

Except for the mirror up above.

This room... it mimicked the one I'd been trapped in nine years ago.

“Oh god,” I whispered, my voice tight. “Oh god. You can't be serious.”

Behind me, the door shut. It was the second unique 'click' that made me turn. Conway held up a switchblade, his eyes cold.

I thought about a few ways I'd dodge the knife: falling backwards, jumping sideways, ducking low. But I didn't need them. Instead of stabbing me, he gripped my forearm

and snapped the plastic tie off.

Unsure what he was thinking, I stood there numbly as he crouched, cutting off the one around my ankles. Gingerly I rubbed my wrists, fingering the tingling red ring leftover from my bonds. “Why would you do that?”

“So you can take off your dress for me.”

My eyes flew wide—heat spread up my neck until I was glowing. “I’m not going to strip for you. You’re insane to ask!”

“I wasn’t asking,” he said, and he sounded so tired. He passed the blade to his other hand absentmindedly. “Take it off, or I’ll do it for you.”

Maybe it was the result of all of my frustration coming to a head... or maybe I was just fucking nuts from disbelief... but I didn’t care that he was threatening me. Looking him dead in the eye, I felt my snide smile and didn’t try to control it. “That must make you feel so good, huh? Threatening someone who doesn’t have a weapon?” I did—but I wasn’t ready for him to know about it. Conway would slice me up before I could get my mirror-shard out of my underwear.

He stopped moving, not even his throat twitched—he was holding his breath.

I bent my knees. “I can see you trying to figure me out. You want to know how far I’ll go, how hard I’ll fight you.”

His eyes flashed from black to oblivion. In a smooth motion he closed the blade and stuck it in his back pocket, next to the key I knew he had. “You don’t want to do this, Georgia.”

“I do. I really fucking do.”



A half-smile, like he was curious, crossed his handsome face. Conway didn't brace himself, he didn't even take a stance. He was an imposing figure in front of my only exit out of this prison. He breathed easy... patiently...

Waiting for me.

Jumping forward, I made a reckless swipe with my elbow at his stomach. My arm cut across my body at full speed; I wasn't going to hold back. I couldn't. Not if I wanted a shot at winning.

To my amazement, I made contact. My elbow slammed into his gut, the reverberation shaking my teeth in their gums. He was solid.

Looking down his nose at me, Conway grappled for my wrist. He caught it, and we tangled together, his limbs trying to catch me while I struggled to slip away.

As strong as he was, I was ten times more desperate.

“Fuck!” he hissed, releasing me, staring at the scratch marks I'd left in his arm. Flexing my fingers I dodged around him, squeezing into the gap between his body and the door. My hand brushed the doorknob. Then he was on me again.

His thick arms coiled until I was crushed from behind. My lungs abandoned all their air; I deflated under his aggressive force. He spun me quickly, throwing me onto the bed. “Last chance,” he said, breathing heavily—more than he should have been. He'd barely exerted himself. “The dress comes off by your hands, or I'll do it for you.”

Sitting up on my elbows, I glared at him. “You're a monster.”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “I know.”

He rushed me as my legs swung off the bed. Smoothly he grabbed my ankles, kneeling on them and the mattress. His weight was familiar—his nearness confusing. I forgot we were fighting and in that spare second I glanced upwards, seeing my pink cheeks in the mirror overhead. With my dress hanging so loosely, exposing my cleavage and nearly my nipples, I looked like someone recovering from a dirty hook-up.

Everything about this was familiar, yet twisted.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

Like it had been designed to fuck me up.

“Georgia.”

I darted my eyes back to him. He straddled my upper thighs, the hem of my dress tickling across my sensitive skin. His shirt strained over his chest. I saw how it raised rapidly, his lips half-open, pupils dilated. It was an expression that said “I could hurt you,” but it also said, “I want to fuck you more.”

Conway was turned on by... what? My struggles? I didn't know all the pieces of this puzzle, or what the final picture even was. I just knew that the static energy making his heart pound was affecting me as well.

I placed my hands on the mattress by my head. “Alright. Take it off.”

His eyes widened. He hadn't expected my compliance—surprising him thrilled me. Shifting in place made his jeans scrub my skin. The roughness woke up more of my cells, my heart flexing madly.

Conway was unquestionably sexy. Being under him like this had been one of my fantasies, and now it was real. But it also wasn't.

His hands reached for me, looping around my dress's straps. One thumb caressed my left shoulder as he started to guide the garment upwards. “Ah,” I hushed. That brief contact had sent a whirl of pleasure through my core.

He inhaled long and deep, shutting his eyes. I imagined him trying to get control of

himself. This side of him was intriguing... no less frightening. But lust was something I could understand, and I mercilessly ached to understand Conway.

There were flecks of white-hot need in his eyes when he opened them again. "You should have listened to me and undressed," he whispered, tugging the cloth higher.

"Why? You're clearly enjoying yourself."

"And you think that's better for us?"

I blinked, trying to grasp his meaning. He yanked hard at the dress. My hands moved from their self-imposed prison, grabbing his wrists. "Stop, you'll just rip it trying to get it up over my," I stopped myself. I couldn't say breasts. How weird that that, of all things, embarrassed me? "There's a zipper on the back."

Without another word he flipped me onto my stomach. Sparks exploded in my skull. I struggled to recover enough to stay in control of my muscles. I was fighting an animalistic urge to rock my ass side to side. He'd woken up every one of my desires on a fucking atomic level.

Conway resettled himself so that he was straddling my hamstrings. I was acutely aware of his weight and how the hem of my dress was now skirting the roundest point of my ass.

The mirror shard, I thought in a panic. Would he be able to see if from his angle? On impulse I squeezed my legs together, hoping he wouldn't discover what I was smuggling.

His fingers wrapped in my hair, pushing it aside to expose my shoulder blades and the nape of my neck. The zipper purred as he split my dress downwards.

Air caressed my clammy skin. The dress fell open like a white lilac shedding its petals. It would be simple to pull it down my legs now, leaving me naked except for my light pink panties.

So why had he gone still?

“What is this?” he asked, his tone crisp.

Cold fear prickled in my blood. He's seen the shard of glass.

I started to twist around. One hard fingertip pressed into my skin, right on the back of my neck, stopping my movement and forcing my face into the mattress. “This. This righthere.”

And I knew what he was talking about.

Conway was looking at an open eye I'd had inked into the base of my neck. It was detailed with perfect eyelashes, the iris the same periwinkle blue as my own.

“It's nothing,” I said quickly, imagining the small design imprinted by multiple needle pricks. How I'd groaned, fighting tears from the pain, ignoring the artist who'd assured me we could stop. “Just a dumb tattoo.”

I couldn't tell him the truth. Not after what he'd done to me.

A single, quick snarl escaped him. The bed springs yawned when he got to his feet. Violently, he snatched the dress down my ankles. I flinched, but I didn't move to get up. I couldn't have if I wanted to; the pressure of the unsaid words between us was stronger than gravity.

His boots told me he was leaving. Finding the strength to turn my head, I watched

him vanish through the door. The lock clicked behind him.

It was clear we'd battled. And in a way, I'd gotten what I'd wanted—he hadn't seen me naked. I hadn't been forced to undress for him. I'd even kept my secret blade.

Why didn't it feel like I'd won?

- Chapter Nine -

Georgia Mary King

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His abrupt exit gave me the chance I needed to remove the jagged piece of mirror. Crouching, I decided to hide it between the wall and the right leg of the bed frame. I could reach it easily there.

Sitting on the bare mattress, I hugged myself, shivering. He'd left me with my flats and my panties; that was all. No bra, not even the dumb flesh-colored pasties. Not that being naked should have mattered... but after seeing Conway's reaction to touching me, it did.

Shutting my eyes, I relived the encounter. His stare had been shining with lust... with greed... and all of it was meant for me. The desire we'd had for each other as teenagers was a ghost in comparison. It worried me.

It excited me.

Gliding a hand upwards, I palmed the back of my neck. It was good that he saw this. It made him leave. Who knows how far we would have gone. Or how far I'd have wanted him to.

Stop being so ridiculous, I warned myself. If he's attracted to you, good. You'll use it against him. Don't be flattered by it. Don't you dare start desiring him. Conway meant

me harm, I needed to remember that.

And Lonnie... holy hell. I didn't expect to see him working with Conway. Last I knew, they didn't get along. Whatever was going on, their father had to be the glue between them. It really was like old times.

Back then I'd escaped because Conway had helped me. He wasn't going to save me a second time.

I had to believe someone outside this island would be looking for me. Chelsea will. She'll go to the police. Conway might be right about no one seeing him at the party, but the guy who'd tried to rape me in the guesthouse would remember being attacked.

Had he seen Conway's face?

Could he recall what he was wearing?

It was messed up that I had to pray my would-be rapist would talk to Chelsea or the cops, helping them form a pathway to finding me. But I didn't have the luxury to wish for heroes with pure hearts.

Whoever knocked my door down and brought me home was good enough for me.

Because whatever happened... I wasn't going to give up.

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“Georgia.”

My eyes snapped open. I'd fallen asleep with the lights on. Conway was standing by the door, dressed in midnight blue jeans and his brown jacket. He looked—fresh. His



stubble was cleaned-up. He'd taken a shower and shaved. The wicked tension that had strung between us was gone; he was back to wearing his mask.

Covering my chest, I sat up, glaring his way. Did he see me? Did he look? "What time is it?"

"Breakfast time." I hadn't noticed the paper bag in his left hand. He tossed it towards me; it landed softly on the end of my bed. "Get changed."

Warily, I peeked into the bag. There was a pair of black yoga pants and a loose white sweatshirt. No bra or new underwear, though. Facing away from him, I stuck my head through the sweater's neck hole. "Are you here to tease me about food, starve me like good ol' daddy did?"

"We're going on a walk."

Suspicion made me move slower. I took my time getting the pants on, trying to see if he was leering at my body. Conway hadn't stopped watching me, but his expression was unreadable. "A walk to where?"

He opened the door, motioning me out. Fear skittered up my spine, but I was eager to get out of this room. Following him, I walked a half-foot behind, trailing him down the hallway. Instead of going towards the front door, he led me down another route.

I saved my questions, unsure how many he'd even answer. I'd find out where we were going regardless of if I stayed quiet.

Conway stepped down into a small mudroom. Opening the door, he went through. I could see the milky-gray sky behind him. With my pulse going erratic, I walked out into the open air. I hadn't expected him to let me leave the house.

Shielding my face from my hair in the wind, I looked around quickly. There wasn't much to see. Other than a few sparse trees, the island was just rocks and flat gravel. It couldn't be more than half a mile across, if not less.

“This way,” he called, waiting for me.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

Can I run? I wondered, starting after him on hesitant legs. If I do it when he isn't ready for it, maybe I can get to the docks. But without his key... how do I get a boat?

I pulled up next to Conway where he'd stopped. We stood at the edge of the cliff, waves punching into jagged rocks before disintegrating. Straight below us was the clearest section of ocean. But it was deep—too deep to see what was underneath the rolling surface.

Sand scraped under his heel. His shadow fell over me. “Trying to swim from here to the mainland would be foolish. The rocks will slice you to the bone, if you don't drown first.”

He was making it plain that tying me up wasn't necessary. Not here. A barbed wire topped fence blocked me from the docks, and this side of the island was a natural barrier. Deflated, I shook my head in dismay. “Why are you doing this, Conway? Why won't you tell me what's really going on?”

“Because there's nothing to tell.”

“Nothing?” I faced him, throwing my arm out towards the house. “You kidnap me, drag me to this hell hole, put me within reach of your brother, a person you risked everything to get me away from before, and you think there's nothing to tell? Fuck that!” I buried my hands in the front of my sweater, needing to grab something solid to make up for how fragmented I'd become. “How can you stand there and silently watch me suffer?”

His head lowered. “You won't like the answer.”

“I still want it!”

“Because I don't care about you,” he said, each word acid from his tongue. “Stop thinking I ever did.”

My mouth fell open. “Conway...”

“All that I gained from our time together as kids was learning what made you tick. How to hurt you in ways no one else could manage.” The glossiness in his eyes gave him a plastic look. This man was empty of all love for me.

Or that was what he wanted me to think.

The wind that danced across the cliffside pawed at the back of my sweater. Turning, I surveyed the water that undulated below. “You really don't care about me?” I whispered.

“No. Not at all.”

My lashes touched the apples of my cheeks. “Let's find out for sure.”

And I jumped.

- Chapter Ten -

Georgia Mary King

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Paralyzing cold swept over my body.

Bubbles flirted with my cheeks and hair, rushing over my eyelids. I'd scrunched them shut to brace for the impact, but the chilly ocean made them impossible to open now. I couldn't see to navigate. The single breath I'd taken into my lungs burst out of me—I had no control.

What the hell had I been thinking?

I'm going to drown.

Something grabbed my arm. It dug in, locking into place, challenging Poseidon himself to try and rip me away. My face broke the surface of the waves; I swallowed more water, choking as I was thrown limply over Conway's shoulder.

He swam hard, avoiding every obstacle that tried to smash us into pieces. We made it to a stretch of rocky beach. Twisting, he curled me in his arms, lowering me to the sand. Large hands cradled my face, turning me sideways so I could spit out a mouthful of briny water.

“Are you crazy?” he snarled, giving me no space. “Did you hope you could kill

yourself right in fucking front of me?”

I couldn't talk. I just hacked wetly. Water had soaked into my sweater, my flesh, my hair. I weighed so much I couldn't even crawl. Then I looked up at Conway, and I became light as a dandelion seed.

His features were knotted into a wretched mess. His hair streamed water constantly into his eyes, yet he didn't blink. He'd warned me that the rocks would slice me to the bone... but it was him who'd been flayed. Each level ripped clean away, one above the other.

Anger.

Hatred.

Disgust.

Beneath it all I saw what he really was.

Afraid for me.

Too late, he understood his mask had slipped. Shaking from the cold—from painful hope—I lifted my hand to his cheek. “I knew you cared.”

Snatching my wrist, he didn't force me away. Conway held me there, the two of us facing each other on our knees. “How could you have been sure?”

“Because you can't trick me. I know who you are, Conway.” Inch by inch, I drew closer to him. As cold as I was, being near him burned. “You'll always be the boy who saved me. Time can't change that.”

He focused on my eyes, his gaze drifting down to my mouth. “Not time. Actions. Georgia, the things I've done—the things I will do...”

“Forget about them. Stop thinking in regrets.”

His lips curved into a hollow smile. “You think we can hide from the world on this beach?”

“We can try.”

His forehead furrowed. “The world won't stop moving just because we don't. You know that.”

The moment was fading, but I wouldn't let it go. There'd never be another chance like this. “Do you remember how you used to help me pretend I wasn't trapped in a basement?”

The rush of pain in his eyes stopped me in my tracks. He shuddered, pulling me even closer. Nothing bigger than a quarter could have passed between us. “Georgia, there's been so many nights where all I thought about was your hand on top of mine in the dark. Your scent, your heartbeat, how smooth your virgin lips were when they touched mine.” Rapid, hot air pushed in and out of my chest as I listened. “It's terribly greedy, but if I could pick then over now... I'd do it.”

His lashes were thick, hiding some of the lust in his stare—but only some. I drew in a sharp breath. His proximity was making me lose control. My upper hand at proving he cared about me was transforming into something sinful.

Reaching out, he slid his fingertips through my soaked hair. He came around to rub the back of my ear, a touch so intimate I whimpered. That sound was the last straw for him.

Gripping the nape of my neck, Conway kissed me the way dying men kiss their wives... or the way long lost lovers reunite. This was how I'd imagined our destined meeting. In my head, it always began with a kiss.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

I folded into him eagerly. He was all hands, all teeth; this wasn't a hesitant boy's kiss. His masculine nose ground along mine, the way wolves greeted each other in the wild. Biting my bottom lip he tugged. "Oh," I sighed, closing my eyes.

Exploring his neck, then his wide shoulders, I dragged my nails down his soaked shirt. His muscles flexed through the material; I could see every perfect line. Nothing was more tempting than getting lost in this moment.

Conway fisted my wrists, holding me steady. I stared at him with my mouth half-open. "What's wrong?" I asked.

I spotted the last flicker of his passion as it died. "We have to go back inside," he said. The steel was back, masking his emotions away, hiding the soft part of him that wanted me so badly.

My fingers fell, drifting through the muddy sand by my knees. Gentle waves erased all the proof that he'd dragged me here and rescued me. "How can you go back to being so cruel?"

"Nothing changes just because we kissed, Georgia."

I didn't respond.

Clasping my face tightly, he bared his teeth like he wanted to terrify me into compliance. "Nothing changes! Nothing can change. Do you get that?"

Looking him in the eye, I smiled sympathetically. "It's too late."

Because it didn't matter what he wanted.

After our kiss, everything had changed.

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“What happened to you two?” Lonnie asked.

Conway ignored him, pushing me through the backdoor. We were both dripping water all over the floor. He opened a cupboard, passing me a towel. I clutched it while eyeing Lonnie—had he been watching us from a window, waiting in the house for us to return?

Had he seen us kiss?

No. He couldn't have, the beach was below the cliff. The same rocks meant to break me in two had sheltered me from Lonnie's prying gaze. But here, the closest thing I had to keep him at a distance was Conway.

He'll protect me. He has to. The man had dove into the raging ocean to rescue me. He cared too much to let his awful brother harm me.

I had to believe that.

Crossing his arms, Lonnie wandered closer. “I guess it was a passing storm cloud that drenched you.” His shadow filled the tight hallway; I coiled myself in the towel. “Or did you two take a dip in the ocean for fun?”

Conway put another towel around me, then he dried himself off. “I was showing her that she can't escape.”

Lonnie nodded appreciatively. “Alright, that's a good call. Dad would approve.”

I swallowed down a wave of nausea. I hated hearing that Facile would be happy about anything Conway did.

Lonnie said, “He's expecting you to begin day one of surrogacy.”

I tuned in; this was new information. “I know,” Conway said, his hands digging into my shoulders.

“I'm still wondering if you'll be able to do this.” The younger brother didn't come closer, but his next words punched me in the gut. “If you don't, the job of breaking her becomes mine.”

Imagining Lonnie touching me... doing whatever the fuckbreakingme meant... had me swaying in place. Conway steadied me; I leaned into his touch eagerly. “I know what I need to do, Lonnie.”

“You know, sure, but will you actually go through with it?”

Conway's tone dropped to a rasp. “If you doubt me one more time, I'm going to smash all the fingers on your right hand.”

Lonnie's eyebrows went up. “Whythathand?”

“It's the one you jerk off with. And if you can't do that, you'll be so miserable you'll kill yourself, saving me the trouble.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:37 pm*

Listening to Conway threaten his brother brought me back to an old memory of them facing off. Conway had defended me then, like he was now—and that was comforting.

Lonnie was glaring at me. I erased my smile, but it was too late. He'd seen.

With a hand on the small of my back, Conway guided me towards my room. I didn't fight him; I was happy to get away from his brother. He let me inside, backing out quickly. “Stay, I need to get some things.”

Blinking, I nodded. Alone with my thoughts, I ruffled my hair and body with the towels, still shivering. I hoped what he'd gone to get was dry clothes. These were too wet to be cured by a towel.

When he returned, he didn't bring me a new outfit. Conway stepped inside, and right away, his energy was different. Colder... sadder. Regret was written all over his face. He was holding a canvas bag—I snapped my attention to it, then back to his tight frown. “You're going to do something horrible now.”

His eyebrows knotted further. “Yes.”

My feet were stuck to the floor. I let the towels fall, knowing they weren't armor. Nothing could protect me from whatever was motivating Conway to act in his father's stead. His surrogate, Lonnie called him. “I want you to know that I'm sure you have a reason for doing this. Even if you keep trying to convince me otherwise, I know someone is forcing your hand. Your dad... your brother... you don't need to confirm anything. I just know.”

He looked at me with an awful expression; some mixed up combination of being thankful, while also hating himself. He dropped the bag. It landed with a heavy thud.

“It's time to begin.”

- Chapter Eleven -

Georgia Mary King

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I'd spent years trying to reconnect with my body—with this thing known as reality. I'd listened to therapist after therapist as they helped me learn the best techniques to stop hiding my emotions—a defensive act that kept me, as they put it, from “being truly happy”.

I'd paid a lot of money for their advice.

All of that work was about to be used against me.

Conway was going to torture me and I was going to experience every vibrant second of it. In retraining myself to accept joy, I'd guaranteed my own suffering.

He started by setting up a camera in a corner of the room. It perched on a tripod, blinking a single red light to notify me it was on. Without looking my way, Conway said, “I want to do everything I can to avoid actually hurting you. But if you don't do as I say, I will. Don't test me.”

I couldn't look away from the glossy lens. “Who's going to watch this?”

He crouched, checking that everything was stable. “My father. Maybe my brother.”

I'd already figured as much, but it still made me ill. "Is it live? Can he see me right now?"

"No. It's only a tape for later."

Picturing Facile sitting down to watch a video of me in private wasn't easier to handle than him seeing it as it happened. "Why isn't he here? Why are you doing this... what did Lonnie call it, surrogacy, for him?"

Conway walked towards me. I fought the urge to back up, was proud of myself for remaining steady. He loomed over me, as inanimate as the cliffs around the island. "Sit on the floor at the base of the bed."

He didn't answer my questions. I eyeballed the camera. Because he's being recorded too, not just me. Was Conway afraid of being caught saying something he shouldn't?

"I told you to do something, Georgia."

Facing the door, I dropped to the hard floor with the bed at my back. I was still in my wet sweater and yoga pants. He placed the bag on the bed; I couldn't see what was inside of it. When he knelt, he grabbed my left wrist. His face was near mine—his breath blew over my temple and I trembled.

Hard plastic wrapped around, fixing my wrist to the bed frame. Another tie followed, leaving my hands dangling by my ears on either side. I tugged experimentally.

"Spread your knees for me," he whispered.

It was a filthy sentence, edges of it tickling a perverse fantasy of mine. Looking up at him, my cheeks burning, I shifted until my bent legs opened. Easily, he attached my ankles in the same way he'd done my wrists, binding them to the base of the frame.

When I tried to push my knees together, I couldn't. Even though I was fully dressed, I'd never felt so vulnerable. He backed up, studying his work like I was an art fixture and not a person.

The man who'd kissed me on the beach had vanished.

Conway grabbed multiple things from the bag—the first was a small tablet that he placed standing up in front of me, out of reach. Next was a set of headphones. They were huge, noise canceling things, and wireless.

Carefully he set them on my head, leaving my ears free. He had more to say. “You're going to watch something.” He waved at the tablet. “If you shut your eyes or look away, I'll have to punish you. If you watch, and you're good, you'll be rewarded.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I said, laughing nervously.

“It's as simple as you make it.”

“What am I going to watch?”

Turning, he pressed the unlock button on the touch screen. It lit up, revealing a paused image of a naked woman from behind. I breathed in, flushing wildly as I realized she was spread eagle on her belly, entirely naked. On impulse I stared down at the floor. “Already disobeying,” he whispered.

Glaring up at him, I shook my head. “Really? Porn?”

“Look at the screen,” he demanded. “Now.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

“Or you'll punish me?”

There—I caught a flash of desperation in his face. Then it was gone. “I'll have to.”

He really doesn't want to hurt me. Uncertain what else I could do, I looked at the tablet. Conway pulled my headset fully into place. He tapped the screen, turning it on, and then he moved out of view. Was he sitting on the bed or staring over my shoulder? I swallowed as I wondered what he was feeling.

The video's audio boomed in my ears.

“Uh, ah, mmmnnn. Please. God, please, give it to me!”

A ripple of embarrassment hit me hard. I'd watched porn before, but it had been in the privacy of my own home. I surged with discomfort—for the woman I didn't know, and for myself being forced to watch her. Both of us had an audience.

“You want this?” A man's voice. He was behind the camera so I couldn't see him. He held out something fat and purple—a huge vibrator. When he slapped her on the ass with it, she moaned.

It came to life in his grip, buzzing furiously through my headphones. She whimpered, panting as she wagged her hips side to side. I could see her shining pussy lips, her engorged clit. Blushing, I shifted on the floor.

“Fuck me,” she begged.

“You'd like that.”

“Yes! God, fuck, yes, just touch me.”

“Are you a slut? My good little slut?”

“Your little slut, Sir. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!”

I could see her face in profile whenever she looked back at the camera. Her blue eye was hazy, lips hanging open in desperation. Maybe she was acting but to me, she was a woman who truly wanted to be fucked.

He touched the vibrator to the inside of her thigh—she squealed, and I couldn't take it, I bent my head and shut my eyes, shaking the headphones free.

“Watch the screen,” he said.

“No! This is insane!”

“Last chance. Watch the screen.” In defiance, I kept my chin tucked to my chest. I heard him rustling inside the bag on the bed. “I thought I could wait before I had to do this.”

Conway came back, settling on his knees beside me. Deftly, he attached a small, circular metallic object over my thigh. I didn't know what it was, but I recognized the other item—a bullet-style vibrator. “Conway, no.” Fuck, fuck, fuck, he can't really do this! Watching the porn was one thing, but this took it to a new level.

He met my nervous stare. There's a moment where we both seemed to realize how insane this is. Then it was gone, and he'd replaced the headphones over my ears, locking them in place. The girl was moaning in my head again; the man rubbing the

vibrator up and down her labia, spreading them, showing off how wet and pink she was.

I shut my eyes, daring him to act on his threat. “Ah!” I squealed, electric pain shooting up my mid-thigh. My eyes slammed open. “Fuck you! Ah, fuck, ah! Turn it off! Why won't you turn it off?” I couldn't hear him through my headset, but I doubted he had any answers for me.

The pain was so great it made my eyes water. Knowing what would stop it, I frantically stared at the tablet again. The hot burst of electricity over my sensitive skin ended. In the video, the vibrator was being pushed deep inside of the woman.

Her ass jiggled; she rocked her hips, mewling in my ears. “Please, harder, give it to me harder,” she begged.

My heart started to calm down, relieved from the pain vanishing. It was still in hyper drive, though, mixed up with adrenaline... fear... and a shade of arousal I didn't want to admit to feeling.

“Are you a dirty slut?”

“I am, I'm so dirty—ah! Yes, fill me up, fuck me deeper, I need it!”

The vibrator on my clit came to life. I jumped as much as I could, yanking at my bonds. I was worried he'd do it, and he had. “Holy fuck,” I groaned. It was a delicious flutter that increased exponentially.

The porn star licked her lips. The purple toy popped out, the tip rubbing over her asshole. Cringing, I shut my eyes—bright pain forced them open again. Every time I looked away, the electrode shocked me. Every time I watched, the vibrator pulsed on my clit.

He was working me up intentionally. No matter what I did, as long as he kept the vibrator buzzing on my pussy, I was going to come.

And he was going to see it.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

“Please,” I begged. “Please, Conway—oh!” I shivered in pleasure. “Don't make me... I can't...”

In response, the vibrations came faster, harder, driving me to the peak. I moaned, matching the same tone, same obscene style as the woman in the porno. Hot tension coiled between my thighs. It worked through my belly until I was an elastic that snapped.

How closely was he watching me as I came?

“Fuck!” I squealed.

“Fuck, yes, oh! I'm your dirty slut, all yours, fuck me more!” the woman went on, but it was all mushy noise to me.

Dizzy, I hung my head. Fierce pain stung the inside of my leg. Crying out, I leaned away as Conway fisted my hair, moving the headset so I could hear him. “It's not over, Georgia. Don't stop watching.”

I spotted the obvious bulge in his pants. He's turned on from this. His black eyes narrowed on me from above, like he was daring me to say something. Without looking away, he turned the vibrator back on.

I was still shaking from the first orgasm. I relented, watching the screen again. The woman was impaled on the stranger's cock. Her whole body shook as he slammed inside of her. The vibrator was in his hand, pushing into her asshole, making her scream even harder. I didn't know if she was coming for real, or if it was all fake, but

I knew what I was experiencing was no show.

I came while he fucked her on her stomach.

I came again when he moved her onto her side.

The video was over two hours long and during the whole thing, Conway continued to drive me to high levels of Nirvana. I was a slippery mess; my clothes had been wet before from the ocean, now they were soaked from my own juices

My experience and the woman's blurred.

“I'm a slut.”

“I'm so dirty. I'm your dirty whore.”

Was I a slut? Conway's whore? I didn't know what was real.

Drool coated my lips. Each time I looked away, either from exhaustion, or because I couldn't handle witnessing the woman getting railed, Conway was there to curb my resistance.

He acted with complete confidence; there was no uncertainty creating chinks in his armor. I'd been a fool to think I could understand him. He'd saved me from the ocean, he'd kissed me on our little beach, and like he'd warned me, none of it mattered.

He wasn't human.

He was a mountain I could attempt to climb, but one I'd ultimately die on.

- Chapter Twelve -

Georgia Mary King

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I stopped counting how many times I'd come, but whatever the final number was, that last, earth shattering orgasm was too much. It knocked me out cold.

When I awoke, I was still in the damp clothes. Conway—who else could it have been—had left me a long t-shirt, gray sweats, and pink boy-short cut underwear. Changing, I put the old clothes in a pile by the door.

Alone as I was, I checked myself over, confirming all my pieces were still there. On the surface they were, but inside... I wasn't as certain.

I was getting hungry when Conway opened the door.

“Hi,” I whispered, sitting up. I didn't know how to behave around him, not after what he'd done to me...after what he'd watched me do. The memory turned my whole face red.

He offered a bottle of water and half a peanut butter sandwich. Without question I scarfed the food, then chugged the water down. “How do you feel?” he asked when I was finished.

“Confused,” I admitted. “And you, what the hell are you feeling?”

Unshouldering the canvas bag, he walked to the corner. “Ready to continue.”

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Days blurred into evenings and I lost sense of time.

Conway showed me video after video. He had a massive collection. Everyone was nameless beyond Whore, Slut, Bitch, Sir, or Master. I detested the domination theme. I also couldn't deny how it turned me on.

At night, the raspy moans of the women with no names haunted me. Often, I awoke in a cold sweat, certain I'd heard them inside of the walls. Were they in the room with me? Was the tablet still playing?

It never was—I was always alone.

There was a good chance I was losing my mind.

What truly amazed me was that I wasn't being starved. The food he brought me was basic dry goods—peanut butter, tuna from a can, banana chips. Things you didn't need to keep refrigerated. It made me wonder about the set up in the house.

“Why is there power for the lights, but for nothing else?” I asked him one day.

He reached for the empty paper plate next to me on the bed. I let him take it. “We have a generator we use sparingly, only for what's necessary.”

Rubbing my arms, I clicked my teeth. “Guess heat doesn't count as necessary. Or is this another mind game where I'm the only one freezing and you and Lonnie are cozy-warm at night?”



He arched an eyebrow. "I'm sorry if you're cold."

"You could give me a blanket."

"That's not happening."

"So it is a mind-fuck game. You're not starving me like Facile, you're doing your own fun torture. Clever."

"I'm not torturing you for fun—" he stopped himself, but I'd touched a nerve. He didn't like me comparing him to his father. I clung to that. "The generator has limited juice. We need it to last."

"Until when?"

He turned away, reaching for the canvas bag I'd learned to fear. The camera came out. "Lie on your back."

Every answer he denied me gave me a fuller picture of the situation. The generator has to last until we're ready to leave the island. Well, maybe not all of us.

There's no guarantee I'll be going anywhere.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

Cringing at the idea of being left behind—and at what being forced to leave meant—I stretched out on my back on the bed. I'd stopped trying to fight him at every turn. I needed my energy for when the right moment came.

We were going to play another game... would it cause me pain, or pleasure, and which was really worse? Pain, I thought suddenly. I'd begun craving the expert way he could turn me on.

He didn't strap me to the bed—that was new. “Look up at the mirror.”

I'd wondered, years ago, what the ceiling mirror was intended for. Facile had rarely interacted with me during my stay. He'd brought me small amounts of food and drink, hardly talking to me, sometimes not even turning the light on. If not for Conway—and Lonnie, briefly—I'd have spent my 187 days in near solitude.

“Can you see yourself?” he asked.

“Of course, it's all I can really see.”

“Describe yourself to me.”

“I—what?”

“Tell me what you look like.”

Unsure about his demand, I considered myself in the mirror. I was wearing a thin pair of sweat pants, the same gray as the long sleeved shirt. Neither fit me very well—a

size too big, probably bought in haste. “My hair's a rat's nest,” I said, chuckling wryly. “I need a shower.”

“What else?”

“I don't know, what do you want me to say?”

“Just look and tell me.”

His instructions confused me enough that I became frustrated. “I look like a fucking mess, Conway. Circles under my eyes... exhausted... I look awful.”

“Take off your shirt.”

His words boomed in my eardrums. Looking over, I judged the seriousness in his face. Why had I hoped he was joking? “If I say no, what happens?”

“I'll take it off for you.”

We'd been down that road before. Chewing my lip, I stared back at the mirror. “You've never seen me—all the way like that.” I'd managed to cover my chest every time while changing, and when he'd pulled my dress off, I'd been on my stomach.

“In the van,” he whispered.

Right. He saw down my dress then. I'd forgotten entirely.

His voice was quiet, but danger lurked under the surface. “Take it off. Then the rest.”

I gave myself a mental count down. Then I hooked my fingers under my sweater and peeled it upwards. Setting it on the mattress beside my head, I lifted my hips, gripped

the sweat pants, and pulled them off. I was naked except for my panties.

Conway was silent. I held still, hands at my sides, waiting for him to do something.

Firm hands pressed onto my thighs. Instantly I jolted, half-sitting up. "Shh," he said, shaking his head at me. "Lie down, eyes closed. Now."

Reluctantly I did so. What's he planning? What's he thinking?

Tracing my stomach, Conway explored my softness with languid fascination. I sensed it through him; a wonderment in our contact. It was the first time we'd touched skin to skin in a way that wasn't a fight.

Did Conway find my curves attractive, or was he wishing I was the half-starved teen he'd originally known? Why do you care? I asked myself angrily. His preferences don't matter. None of what he likes matters here. Believing that was a challenge.

He came up against the elastic band of my underwear. Exploring it from one end to the next, he gently spread my thighs. "Open for me," he whispered.

I did.

Running his touch down the inside of my legs, he moved around the openings of my panties. The contrast between cotton and skin made everything more sensitive. He laid one palm flat on top of my pussy.

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I whimpered, peeking through my lashes down at him. He was watching my face—my heart pounded, I shut my eyes again. “Sorry,” I said quickly.

Two fingers traced the V at the junction of my thighs. Up, down, he did it so many times. I was clay that he was molding. Without removing my panties, he rubbed his thumb over the dampening slit of my pussy. “Already so excited,” he observed.

He pet my clit so, so gently, as if he were rubbing the head of a daisy. I shuddered under every single stroke. I forgot about the camera. I even forgot that we were in a busted up house on a barren island. That people could be looking for me, right now, wondering if I was alive or dead or dying.

The bed shifted under his weight. Against his instructions, I opened my eyes again. His thick cock was naked in his fist. It wasn't the first one I'd ever seen, but it was easily the most beautiful. The tip was dark with arousal, made fatter by his hand's pressure. “Close your eyes,” he commanded, his pupils scolding me. That wasn't anger—that was undiluted lust.

Shutting my eyes tight made my senses heighten. I kept picturing him in my mind's eye; the way he was stroking me while stroking himself. Conway's shadow skimmed overhead, the bed trembling from his subtle, desperate motions.

He was jerking himself off.

Fingertips tweaked my firm clit; he moved faster, racing his own clock. He's going to come, I realized. But he wants me to finish first. Dizzying arousal flooded my body. I tingled down to my toes, muscles tightening as I rocked my hips.

“Don't look,” he moaned. “Eyes shut. Until I say. Understand me?”

“Yes,” I managed weakly. I was perched on a tightrope that threatened to tumble me into decadent pleasure every second that ticked by. My pussy was my world. It clenched helplessly, fluttering like a thousand butterfly wings. I wanted to be filled—I was empty and wet and losing myself in hedonism that was wrong. But I didn't care. I didn't want to care.

“Conway,” I gasped, “Make me come. I need to come so badly, please!”

“Then come for me,” he snarled, fingers working my clit like he knew me better than I did. “I can feel how badly your pussy wants to come,” he said, breathless.

“Ah, I'm there, don't stop, I'm...aah!” I moaned, vibrating against his fingers as I climaxed. He made lazy circles, never too much pressure, reading my subtle twitches to tell where I was too sensitive. Behind my eyelids, colors rotated like a carnival at night.

Sticky warmth landed on my chest. Conway hissed through clenched teeth, string after string of his seed coating me. Like he'd built it up for years waiting for me.

“Now,” he said thickly, his hand vanishing from my thighs. “Tell me how you look.”

I opened my eyes and stared at the mirror. My cheeks were flushed. I was breathing heavily, the motion shaking my naked breasts. His come was drizzled across my chest like icing on top of a cinnamon bun. I was exposed... vulnerable... “Beautiful,” I whispered. “I look beautiful.”

Conway shuddered—I felt it through his hand on my knee. “You truly do.”

Blinking away some of my delirium, I took him in. I longed to know what was going

on in his head, but he was already turning away. Zipping his cock into his jeans, he walked over and flicked the camera off.

His distance created a chasm inside of me. I sat up, taking the wet-wipe he offered. Cleaning myself was more awkward than knowing he'd come on my breasts. It felt like a pointless transaction, the heat evaporating. I slid my clothes back on, but even that didn't carve out the pit of ice in my gut.

The only thing that could was answers.

“What will happen to me after this?” This, because I had no name for the things he was doing to me.

He paced the room, and I recognized he was trying to keep his emotions at bay. His voice came out with a hard edge. “You'll belong to my father when this ends.”

Disgust roiled up in the back of my throat. “This whole surrogacy bullshit is just you doing to me what he'd like to, then.” “Belong to Facile?” “Death would be better.”

His fists balled at his sides; he remained facing the wall. “You're not allowed to die.”

I laughed until it sounded more like screaming. “Allowed? You can't decide that.”

“I can,” he growled, whirling on me. Quickly he advanced, looming over me on the bed, his hands coming down to dig into the mattress on either side of my hips. “I decide everything for you, Georgia. It's up to me what you eat... it's my choice if you get to shower, or sleep, or if I make you come or tantalize you on the edge while you drip and beg for release.”

Like he controlled it, my pussy flexed. My tongue darted over my bottom lip. “You've only made it happen through force.”

His hand went into my hair, holding me where I was. Conway was hazy in my vision—the way the horizon of a sweltering desert was. I was sweating from the heat wafting off of his fit body. “Force,” he whispered, studying my eyes, “Or because you wanted it to happen?”

The tension in my belly increased tenfold. I was trying not to blink—if I did, I'd lose our unspoken contest of wills. “I never wanted any of this.”

His free fingers trailed down my naked belly, pausing over the top of my panties. Conway was coiled in preparation for another brawl. Hewantedto fight. Wanted me to fight back. “You never dreamed about being with me? Having me rub your clit, finger you deep, making you scream my name?”

“No.” I said it too fast; he saw through my lie and smirked. “But what about you?” I threw it back at him. Grabbing his palm, I pushed it under my sweater and onto my breast. My desire to get the upper hand made me bold. “How many times didyoujerk off to the thought of me?”



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I'd been sure I'd get a reaction. But he just looked down his nose at me, his hand not moving on my chest. "Would you believe never?"

My heart thudded quicker. "I wouldn't."

His fingers gently pinched my nipple—I gasped. He was mapping me out, observing my reactions. "You're right. I thought about you for countless nights, Georgia. I've ached to fuck you... never thought I'd get the chance."

The boiling energy between us combusted. His lips were a whirlpool, slamming us together and threatening damage. Our inner demons were eager to get out their frustrations at the world in anyway they could.

This push-and-pull excited me. Had he warped me already?

Or was I twisted up all along?

Ripping my sweater up he exposed my breasts. His opposite hand sought out my other nipple; the missing part of his pinky was noticeable on my tender skin.

Abruptly he withdrew, leaving me sitting there with my legs spread as wide as my eyes. He clutched his forehead like there was something stabbing him from inside his skull. "I can't do this."

"Why?" I asked. My voice splintered from his rejection. "After all that, you won't... am I only good enough when you're treating me like a toy for your father?" I demanded, and he flinched. "Do you really not want me?"

The despair in his final glance cooled my mood. “I don't. Not like this.”

I'd never heard a door slam shut so loudly in my life.

- Chapter Thirteen -

Conway

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I was a traitor.

I saw it on my face whenever I stared in the mirror. I could see it dancing in the deepest grooves of my irises. In the lines of my teeth and in the way I frowned.

I just wasn't sure whom I was betraying anymore.

October wind yanked at me as I stood by the cliff's edge. Unseen fingers begged me to fall forward, giving myself up to the hungry ocean. It would be so easy—the action... not the consequences of the decision.

My suffering would end.

What about everyone else?

Reaching back, I felt my phone in my pocket. The messages from my father were sitting inside, though I'd longed to delete all of them. The last one had been a reply to the one I'd sent weeks ago.

Me: I've taken her.

Unknown: Then it's time to begin.

Clutching the device, I debated throwing it into the ocean.

“You looking for sunken ships down there?”

Lonnie. My eyes stayed fixed on the white foam that crashed below us.

He moved beside me, glancing in my direction, then down at the water. “If this is getting to be too hard for you, say the word. I'll take over.”

My eyes snapped to him. “What?” I asked.

“Taming Georgia. It's plain on your face that it's already taking its toll.”

“You and I both know that Dad demanded I be the one to do this.”

“He just wants her to be ready for him.” Lonnie was reading me, trying to get into my head and see my secrets. We both knew I had them. “If breaking the little peach down is too rough on your gentle heart, let me take over. Say the word.”

“Gentle heart,” I laughed. Holding my hands up, I showed him my palms. The skin was hardened by calluses that spoke of years of rough, physical work, some innocent, most of it not. “Lonnie, these hands are about as gentle as any other part of me.”

He smiled in a way that didn't touch his eyes. “You really expect me to believe you don't have a soft spot for her?”

I screwed up my face and let my hands bind into fists. “And if I did, would it matter? You know I have to do it. Stop trying to micromanage this like you're in charge.” My brother's baby-blue eyes hardened. “Dad is the one running this shit show. You're

kidding yourself if you think he'd want anyone preparing her but me. He chose her to make a point... and everything he's telling me to do is no different.”

I'd freed Georgia years ago.

Now we were both suffering thanks to my so-called “gentle heart.”

Everyone talks about wanting to go back in time, thinking they can fix the one thing that led to their tragic present. But if I was given such an opportunity, where would I even begin?

My brother was watching me in that ruthlessly patient way of his. He reminded me of our father when he did that. “You always did have such a huge ego.”

I balked. “Excuse me?”

“You think this is all about you.” Tucking his hands into his khaki-colored pants, he stared out over the ocean. “Where do I fit into your worldview, hmm? Dad didn't just get in touch with you, Conway, he reached out to me as well.”

“Fuck,” I spit. “Lonnie, this situation is messed up for everyone involved. No one wants to be here.”

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Ever so slowly, he shut his eyes and sighed. He sucked in the breeze, arching his neck, his spine, reveling in either the October weather or my observation. “You,” he said, opening one eye; the one that was pointed at me. “You still believe you know what's best for everyone you come in contact with.”

Stunned, I looked at him with new wariness. “Do you actually want to help our father?”

I'd seen him smile a number of times. This one lacked the insincerity I'd come to expect—it crinkled the edges of his eyes. “Did you know this was the first time he asked me to help?”

My heart struggled to beat, like a hand was grasping it. “What are you talking about?”

“All these years, he always asked you. Dad thought you could do no wrong.” A quick, rusty laugh escaped him. “Even after you let Georgia free! Even with me telling him over and over and over that she got away because of you, he still never asked me to be the one to help him with anything!” I became aware of how close we were to the edge—he followed my thoughts. “Relax, I'm not going to throw either of us onto the rocks.”

I took a full breath and let it out. “Lonnie, trust me, you were lucky that he never involved you. You were just a kid.”

“And after he made us run so he wouldn't get caught for kidnapping those girls?” The muscles in his forearms writhed. “When we got into Mexico... it was still you that he

asked to do everything. Working with the smuggler boats on the docks, guarding doors from snitches. He even let you beat people if they were short on cash they owed! I was more than capable of those things.”

These were memories I wished I could forget. “Lonnie, none of that was stuff I wanted. Working for dad wasn't glorious.” I'd ached to run every single day.

But I couldn't. Not when there was a chance that he could get me something I needed. I'd told myself night after night that I stayed because he might hurt other girls. But I knew it was more selfish than that.

In the end, I hadn't had to serve as his rabid dog forever. The cartel didn't like someone muscling in on their territory, small potatoes or otherwise. One drug set-up later and the dirty cops had happily thrown my father in jail on a good-as-life sentence. I was sure he couldn't hurt anyone anymore.

Then I'd gotten his message, and I'd known better.

“Glorious or not,” Lonnie whispered, “It was better than being treated like a burden. It's funny, you're a lot more like him than you seem to realize.”

This line of talk had thrown me. I shook my head side-to-side, sweat cooling on my throat. I hadn't seen my brother in over three years and I'd thought the only things that changed about him were his build.

But I was wrong. Very wrong.

My lips curled back over my teeth. “I'm nothing like that monster.”

“Dad protected us when he could have thrown us aside. He never abandoned us in Mexico when caring for himself solo would have been easier. He was always a

family man... wanted us to stick together. All of us.”

“You talk like you worship him,” I said in disbelief.

“Don't get the wrong idea. I hate him as much as you do.” He started to walk towards the house. He stopped before he got far—his heels coming down with a sharp click on the rocks. “Hating him doesn't mean I think he shouldn't be admired. There's a lot I learned from that man.”

I watched Lonnie go inside. He'd always been unhinged, but maybe I knew less about his motivations than I thought I did. What did he mean, things to learn from Dad?

It was getting late; the icy wind numbing my ears and nose. Still I stayed by the cliff, trying to make sense of what had just gone down. Water slapped hard on the rocks. The beach below was invisible, the high tide drowning the place I'd kissed Georgia Mary King. It didn't matter that I'd looked on as she shivered with orgasm, jerking myself off on top of her perfect breasts.

It was that singular kiss that haunted me.

Scrubbing my fingertips over my mouth, I remembered the sweetness of her. Indulging in the memory was selfish... but I'd long ago accepted that was the kindest word I could stamp my soul with.

Georgia didn't deserve what was happening to her. Even so, the truth would do nothing for the girl. She'd begged me numerous times to tell her what was going on... and I couldn't.

I didn't deserve the grace of her understanding.

Turning, I walked back towards the house like I was heading to face the electric



chair. I'd gained one positive thing, though, after all of my brooding. I finally knew what I'd do if I could go back in time. It was simple.

I'd make sure I was never born.

- Chapter Fourteen -

Georgia Mary King

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There was a knock at my door.

Sitting up, I worked to gather myself and make sense of this oddly polite noise. It was late. Conway hadn't come back after he'd stormed off. Why would he knock? "Come in," I said, smoothing my hair unconsciously. It didn't cross my mind to try and look pretty. I didn't care about looking good for anyone; it was almost a relief that he kept bringing me boring clothes that barely fit.

Lonnie opened the door, scanned the room, then fixated on me. "Evening," he said with a grin. "Got a minute?"

Do I have a minute? What the fuck? I slid further down the bed, away from him. "What do you want?"

Shutting the door, he did something Conway never did anymore—not since he'd stopped tying me to the bed. He locked it. It reminded me that I'd been acting too much like a good little hostage and staying put. Why did I only think about escaping when I no longer could?

"Easy," he said, holding up his hands. "I'm not here to cause trouble."

Looped over his wrist was a small black bag. It wasn't the one Conway used, but the sight of it made my eyes widen. Lonnie saw my reaction; he shook his head. "Ah, shit. I don't want to freak you out. I just brought—well, here," he said, emptying the contents onto the foot of my bed.

Out of the bag rolled a small bottle of lemonade, some Reese cups, and a paperback book, *The Valley of the Horses*. My eyes didn't unwidthen, they were permanently stuck at their limit. "What is all this?" I asked.

"I don't know." Awkwardly, he scratched at his neck. I'd never seen Lonnie behave like a normal person; it unsettled me. "I thought you could use a boost. I imagine whatever my brother is putting you through is painful."

"You talk like you don't know."

"Well, I don't." He shrugged. "I have an idea, because I know Dad asked him to do this, so I'm not oblivious."

He hasn't seen the videotapes of me. It was a huge relief. Inhaling, I stopped fighting my urge and grabbed up the candy. I'd bitten one of the cups in two before thinking to savor them—I couldn't help myself. Chocolate was familiar and sweet and god damn delicious, and plates of crackers were not.

Lonnie sat on the edge of the bed, not asking if he could. Would I have told him not to? It was hard to be sure. I didn't trust him, but he'd brought me snacks. Something Conway used to do forever ago. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked gently.

I shoved the other cup into my mouth, chewing as I spoke. "I'm not sure how to answer that."

He leaned closer. "Is it that bad?"

“What do you think?”

“I think it's got to be awful for you.”

Uncapping the lemonade, I took a big gulp. “I don't remember you being sympathetic before.”

Lonnie's smile was thin as new ice. Had he edged closer to me? “I'm sorry. I was a kid, I didn't know what I was doing.”

The bottle twisted in my palms. “Now you know, though. And if you know this is awful, you could help me.”

“I did help.” He pointed at the food.

“I mean... you're saying what Conway is doing to me is bad. You know the biggest thing you could do is get me off this island.” I didn't trust Lonnie at all, but here he was, bringing me treats and a favorite book and—and how did he know? Startled by my own realization, I gaped at him.

His eyebrows knotted at my stare. “Huh. Something interesting just crossed your mind. Tell me.” He was definitely closer now, his leg brushing mine on the bed. I glanced at the door. “Oh,” he chuckled. “Don't get ideas.”

The sugar turned into glass in my guts. “Who told you about this book?” I asked, reaching for it.

Lonnie's grip came down, trapping my wrist on the mattress. I could smell the mint on his breath. “Conway told me. He told me everything about you.”

“No, he wouldn't.”

Squeezing so tight that I gasped, Lonnie said, “Of course he would. He wants to transform you, Georgia. He's not on your side.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

I yanked, trying to break away, but he grabbed my other wrist instead. We were sitting on the bed facing each other. “And what, you're my only friend here, is that it?”

“I can be.” His muscles flexed; he pushed my palms down between us, his nose coming close to mine. “Oh, sweet peach, I can beso niceto you. Wouldn't you like that? I'd treat you like a queen, all you have to do is get on your knees for me.”

“Queens don't kneel, slaves do. I'm not your fucking slave.”

His polite act slipped. “Not yet. Let's fix that.” Shoving me backwards, he braced his knees on either side of me on the bed. My head came down hard enough that my brain sloshed in my skull.

Lonnie squinted at me, his grip shifting; he held my left hand on the bed, and with his other, he wrapped my hair up. He leveraged his hold until I was face down in the mattress, my upper body struggling as he twisted me like a pretzel.

Inhaling, I tried to scream. The mattress muffled most of it.

“Shh,” he said. His chest crushed into mine, his heart picking up speed. “Stop fighting me. There's no point.”

This was what he'd longed to do to me years ago. Back then, he'd been young, but his mind was sick. He hadn't known the core of his black desires but here, he could finally exercise them.

I was hyperventilating—straining. But not to fight him off, I needed my strength for something more reliable. “Dumb bitch,” he breathed on the side of my throat. He couldn't strip me; his hands were busy holding me still. “Why do you always resist when complying would make your life so much easier?”

Flashes of color moved through my vision. I'd wondered what his plan was—and it hit me. He was going to knock me out by keeping me from breathing. It's amazing how your body can keep acting when you're so detached from it. I was floating above, seeing myself bending, contorting, pushing my right shoulder to the point of dislocation.

“I knew he wasn't strong enough to break you,” he whispered in my ear.

My fingers brushed something by the bedpost—pain bloomed. I'd cut myself.

“But I am, little peach. I am.”

“No,” I gasped. “You aren't.” Spinning around with the force of a slingshot, I slashed blindly. He released me and I faced the man who was pinning me to the bed. I got to witness the uncertainty in his face as it morphed into shocked pain. Did he see the shard of mirror before it sliced through his cheek, or did he just feel it?

“What thefuck?!” Flying off of me, Lonnie grasped at the blood leaking from the gash in his face. I would have loved to cut out his tongue to shut him up forever, but being free was more important than a lust for revenge.

Scrambling to stand opposite him, I brandished the makeshift blade. “Give me your keys.”

“You cut me! You cut my face you stupid fucking whore!”

The room was small, I cornered him with a few quick air slashes; he bumped into the far wall, his hands going up. “I’ll cut off more if you don’t give me the keys!”

Red droplets hung from his chin, then fell, staining his shirt. It bothered me that he didn’t look afraid. His robin’s egg eyes were shining with humor. “Which keys do you want?”

I faltered, my hand dropping an inch. He’s scared - he has to be. I just cut his damn face! “All of them. I need the one for this door, and the one for the fence blocking the boats.”

He tilted his head slightly. “How do you know I even have a key for that fence?”

“As if you’d let yourself be stranded here while Conway was gone. You both have keys, there’s two damn boats.”

“Alright. Fair.” Watching me carefully, he reached a hand into his back pocket. “You ever wish you had a gun for moments like these?”

My heart exploded with adrenaline. Taking a stance, I prepared to dodge the inevitable bullets.

Grinning, Lonnie offered me a small ring dangling with keys. I couldn’t count them all—more than two, less than ten. “Lucky girl. No gun on me, this time.”

Snatching the keys and trying not to touch his skin, I backed up. “Stay there.”

“Aren’t you worried about what you’re doing?”

I was quick to find the right key and undo the latch. I shot look after wary look at Lonnie as I did so. “If you mean letting you live...”



His smile cracked, then recovered. "I'm talking about what happens to Conway if you escape."

My spine went straight. Conway... No. I couldn't wonder. He'd made it clear that staying here was my path to a grim future with Facile. There was no reason to care about Conway after learning that.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

He wasn't someone who had ever loved me.

His purpose was to peel my skin back and erase my heart.

Locking the door behind me, I ran down the hallway.

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It was dark outside. My ears echoed with my frantic panting; I bumped into walls, boxes, and things I couldn't name. But the pain just drove me on.

Bluish light illuminated the main room through the front door. It peeked through the cracks of the boarded up windows, my eyes finally adjusting. Sweat stained my entire back as I gripped the door handle. It wasn't locked; it opened after a single twist.

On bare feet I jumped the steps, skidding on gravel, sprawling hard. I cried out sharply when my elbow slammed down. The bloodstained mirror fell from my grip. I wasted a few precious minutes until I found it glinting on the pale sand. I refused to lose the one weapon I had.

The moon behind its shawl of clouds guided me down the path. Run, run, go! Be faster go faster just move! My strides were long as a deer's—I bounced into the chain fence, unable to pull up in time. Slick fingers scraped over the metal, seeking the gate's opening. I was shaking all over, my skull feeling like it was spreading. I expected it to burst.

Behind me, on the path, someone called my name.

Sucking in air like I was one breath short of dying, I gripped the padlock. Lonnie's keys jingled as they hit the ground. "Fuck!" I sobbed, crouching in the shadows, hands clawing in the sand. I couldn't see anything!

"Georgia! Georgia!" Conway shouted.

There was a dream I used to have, one of the only semi-pleasant ones about being kidnapped. In it, I was racing for the trees while Facile roared like a rabid bear in the distance. Safety kept getting farther and farther away. I couldn't escape.

Not without him.

So unlike what had really happened, I'd looked back. There was Conway with his mysterious, youthful smile. He grabbed my hand and ran away with me. It was what I'd always wished for. The ending I really wanted.

And here I was now, running from him.

My nails touched metal—I grabbed the keys. Sweat and tears mixed on my cheeks. The telltale crunch of feet pounding on the ground rose up behind me. I had too many keys to test. What did these all go to? One by one I tried them; a thin copper key, a jagged one shaped like a house key, one meant for a vehicle of some kind.

Closing my eyes, I tested the fourth key of the set. It fit, opening the padlock, the gate creaking as I forced it wide. I looked over my shoulder. The figure rushing towards me was all shadow and breakneck speed. Conway's eyes glowed, challenging the moon to shine brighter.

Then I saw Lonnie was with him.

How did he get free?

Turning, I raced across the bent wooden planks of the dock. The water sloshed, calmer than I'd last seen it. This side of the island resisted the waves. I didn't know enough about the ocean to understand if it was due to direction, shape, or time of day. It comforted me enough to consider jumping in and forgetting the boat entirely.

Fumbling with the rope on the nearest boat, I remembered how easily Conway had worked with it. His hands had the same ease when he touched me. Gritting my teeth, I gave up being gentle; I hacked at the rope with my piece of mirror.

The fibers frayed. Conway's shoes hammered on the dock. Panicked, I cut my own hands with the shard, blood spreading on the wood, the water, until the rope snapped and my lovely man-made weapon splashed into the ocean. It had been more useful than I'd imagined.

I spotted Conway from the corner of my eye just as I ducked into the boat, fighting with the oars to make it move. "Georgia!" he growled, bending down, reaching for my arms. He caught me by my sweater.

"Let go of me!" I screamed, trying to shrug him off. He was too strong. I couldn't pull.

So I pushed.

Wide-eyed, he tumbled backwards, letting go of me and vanishing on the other side of the dock. Black water fanned upwards; I was free.

Lonnie was standing nearby. Just watching.

Not caring about the reason for this burst of luck, I began to row. My hands burned from their fresh cuts—but that wasn't why I struggled. I'd never rowed a boat before. I didn't know what I was doing.

Conway parted the gentle waves with powerful strokes. He came at me like a shark, too fast and ready to strike for me to avoid. He hoisted himself into my boat, and I expected his face to be painted with anger.

Shaking water from his hair, he sat opposite of me, his eyes heavy with sorrow. “Is this really what I've driven you to? Will you keep risking your own safety, just to get away from me?”

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My mouth fell open. Over his head, I saw Lonnie staring at us with a quiet thoughtfulness. "I'm not running from you," I said, the truth erupting. "I'm running from your father. From your brother, who came into my room to hurt me! Again!" It was a sickening nostalgia.

Conway's face went deathly flat. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder. Lonnie didn't smile or frown or even shrug. He kept watching like he didn't want to interrupt. Scanning me again, he said, "I saw what you did to his face. Where did you get the knife?"

"It was a piece of mirror. From the rest stop bathroom."

"Of course," he said, laughing like a man who hadn't slept in ages. His smile was weary. "I underestimated you."

"Stop talking to me like we're rivals! Conway, look at us. We can leave right now, go to the cops... we can besafefrom your father! What's stopping us from rowing away from that island?"

Utter despair flooded his expression. Gently, firmly, he put his hands over mine on the oars. "What's stopping us is me."

The energy went out of my body. "You don't care if I hate you, do you?"

Water dripped steadily into the boat from his clothes. In silence he began to row, taking us smoothly to the dock. I'd barely gotten twelve feet out. Lonnie came close, helping tie the vessel back up with what was left of the rope.

Conway hooked me by the elbow, forcing me out ahead of him. His brother started to reach for me but I dodged, yanking out of Conway's grip, glaring at them both. Lonnie's gash was still dripping; he didn't stifle it with his palm. I think he wanted me to see what I'd done. "Like I said. If you can't break her, I'll do it instead."

Conway thrust himself between his brother and me. His chest puffed out; I'd seen him pissed off before, but now, he looked ready to kill. "What the fuck did you do to her, Lonnie?"

"Sorry, what did I do to her?" He ran a fingertip in the air over his cut. "She sliced me open with a piece of glass. How did you let her get access to a weapon, huh?"

"I'm asking," he said, so cold and quiet, "What you did to her."

I shivered with a mix of fear and pride. Amazingly, Lonnie didn't back down. "Brother, all I did was test how your work was coming along. If it isn't clear as day, you've fucked this process up. Or have you forgotten what Dad expects?"

None of the rage went out of Conway's stance. The veins in his neck throbbed. "Don't you ever, ever touch her again. Understand?"

They stood across from each other; men who shared the same genes, but acted so different. Neither blinked... and neither twitched a muscle. The night wind tossed my hair, and when I brushed it away from my eyes, it was as if my movement ended the standoff.

Lonnie turned on a heel, speaking as he went. "At this rate, she really will end up just like Anna."

Conway looked after his brother. He didn't uncurl his fists until the other man was gone, and when he did, I caught a glimpse of the exhaustion in his bones. His

attention slid to me; I jumped under that fiercely cold stare. “Keys. Now.”

Offering him Lonnie's ring, his fingers grazed mine. Both of us lingered; we were the only warm things on this island, and we recognized it. “You're bleeding,” he said, holding me still.

“It's nothing,” I whispered.

His arm moved away. “Let's go inside and clean you up.”

I saw the water dripping from his clothes—how his teeth chattered ever so slightly. He had to be freezing, and he was acting like I wasn't the one who'd pushed him into the ocean. Conway behaved the way he always did.

Like he felt nothing.

Except I kept seeing the glow of his heart... the corner of his soul, no matter how he hid it. Not moving from the dock, I asked, “Who's Anna?”

“Nobody.” His whole frame shook; I didn't know if it was from my question or from the cold.

“She's important, or Lonnie wouldn't keep bringing her up.”

He spread his fingers over his face. “What will it take for you to stop challenging me?” His scorn disintegrated my confidence. “Can't you recognize danger when it's right under your nose?”

I swallowed. “Are you talking about Lonnie... or about yourself?”

Grimacing, he reached for me—then he stopped. “Georgia, just go inside. That's all



I'm asking.”

“You're asking me for much more than that.” Lifting my chin, I passed around him, walking on sore, naked feet over splintered wood and hard rocks.

After a few seconds, I heard him following me. I didn't turn, my mind working on this mystery that felt like the core of Conway's villainous actions.

Whatever had happened to Anna was bad.

I needed to know who she was.

- Chapter Fifteen -

Georgia Mary King

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They locked me in my room for three days after my escape attempt.

Conway brought me food and water, but that was all. He wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't say a sentence. I didn't mind. I didn't know what to say to him, either.

But on day four, a problem arose.

I was starting to stink.

Conway had brought me a small bucket with a sponge, cold water and some weak soap before. Apparently my escape attempt had forbidden that luxury. "Conway," I said, jumping up when he finally opened the door. He was carrying a paper plate with a peanut butter sandwich. Not looking at me, he set it on the floor. "Conway, wait! I need something!"

He paused with his hand on the knob. "What?"

"A shower. A bath. Fuck, toss me in the ocean, just anything so I can get cleaned up."

Pressing his lips together, he slid his eyes over me. My heart spun under his hard stare.

“Please,” I said, putting my hands together.

“You're nice when you want something, hmm?”

I faltered. “I'm...”

“Tempted to hit me with a witty comeback. I know. Swallow your pride and ask me properly for what you want.”

Tightening my jaw, I approached him carefully. My hands stayed in front of me, and I did my best demure princess face—head tilted down, wide eyes fluttering up at him. He wanted me to play this game? Fine. “Please, please let me have some soap. It's getting really bad.”

Conway sighed. The corner of his smile lit up my spirit. “Alright. Come with me.” He started out the door then paused. “If you try anything reckless, you won't just be locked in. You'll be tied down. Understand?”

Touching my wrists like the plastic straps were still there, I shuddered. “Got it.”

\*\*\*\*

He led me to a bathroom deep in the house. A single droplet of water tapped in the huge copper basin over and over. The whole place echoed with our movements. When he turned on the lights, it felt more pleasant. Then he ran the water; the hot steam made the room damn near romantic.

The sound of the water running kept us silent. When it was done, and the tub was full, I glanced at him. “Yes,” he said calmly, “I'll be staying.”

Glowing pink, I shrugged stiffly. “Fine. You've seen me naked, who cares?” I cared.

Stripping for Conway wasn't old news; I could count on one hand the number of people who'd ever seen me naked.

I'd only managed two brief relationships as an adult. And only one of those had turned into sex, thanks to me being "tired" of feeling broken. That encounter hadn't fixed me, and I'd been stupid to think it would.

Shoving my clothes into a pile, I faced the tub. I was overtly aware of every round shape my body created. On locked knees I climbed in, catching my wobbly reflection in the water.

"Ah," I groaned, my toes sinking in, then my knee. "This feels amazing." The water sizzled up my lower half, erasing aches and pains and weeks of sweat. When I was lying in the basin up to my neck, I dared to glance at Conway.

He was eating me up with his eyes. He caught me watching, and to my shock, he looked away. "Here," he said, offering me a small square of white soap in one hand, a cloth in the other. As I took them, I brushed his left pinky. The indent where his skin had been removed drew me in.

What happened to him? I could see his old injuries, but they couldn't speak for him.

He wrenched away, facing the wall again.

Using the dried piece of soap, I scrubbed my scalp. The suds were exquisite. I washed myself until my skin buzzed, scraping like I could escape this place by removing my physical body in layers.

Conway hovered by the door. It reminded me of when he'd guarded me at the rest stop. He'd tried to keep me from causing trouble, and I'd still managed. "About what happened," I said, searching for the right words.

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“Don't apologize for attacking Lonnie. Or for running.” He shrugged. “You'd only be lying.”

Shifting uneasily, I reclined with my head on the rim of the tub. Steam condensed on the sink and single, small frosted window. “Where is he right now?”

“No clue. He does what he wants.”

It was weird to be sitting naked and talking so casually. But I clung to it. “He told me... that you told him all about me and the things I like. So he could use them against me.”

Black lightning slammed through his eyes. “I'd never.”

“I thought so, too. But he brought me candy... and lemonade... and a book.”

Conway leaned closer. “Where did you put them?”

His inquisition wasn't settling my nerves. I withdrew in the water up to my neck, eyeing him. “Me? I didn't put them anywhere. They weren't in my room when you brought me back. I guess he took them when he left. How did he even get out? I'd locked him in.”

“He called me. I released him before we went after you.”

I should have checked Lonnie for a phone. A spike of disappointment had me sinking lower. Water tickled my chin. “If you didn't tell him, how did he know? The Valley

of the Horses is too specific to be a guess.”

Conway moved, sitting on the floor next to me. His head was level with mine. “Maybe he saw me bring it to you. I don't know. That was a long time ago.”

“It was,” I whispered.

We sat in silence. I wondered if he was reliving the same memories. Were they fond ones for him, or horrible? I knew where I fit into his present, but where did I fit into his past? I itched to learn everything about Conway. I knew where I had to start.

My arm dripped water as I swooped it out, catching his left hand, lifting it into the light. The notch in his finger reminded me of a crater on the moon. “How did this happen?”

He studied his own finger as if he'd never seen the damage until now. “My father was accused of cheating at poker. The girl who was bringing him his drinks was blamed. The other players thought she'd been slipping him cards. They took his money, then were going to take her whole hand... until I said I'd been the one helping him cheat.”

My mouth went dry. “Were you?”

“Dad is many things, but he's not a cheater. They just wanted to bully him to make a point.”

I was hanging on his every word. “You risked your life to save her.”

He smiled wryly. “Please. Those big bastards over the border are all talk.”

“If they're all talk, why did you get involved?”

He frowned and slid his hand out of mine. “I said they were all talk, not that they're good people. Ultimately, they backed down, agreeing to just take Dad's winnings, and part of my pinky instead of a whole hand. It worked out for everyone.”

He acts like what went down was normal. “That's awful. I'm so sorry.”

“Don't be.”

“You said the border. Is that where Facile took you both? To Mexico?”

I could tell he was debating whether to answer me. Finally he sighed. “Yes, that's where we ended up. Little lawless town—well, mostly lawless. Dad made new friends and new enemies both.”

“It's dangerous around him,” I whispered.

“Of course. It's always been that way.”

“Why didn't you ever try and run?” The question came out in a rush. My tongue was working to keep up as I let my heart speak for me. “If you were smart enough to survive for so long, what stopped you from just escaping Facile?”

A wicked, spiky thing welled up in his eyes. His knuckles turned bloodless, and when the ceiling bulb flickered, I imagined it was because of the unseen darkness flowing off of him that looked for every source of light it could wipe out. “What makes you think I wanted to leave his side?”

I was falling... slipping through the fingers of courage that had been cupping my heart. Conway couldn't mean it, he couldn't. I was so fucking confused again. “I don't understand.”

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“Enough. I agreed to get you clean, not to play a hundred questions. We're done here,” he said, starting to stand.

“One more question, please.”

He stopped mid-motion. Slowly, he settled back on the floor. “Fine. One more, that's all.”

“Did you mean what you said before?” I asked in a hush.

“Which thing?”

My gaze fell to my knees where they poked from the water. I remembered everything that had happened so acutely; my face in the ceiling mirror, flushed with passion, was seared into my head. “When you told me I was beautiful.”

His silence was torture. I'd never cared what people thought of me, because none of them had left a mark on my heart. But Conway was different.

It was why everything he did hurt so much.

He has nothing to say. Guess everything was a show for the damn camera. “Fine,” I said, laughing weakly. When had I become so frail? “Forget about it. What a stupid question.”

I started to pull my head under the water. He caught my chin, guiding me up and around until I sank into his tunnel vision. “I meant what I said with every fiber in my



body. You're more beautiful than anyone I've ever known, Georgia Mary King. If you searched every star in the sky, you couldn't find one more glorious than you. Not if you looked for a thousand years.”

I reached for his wrists, holding his palms to my face. “I've changed so much over the years. You didn't like me better when I was a skinny teenager?”

His sharply handsome features became perplexed. “Thin as a needle or round as the moon, you're stunning either way. That will never change.”

A compliment had never roosted so solidly. My lips were on his, seeking out more of this addictive feeling—to be wanted. To feel loved.

He returned my kiss, not caring that I tasted like soap. Lifting me from the tub, he wrapped me in a towel. “Back to your room,” he whispered, his voice husky. “Now.”

Reaching my hand down, I palmed the erection in his pants. He openly groaned. “Not yet. I don't want this moment to end.”

Every glimpse at therealemotions Conway kept bottled up was magical. If we left the room it would be over. I knew it and I couldn't handle it.

“Georgia...”

“Please.” I stroked his zipper, opening the button. “I need to feel you. You keep working me up and driving me crazy, you keep warping me into some sort of sexual toy, but you won't let me taste you. You won't fuck me.”

He dug his fingers into my upper arms so roughly it hurt. “Is this what you're asking for? You need me to fuck you, stretch you out with my cock? Say it. Say that's what you need.”

Jolt after jolt of delicious heat rolled through me. “I need your cock. I—fuck- just put it in me. I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want you.”

He grimaced like I’d hurt him. “You’re going to ruin me. Aren’t you afraid I’ll ruin you in return?”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I said honestly, looking him in the eye. “I haven’t ever been.”

Wrapping me up like an avalanche, he glided his tongue in my mouth. His thumbs brushed my temples, clasped my naked shoulders and shoved the towel to the floor.

Kissing me again, he yanked his shirt over his head. Murals of ink cascaded over his flesh. He wasn’t free of scars, but unlike his arms, there were far less of them here. Only one drew my attention—a jagged thing that tracked from his collarbone to his right shoulder.

He saw me looking; when I touched the scar tissue, he chuckled. “Relax. It’s not like it hurts anymore.”

“You’re used to it,” I whispered. “But I’m not. Seeing it for the first time is like I’m the one being stabbed.”

Dismay wrecked his features. He inhaled my worries, linking his fingers so we traced his scar together. Unable to help myself, I rolled my hand over his denim, caressing the outline of his massive hard-on.

“Jesus,” I breathed out. I’d seen him touching himself. It was nothing compared to doing it myself.

“Take it out,” he said.

I'd already popped the button. It was quick to spread the zipper all the way to the base. I half-crouched, sliding his jeans over his trim waist. His cock jutted proudly against his black boxers. Reaching around, I palmed his firm ass, loving how he growled in his throat above me. Every inch of this man was pure, masculine power.

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Slowly, I edged his underwear out of the way. Flexing in the air, his shaft bobbed heavily. My mouth watered at the sight of his naked cock. I ran a fingertip over his full length—he hissed.

“Lick me,” he said, his hand settling on my head.

Conway thrust himself closer. The tip of his cock-head was beaded with pre-come. Wildfire curled up inside of me. His scent, his color, the tremble in his voice as he commanded me... I couldn't have resisted if I'd wanted to. And I didn't fucking want to.

Wetting my lips, I circled him tenderly. “Fuck!” he crowed, fingertips working in my thick hair. His patience stunned me—he clearly wanted to ram himself down my throat. His whole body was shaking with his arousal.

Cupping his balls, I shivered at how they flexed. His grip tightened. My pussy clenched in response. When I rocked on my heels, I felt the sticky juice coating the inside of my thighs. My labia were swelling. I was a being of desperate lust.

Pulling off of him, I gasped for air. Tears leaked from my eyes; drool fell from my lips. Conway studied me, his eyes burning bright. “You actually wondered if I thought you were beautiful?” he asked.

He lifted me up and kissed me one, quick—teasing. It was his turn to crouch, his face level with my sensitive clit. His tongue flattened, circling me, eager to taste me. His fingers crossed like he was making a promise; they slid inside and massaged my walls.

Conway shifted his finger-pads until they pushed relentlessly against the roof of my pussy. He explored until he found the sponge-texture of my G-spot. He wrote words inside of me letter by letter. This man brought me to the cusp of orgasm the way poetry could make you break open and cry before you were prepared.

I came hard, choking his fingers, listening to him eat me out with glee. His face was shiny when he stood again. Kissing me, I tasted myself, and it made my insides tighten with new pressure.

He slid a condom from his fallen jeans. The sight of it pulled me from my pink bubble—it reminded me of logic, and logic would say that fucking this man was idiotic. He caught my stare, peeling the rubber circle free. “No accidents,” he said, and that word made my heart shrink.

His eyes reminded me of charcoal engulfed in flames. I could taste the smoke. “Georgia, we can't pretend for a second that getting you pregnant would be—”

“I know.” But the pain had calcified inside of my blood. It would always be there.

He was hesitating, so I took his hand, rolling the latex down his shaft with him. The action was erotic, it brought us back to the moment we wanted to be lost in. “Face the wall,” he said, fisting himself a few times.

I spun, bracing my palms on the tile. His hand settled over one of mine, his other running the tip of his cock up and down my slit from behind. I thrummed each time he rubbed my swollen clit. “Fuck me,” I begged. “Please, I'm tired of waiting for this. I can't... I don't want to wait. Not anymore.”

I'd waited so many years for Conway.

And he was finally here.

His cheek scraped over mine; he nipped my ear then kissed me with breathless abandon. The head of his dick spread me an inch, then he withdrew, my muscles begging to squeeze, to keep him inside.

He did it again, teasing me every time.

I was blind with desire.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

He'd expected something filthy to spout from my lips. I had, too. We got something else entirely. “I want to be yours,” I said. “I never wanted anything so much.”

Crushing my hand in his, Conway panted like an animal. His cock stretched me open in one great thrust. He was done playing—had my response been the one he'd actually been seeking?

He swelled inside of me. That sensation, nearly breaking, barely able to fit him, sent me coming again. The latex didn't keep me from feeling the heat of his come. It reverberated through me, pulse after pulse. Overwhelmed, I thought I heard him cry out my name. I couldn't be positive... and when I tuned in, it was only his breathing that echoed on the tiles.

Conway embraced me in my arms. He played with my tits as he finished, his pulse so frantic I worried he'd pass out. But of course he wouldn't. This man was strong enough to conquer the world.

“That was amazing,” I whispered, relishing our nearness. His chin balanced on my head; he turned me to him, kissing me softly. It was more tender than I believed he was capable of.

There were a great many thoughts rotating through his eyes. He opened his mouth. The words never came, replaced at the last second by new ones. "It's time to go."

Draping a towel around my body, he started to link his hand with mine. He pulled back, because such a gesture was meant for sweet couples. Not enemies, like he wanted us to be.

We walked back to my little prison together.

- Chapter Sixteen -

Georgia Mary King

I pat the bed. “Do you want to... I don't know, stay?”

“Part of a new plan of yours?”

Bristling, I dug my nails into the mattress. “No. I'm just lonely.”

The raw pain that attacked his fine features left me stunned. “I know all about that,” he whispered. “Besides you, I haven't really been around anyone other than Lonnie. It's easier to be a recluse.” He stood against the far wall; his head tilted back, eyes at the ceiling.

It came to me in a sudden electric pop. “Am I the only girl you've kidnapped?”

“Yes,” he blurted.

“But—the news! I heard them.” The night that felt so long ago played through my mind. “They said you were the prime suspect in multiple abductions.”

Conway ran his finger along his knee. He twiddled with a loose piece of thread, then ripped it free. “I probably am. That white van was bought for cash, I guarantee it was used for some suspicious shit before Lonnie and I got our hands on it.”

“If it's not true, how can you be so casual about this? People are out there thinking



you're some awful creature!”

“They're not wrong.” He tossed the thread aside. I watched it go, forgotten. “How many times do I have to say it? I'm awful, Georgia. I'm a fucking demon. I belong somewhere worse than prison. What do I care if the world thinks I kidnapped one girl or fifteen? I'm guilty enough without them getting the facts straight.”

“It does matter,” I insisted.

He dropped his eyes onto me. “Why, so you can decide for yourself if I'm worth saving? I'll let you in on a secret, Georgia. I'm not worth saving. None of me is.”

I didn't know when I'd started shaking my head, and I didn't know if I could ever stop. “No! Just no! You've done nothing wrong, it's all an act.”

“You think this is a costume?” he asked scathingly. Running his fingers down his chest, he pointed at the door. “This place isn't pretend! This situation isn't a game! You're scared to accept what's true—that I'm your enemy.”

“Prove it.” I stood off the bed in the clean jeans and soft sweater he'd gotten for me on the way back to my room from the bath. But I didn't move closer to him. “If the only thing you've done is kidnap me, then it's up to me to forgive you. And I can! I will! So what the hell is holding you back, how can you keep insisting you're evil when the facts say otherwise?”

“Because of Anna!” he roared, throwing his arms down.

My tongue wouldn't move, but it didn't have to. He knew what I would have said next.

“You asked about her before.” His head swung low, pushed down by something

greater than any external force. “She's the proof that I'm worse than scum. The reason I'm so tired of hearing you tell me I'm not a broken, terrible excuse for a human being.”

“Oh, Conway...” Pain moved through my heart for him.

Air rushed from his nose. “She was the first woman my father kidnapped,” he said softly. “The one right before you.”

The tiny drumbeats in my chest exploded. If Anna was the girl before me, that meant...

“Yes,” he said, examining the shock on my face. “She's the one who died.”

“They never found her body,” I whispered. “The police looked everywhere on the property. I don't think they believed me, but I believed you. I was sure she was there.”

Conway's head fell even lower. “My father made me bury her in the woods, miles from the house. It'd be hard for anyone to find her bones.”

But not for you, I thought, sensing his regret. “Conway, how did it happen? How did she die?”

“I killed her.”

A whistling began in my ears. “What?”

Conway approached me as slowly, one toe in front of the other. His eyes were hollow. “I killed her, Georgia.” Another step. “I was supposed to keep her alive, that was what he asked me to do, and it was a job I fucking hated but it was better than...

than anything else he could have asked of me.”

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My shoulders thumped into the plaster. Was this how Lonnie had felt when I'd swung at him with my shard of glass? Conway was acting erratic.

Another step. He was so close. "I couldn't handle listening to her cry anymore, nothing I said or did soothed her. I left to clear my head, I just needed some damn space." His expression exploded like brittle steel. His shoulders began to shake. "When I came back later, she was dead." He wrapped his fingers in his hair, his voice cracking. "Anna suffocated herself. Tangled her face in the bed sheets."

That's why he never gave me sheets or blankets. Grasping the reasons behind Facile's decisions turned my bones into jelly. What was worse was realizing that Conway had followed his guidance.

"Do you understand how badly she must have wanted to escape, if she could have done that to herself?" he asked.

"Yes," I said solemnly. "I do."

"Exactly. Fuck, of course you get it." He turned away, his head thrashing. "Dad blamed me. He was right to, you know? It was my fucking fault she died. Anna could have... maybe, like you, she could have... If I'd realized sooner I could have saved her. But I was too scared. I was a useless coward then, just like I am now."

He was pleading with me to hate him. At the same time, he was begging me to understand. And I did—as messed up as this all was, I really did get what he was telling me. Anna's death had weighed on him this whole time.

Thanks to her he'd gone out of his way to free me.

Curling my arms around his stone-hard body, I hugged Conway from behind. "It wasn't your fault! It was an accident! You can't let this drag you down forever."

He didn't toss me aside, but he didn't soften, either. "You think it matters if I wasn't the one who pushed her face into the mattress? Georgia, my sins have been building every year and they haven't stopped."

A flicker of resentment turned my voice cold. "You could stop one of them right now."

He pulled away, turning to watch me. "I can't set you free. It's not that easy."

"Why, because you enjoy breaking me apart?" I clawed the air between us. "Just listen to yourself! Anna is a huge regretto this day, you saved me because you were afraid I'd turn out like her. So how the hell can you drag me here and do this all again?"

"You don't understand," he said, biting each vowel. His teeth remained bared, eyes wild. Lost. "I can't handle it!"

"Handlewhat?"

"The thought of anyone else I love dying."

We both froze. He'd been breathing heavily, but now he stopped breathing at all. His pupils were hard to see in the wide expanse of his eyes. "You love me?" I asked.

His hands closed on mine, yanking me against his chest. He clung to me like he expected me to fade away. "Of course I do. Ever since the night you cried while

asking me to be your first kiss. I felt a warmth grow in me that I'd never experienced before. It's been there ever since."

He loves me.

Conway bruised my lips with his, digging his fingers into my hair. He was a man intent on leaving marks across my whole being. It would have been easy to get lost in this moment. But my life was never meant to be easy.

Pressing my elbows upwards, I broke his hold, backing away. "No. Just—no." Hot tears squeezed from the corners of my eyes. My righteous anger wasn't enough to will them away. "If you loved me—if you loved me the way I love you, you'd help me."

The shock in his face had my heart crumbling into dust. "I can't."

"What does your father have over you that's controlling you like this?" When he gaped at me, full of wretched pain, I knew I was right. "Tell me. Please, just help me understand why."

"It would be so much easier for us both if you would just hate me," he said softly.

"Your mistake was thinking I was ever capable of hating you."

Every part of his face that could move did—the bridge of his nose crinkled, the rows in his forehead deepened, the fine lines at the edges of his eyes bloomed. He was a black hole upon himself, absorbing my feelings and unable to deny them any longer.

On stiff legs he came back to me. From his pocket he pulled out a phone; I'd never seen it until now. "Before I show you this," he said, typing in a pass code, "I need you to know that I hoped to keep it a secret forever. I really, truly wanted you to loath me. I never deserved your pity—I never wanted it." He paused, then he handed me

the device. “Don't let this shift your opinion of me into a positive light. Men like me don't deserve that. I made every choice that got us here, and I'll answer for all of them in the afterlife.”

Shaking under his watchful eyes, I held the phone gingerly.

I didn't know what I expected to see when I looked at the screen.

- Chapter Seventeen -

Georgia Mary King

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The photo was of a young woman. Thin-boned, tangled reddish hair showed even in the green tint of the fuzzy digital picture. She was tied to a chair. Her face tilted upwards, mouth half open. I'd made that same expression many times; agony.

“Who is this?” I asked, going cold with unease.

“That's Emily. My sister.”

I jerked my head up to stare at him. “I saw her in a photo when you were pulling me out of your house. She looked so much like me,” I mumbled. “But now...”

“You don't look similar anymore, no.” He ran his gaze down my body, both of us seeing how he appreciated my soft curves.

Emily was thin, that was true, but the hollows in her cheeks came from something insidious. A picture could say a thousand words, but I hoped she'd be able to tell someone—anyone—more on her own. “Who did this to her?”

He took the phone back, snapping it shut. “My father.”

“What? How could he do this to his own family?”



“You met him, Georgia. You know he only cares about getting his way.”

I held my temples, trying to absorb all of this information. “You said before that he didn't know where she was, that after your mom died, she vanished.”

“Somehow he found her. And now he's hidden her, using her against me. Emily is the one thing I cared deeply about in this world... besides you.” He flinched. Then his stare softened. “He thought if he threatened me with killing Emily, that I'd do as he said. And the bastard was right.”

“He's more messed up than I guessed. Is that why he's not here, is he with her?”

“No. He's still locked up in Mexico. Got put there when I was nineteen for drug trafficking.”

Shivering, I hugged myself. “Then he had someone kidnap Emily for him. Did they send you that photo?”

“It came from a burner phone, number doesn't exist any longer. That's how my dad communicates with Lonnie and me. He shoots messages when he can, but they all come from other sources who are working with him.”

My pulse was racing. “Why would anyone help that man?”

“Money. Connections. The usual.” His frown became a long, smooth line. “I don't know when he's getting free, just that it'll be a break out. His sentence would leave him in there to rot for another twenty years.”

I held my head, trying to grasp all of this. “Then... I'm supposed to stay here until he gets out?”

“Yes.”

I could be here for weeks or months. An idea struck me. “Are you sure that's your sister?”

Conway shifted side to side. “Even if it wasn't, how can I risk being wrong?”

I agreed with that. Family or stranger, this woman would die if Conway didn't do what his father wanted. “And Lonnie? What does he know about all of this?”

“Everything. I don't know how much he cares about Emily. I'm starting to suspect he's just in on this because he thinks it's hilarious. He always loved seeing me brought low.”

Turning away, I rubbed my arms up and down. “Then the deal is that you're supposed to break me down, turn me into the person Facile wants me to be. And if you don't, he'll kill her.”

“Yes. That's what he promised.”

My eyes shut heavily. I wondered if I could keep them closed forever.

“Georgia,” he started

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

“Thank you.” I looked at the ceiling, then at my own hands. “Really, thank you for telling me all of this. I feel... I don't know. Better, in a way. Lighter.”

Conway approached me warily. “You shouldn't feel better. I just showed you that I'm willing to ruin you in order to get something I want.”

My smile was bittersweet. “This was the last piece of the puzzle. I finally understand why you're doing this to me. You can't imagine how hard not knowing has been.” Warmth flushed my face—I was crying again. Fuck, I cried so much lately. “You saved me nine years ago, and then, the first time I see you again, you knock me out and take me here. You've wanted me to think of you as my enemy—”

“Because I am,” he cut in.

“You're not. You never were.” Grabbing his hands, I squeezed. “You're as much of a victim of your father as anyone. And now that I know that, now that I get it, I want to help you.”

He was judging me, trying to grasp my new serenity. “How can you help?”

I'd told him I wasn't the girl he used to know. But that wasn't entirely true. I'd grown, I'd changed, but right now, I needed what teenage me had after she'd been stolen from her own bedroom.

The courage to lose.

“Tell me how to keep us all alive. And I'll do it.”

- Chapter Eighteen -

Conway

There was a list of things that my father had messaged me before I'd kidnapped Georgia. So I'd known, for some time, all the ways I was supposed to wreck her. I also knew my father meant for me to hate it all.

And on some level, I had.

But on another lower, baser level... I loved it.

I'd warned her before. I'm a fucking demon; and not just because I was destined to splinter her mind. If I was a good person, I wouldn't love the hint of fear in her face when I tested her limits. I wouldn't think of it as an aphrodisiac.

I'm not my father.

I'm much worse.

Setting up the camera, then the tablet at one end of the bed, I waved at her. "Get on your knees on the mattress." She climbed up, obeying me with a quiet curiosity. Her hands gripped her shirt. She had it over her belly before I said, "What are you doing?"

"Getting undressed. I thought you'd want that."

“I do.” My smirk curved like a scimitar. “I’m just surprised you went ahead with it on your own.”

Biting the edge of her lip, she finished pulling her shirt over her head. Her perfect breasts were full, nipples the color of roses at dusk. A hot spike of passion danced into my belly. Her pants came off next, and with them went her underwear. The look she shot me was dastardly. She's trying to get a rise out of me.

Chuckling in the back of my throat, I twirled a finger. “Face the tablet, face down, ass up.”

My blunt instruction made her mouth drop open. Her feet crossed demurely over each other, that delicious ass of hers exposed. But nothing could distract me from the sight of her pretty little cunt.

Every plan I had vanished.

“Ah!” she gasped when I crouched behind her. Holding her still, I peeled her pussy wide and licked her from bottom to top. The sight of her bending over for me so eagerly, so willingly, had fogged my brain into mush.

I was a wild beast. I needed to taste her salty-sweetness. I longed to roll my tongue on her firm clit until she screamed my name. Messy, desperate, I lapped at her cunt and her asshole because a good man never ignores any part of his woman. My teeth grazed her skin lightly. “Fucking hell, I could eat you out for days, Georgia. You taste so damn good.”

The springs squeaked. She'd bit the material, muffling her sounds.

“No,” I purred, sitting up, cupping her jaw. “Don't you dare try and stay quiet. The music you make belongs to me, understand?”

Her periwinkle-blue eyes went a shade darker. Her voice was thick with arousal. “Yes, I understand.”

Shivering, I ran my knuckle down her cheek. My thumb perched on her bottom lip, sliding over her teeth. “Suck it.”

Locking her stare on mine, she wrapped her lips around my thumb and suckled like it was my cock. Her pink lips were glossy, plush. I wanted to kiss them. I was eager to feel them sliding on my shaft and balls.

Groaning, I clenched my teeth and laughed. “You're too damn good.” I shook myself, regaining my composure. Reaching into the bag on the floor, I withdrew a small bottle. A long string of clear lube extended between it and her naked asshole. She jumped—I chuckled. “This will help,” I assured her. “I'm going to fuck this ass raw. But I don't want to split you in two. This is about pleasure, not pain.”

“It won't hurt?” she asked, looking up at me imploringly.

“Not after I warm you up.” With my fingertips, I rubbed the slippery lubricant over her sensitive skin. Georgia bucked, inhaling sharply. “I'll get you used to being stretched out before my cock even touches you.”

I reached over and turned on the tablet. The sound of Georgia panting obscenely erupted from the speakers. “Please,” she moaned in the video. I'd uploaded one of the tapes of her onto the device.

She froze on the mattress, staring at herself on the screen. “What's this?”

“A reminder of what you're capable of.”

Her eyes narrowed dubiously. Then, like she was telling herself something that gave

her courage, she nodded. Her breasts plumped up like pillows on her folded arms. The need that was burning in her eyes was reflected in my own.

I couldn't handle how stiff my cock was getting. Quickly, I unzipped my pants. Georgia watched in fascination as my length arched into the air. Pumping myself, I groaned. "Let's keep going. I want to see what your ass can take."

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She hadn't stopped staring at my thick dick. "I'm not... Conway, that won't fit."

Her fear lit me up. "It will. They were made for each other."

Crouching behind her, I squeezed her ass-cheeks. Georgia obediently watched herself in the video. In it, she was kneeling on the floor, drooling as I made her orgasm with the vibrator. It had been her first session with me.

Had it made her understand what I was capable of?

My thumb scraped over her crinkled entrance. Reaching beneath, I lifted her hips higher. I wanted access to her clit. Perfectly in sync, I rubbed both it and her asshole. "Fuck, you love that," I noted as she rocked against me.

Pushing my thumb into her ass, plunging in and out, I made circles. She was panting like an animal. I kept pushing, working her ring of muscle until I finally slid my finger out.

Her asshole gaped in front of me. She mewled for more, the thrill of her arousal making me feel drunk. "You're desperate to be filled," I said, almost in amazement. Somewhere between being forced to do this and agreeing to go along with it all in the name of the greater good, we'd both gotten lost.

I wanted this.

And she wanted it even more.



Running my palm along my shaft, I gripped her ass-cheek for leverage. I soaked my cock in more lube, jerking myself in fast strokes. I was losing control but I kept up my facade. I was strong enough to take her in any hole, any way that I wanted, without her say so.

But this wasn't about force.

I needed her to crave my cock. Georgia had to become the perfect slut for me and me alone. No, for my father. Right. It was easy to forget when I had her silky skin pressing against my own.

“Conway,” she whimpered. My name on her lips was addictive. I wanted to slice open my veins and pour her voice straight in. “Please, fuck me, I'm ready.”

“Are you?” Grinding her clit with my fingers, I bent near her ear. I was pushing the tip of my cock against her asshole, the pressure solid. Impending. Unstoppable. “Beg me to fuck you in the ass, Georgia. Say you're my little anal princess.”

Sweat made her perfect skin shine like diamonds. She pushed back, trying to get me inside of her. “I can't! That's so dirty.”

“Say it,” I breathed, my fingers vanishing from her swollen labia. “Or you won't come at all.”

Georgia shivered. That sensation transferred through her skin and right into my cock; my balls flexed. “I'm your anal princess. I'm your cock slut. I'm whatever you need me to be, Conway, just fuck me. I'm going crazy, I can't... fuck, I want to come.”

My eyes rolled in my skull. I was one big rush of pleasure. Clenching her hips with both hands, I guided my thick cock-head into her asshole. Under me she moaned, the noise mixing with her moans in the video.

It was a crescendo in my skull. It was the closest I'd ever get to heaven.

“Yes,” I panted. Deeper I sank, wedging my cock inside of her. The muscles in her ass suffocated my shaft. It made me dizzy, my vision swimming as I grasped what control I still had. I was close to giving up and slamming into her balls deep. She felt so damn good.

Amazingly, she closed the gap first, thrusting herself backwards. Georgia fucked herself on my rigid length with her face buried in her arms on the bed. Ravenous to feel her come while my cock was in her ass, I tweaked her clit.

I'd hardly touched her and she started to squeal. Every cell in her body flared, her skin pink and her lips curling over her teeth. She was so beautiful when she came.

Her walls milked me, tighter than her pussy could have. The sensation of her asshole fluttering over my cock was my doom. Squeezing her middle, I fucked her for a handful of solid strokes. “You're mine,” I whispered, not caring if she heard. If she even understood how much I longed for her. “I love the way you come for me. I love how your clit cries out for me. And I...” I went so quiet the camera wouldn't pick it up. “I love you.”

There was a hiccup in her moans; she looked over her shoulder at me. Then she looked at the camera in the corner. My smile was sharp. Was she scared for me, or did she trust that I knew what I could get away with?

Throwing my head back, I packed her asshole with rope after rope of my thick come. Hot tingles kept me thrusting, enduring the hypersensitivity.

We clung together on the bed long after the tablet had stopped playing the video. With a raspy hiss, I slid myself out of her. I walked over to turn off the video camera. A whip-crack of guilt erupted inside of me. If you removed all the trappings (the

tablet, the toys, the depressing room) you could almost pretend Georgia and I were simple lovers - a couple having normal, sweaty fun.

I turned to face her. She saw the camera was off, and right away, her body relaxed. That, too, cut me painfully. “Are you alright?” I asked, handing her what she needed to clean up.

“Yes,” she said, her lips quirking. “I've never done that before. It was—I really liked it. Is that wrong?” she asked, suddenly acting shy.

My spent cock swelled for her like magic. “Not wrong at all.” Standing beside her, I ran my fingers in her hair. “It's incredibly hot. Almost like you...” Like you actually want this part of me.

Fuck. Why, after she'd learned so much, did things manage to feel more complicated? Redressing hurriedly, I hoisted up my bag. “I'll be back,” I said. Stepping into the hall, I breathed deeply of the air that wasn't infected by her. I just needed a moment...a tiny break away from—her, from all of this.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

The walls flickered as the tablet came to life in my hands. These things are so damn touchy, I thought, swimming with a bitter mood I was struggling to make sense of. As I started to turn it off, I stopped. The still-screen was showing the video of Georgia. The one I'd forced her to watch as I fucked her.

It was paused, but even when she wasn't moving, she was a creature of life. It taunted me; too crisp, too saturated, too real. My thumb moved of its own accord—I deleted the video.

The immediate wave of relief left me dazed. I hadn't considered erasing the videos until I'd done it just now. But I fucking had to. Not just because it was wrong for my father or brother to ever see Georgia like this, because it was wrong for anyone to.

Anyone but me.

The smoky lure of possessiveness took over—I was out the backdoor of the house, canvas bag in hand. Jogging to the slope that led to the water, I slid on the wet gravel. Sea spray burned my nose. One by one, I tossed the tapes into the water, soaking them in the salt that was sure to ruin everything.

This vision of Georgia belonged to me.

These memories were mine.

Looking down at the pile of wrecked tapes, my heart raced. I'd known I was a traitor but this was the first time I actively lashed out against my father's wishes.

A tiny voice told me this was just the beginning.

- Chapter Nineteen -

Georgia Mary King

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Idid everything he said.

I performed for the camera as well as the porn stars he'd made me watch. Facile's ultimate goal was for me to be his perfect little sex kitten. That I'd never talk back, never fight, no matter how he abused me.

I couldn't imagine obeying Facile.

But for Conway... it was almost too easy.

When he called me his cock-slut, I became it. I shivered, melting on him, slobbering on his shaft and eating both his come and my own. He'd rub his thumb on my lips and make me suckle it perversely. I did it with an eagerness neither of us expected.

That we couldn't ignore.

And he taped it all.

The blinking red light was a constant enemy in the room with us. Pretend it's Facile, I told myself, kneeling at Conway's feet. You said you could behave. You promised Conway that you'd do everything perfectly.

I'd said I'd give up my own dignity to save his sister. I'd meant it. In the late hours, after we were done performing, and as we lied there on my bare mattress staring into each others eyes, I wondered if he knew the truth: that I was risking my own soul to save his.

I could never tell him that.

I loved him too much.

- Chapter Twenty -

Conway

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“This is a farce, and you know it.” Lonnie slammed the scissors down on the table. He'd just finished pulling out the hasty stitches he'd done on himself weeks ago.

Patiently, I moved the box I had away from his bloody threads. “She's doing exactly what Dad wants. That's good enough.”

“It's not good enough! Not one fucking bit! And what's up with those videos, hm? Why haven't you shown them to me by now?”

“The ones I recorded are corrupted,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “I'll make new ones once I buy a better camera.” I had no intention of that.

“Dad is going to be pissed,” he said, his anger sliding through. I didn't see Lonnie lose his cool often. “He's seen no solid proof that you're doing anything that he's instructed.”

“Have you heard from him?” I asked, taking out my phone. “Because I haven't, not since I first arrived here with Georgia. For all we know he got shanked in prison and he's dead.”

Lonnie coiled with tension from head to toe. “He's not dead. And she's not fooling



anyone. When Dad meets up with us, you know what's going to happen to her? He's going to beat the shit out of her. She can trick you, but not me, and not him. Everyone will be fucked. Including Emily.”

I didn't think—I just grabbed him by the front of his sweater and slammed him against the fridge. Breathing in great heaves through my nose, I said, “Don't talk about her. Not when you're not responsible for her life.”

His eyes trembled in their sockets, yet he smiled. “But I am. I'm very responsible. Dad said I'm the Watcher. I'm watching to make sure you make Georgia perfect for him. But you're not, so I can't stay quiet about it.” He leaned close to me. His newly healed scar shined. “If you don't crush her actual fucking spirit, this shallow, surface level game you've got her playing will put all of us in the ground.”

Letting him go, I stepped back, grabbing the box. “Let's hope for the shanked in prison thing, then. Yeah?”

His eyes burned on the back of my head as I left the room. Outside, Georgia was waiting for me on the front steps. November had created constant rain, but she wanted to be out in the open as often as I'd let her.

I didn't believe she'd run again. Not after what I'd revealed to her. Perhaps being honest was the truly selfish thing, because it had insured that Georgia finally did as she was told. But my guilt over it all was a constant weight on my chest.

The heavy rain had left massive puddles around the outside of the house. As we passed the left side, I noticed the ground there was sunken in. “I hope we don't get flooding inside,” I mumbled. “I'll ask Lonnie about it later. There was a big storm back in the spring, he said the cellar got pretty wrecked then.”

Georgia followed my eyes. “You were here in the spring?”

“Lonnie was. He's been holding up here since then, kind of like a squatter.” He'd come here to get away from the world while he figured out what to do without Dad guiding us. It was convenient that the abandoned island served as a perfect place for our current dirty work.

“It's dry today,” she said, stretching out her arms. “Maybe it'll stay like that.”

“Maybe.” We circled the island, crossing by the fence that blocked the docks, by the cliff that could snap our necks. Finally, we spread a blanket on the gravel and sat on it.

“When asked for more fresh air, I never expected a picnic,” she said, chuckling.

My smile was wry. “Happy birthday,” I said, offering her the box.

She blinked. “Sorry, did you say birthday?”

“Today is November 2nd.” Her face fell. My black guilt spread to my limbs, I became sluggish all over. Reaching for the box took too long. “You're right. I'm sorry, this was tone deaf of me.”

To her credit, she recovered and smiled. “It's fine, just... shocking. Come on, what did you get me?” She picked the present up curiously. I hadn't wrapped it, but I'd stuck a purple, shiny ribbon on top.

Examining the box, she opened it like it was full of fragile porcelain. I watched how wide her beautiful eyes were capable of getting. “I told you forever ago that I'd sneak you some cake,” I said. “I never got to. And I'm glad for that, of course, but a promise is a promise.”

Georgia gazed down at the whipped cream topping on the small slice of cake. Lonnie

thought I'd left yesterday morning to get more supplies. I hadn't lied entirely; I'd just also bought a strawberry and cream cake slice from the nearest bakery.

It had been a huge risk.

I didn't regret it at all.

“Conway, how did you remember?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

I settled my hand on hers. Our pinky fingers linked together. “How could I have forgotten?”

Dipping her head, she scrubbed at her eyes with her free hand.

“Are you crying?”

“Forget it,” she laughed. Lifting her hands, she fanned herself and stared at the clouds. “It's nothing some sugar won't fix. Let's eat this cake.”

I was torn between thinking I'd done something amazing... and something horrible. Could it really be both? We ate in silence, the air around us shifting into something easier to manage. It was almost joyous, but it never quite tipped there.

She plucked the purple ribbon off of the box and wrapped it around her wrist. “Can I keep this?”

My eyebrows lowered. “I don't care. But once Dad arrives, I can't guarantee anything.” Thinking about the future made me sick.

Her eyes were glistening. I expected her to cry again, but she didn't. “I know. Just for now.”

“For now,” I whispered, brushing the curling ribbon.

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Lonnie was still in the kitchen when we went inside.

“Go on,” I said to Georgia, waving her down the hallway. She hesitated, eyeing my brother, before she darted out of view. When she was gone, I looked back at him. “You want something. What is it?”

He pushed his phone towards me. I expected there to be a message from our father, but it was a website instead. We had very spotty Internet on the island. Squinting, I read the article.

The police had started searching for Georgia back in October. That wasn't news to me, I'd paid attention to everything that had to do with her abduction. But I'd quit looking up news stories around two weeks back, when they still hadn't connected me to the crime.

Yesterday, they'd finally done it.

The article had my photos from the gas station plastered all over. It talked about my connection to the white van they thought was picking up girls. That the vehicle had been in the area Georgia Mary King was last seen in.

Her friend, Chelsea, insisted there was foul play. Georgia hadn't returned home the day after a party and her purse was still in Chelsea's car. Again, this was all old information. What was new was that piece of shit that'd tried to rape her finally come forward.

He'd told the police that he'd tried to save Georgia from a man with dark hair in a brown jacket and jeans. According to him, I'd overwhelmed him after a fight, and a lucky punch had knocked him out. He claimed to be very concerned about Georgia.

“Fun, right?” Lonnie said crisply.

I handed the phone back, sitting down across from him. “It's not like they can find us here.”

“No, probably not.”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “Then what are you worried about?”

“Me?” He touched his chest, blinking. “I'm not worried about anything. I'm just pointing out that you can't walk away from this unscathed.”

My shoulders bunched up, my jaw tensing. “I never thought I could.”

He watched me for a long, silent minute. “Okay then. This was your daily reality check, go back to having cake with your rent-a-girl.”

Shoving myself upwards, I knocked my chair to the floor loudly. I was furious—but not at Lonnie. He was right; there was no walking away from this. Had I honestly thought there was?

If I save Emily, it doesn't matter.

That belief lacked strength. It was smothered by a new voice that cried out to protect Georgia. But I could only keep them alive if I stayed on this path. There was no way out.

Was there?

Rounding the corner, I ran into her. She backed up before we collided. “What are you doing out here?” I asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

“You just said to go. You didn't say where.”

“I meant your room and you know that.”

Her hip kicked to one side, emphasizing the drastic dip of her middle. My hands buzzed at the thought of fitting there so perfectly. “That's not fair, you're assuming I know what you want without you saying it clearly.”

The pulsing in my body stalled. “Don't you?” I wondered out loud. Georgia's face tilted down, her eyes hidden in the dim hallway. This whole house was crawling with shadows. Even when we were forced together, they still let us hide what we really desired.

She started to walk away. I closed my hand on her shoulder. “Wait,” I said. “You're right. I don't want you to go to your room.” My fingers tightened on her soft skin. “Let's go to mine.”

\*\*\*\*

I'd been staying upstairs. I had a view of the ocean through the gaps in the wooden boards on my window. Lonnie was on the same floor, but down the opposite hall. We didn't have to sleep near each other in this huge house and we took advantage of that.

Georgia stared around as we entered. “Nice,” she said. It wasn't—it was a single bed with thick blankets, a chair with my jacket draped on it. One wall had a dusty dresser that was barren. It was the opposite of fucking nice.

Yet... with her in here with me, it wasn't so bad.

She must have felt my stare, because she spun around, squinting. "You get blankets, but not me."

"I told you why."

"How do I make you understand I won't do anything to hurt myself?"

Sighing, I sat on the bed. "Alright. I'll get you a blanket."

"I could also sleep here."

My eyes flashed at her. The idea of sleeping with her curled against me, my hands able to touch her whenever I ached to, was tempting. Stop getting close to her. You can't keep her. "No," I said, channeling what ice was left in my blood.

"What? Why not?"

"Because you're my prisoner."

She backed up from the force of my claim. "I thought—"

"You think you're free," I growled, standing again. Gripping her by her hair, I pushed her roughly onto the blankets. The pent up frustration at being between a rock and a hard place had gotten to me. "You think I want you."

Amazingly, when she knelt and faced me, she lacked any hint of terror. I knew I was frightening. I didn't know where her strength came from. "What do you want, then, if it's not me? What would truly make you happy?"



Grasping the front of my shirt, I traced the obvious scar beneath. I palmed the old injuries on my arms, the ink I'd covered myself with because choosing to experience pain instead of having it forced on me was intoxicating. Surreal.

I touched myself to see if I really existed. The lack of hate in her eyes made me think I had to be invisible. How else could Georgia not wish death on me with every glance? “What would make me happy,” I said, choking up, “Is if I could erase my existence. It's the only way to make sure this moment never happens to you.”

Her pretty mouth made an ugly shape. “What?”

“Have you looked around?” I asked. “You're my slave, Georgia. And soon you'll be my father's.” I quivered, and as if picturing her out of my life, I gripped her forearms and dug in until she winced. But she didn't buckle. “My life equals your suffering.”

“Being with you isn't suffering!” she cried.

“No? You mean youlikethis?” I loomed over her, watching how she did her best not to crumble under my ferocity. “You wouldn't change things if you could?”

“I—I would. Of course I would.” She gathered herself. “I'd go back and make sure you ran awaywithme.”

I locked up at her words. “What?”

“That day, when you told me to never look back, I listened. Did you know that's my biggest regret?”

I released her as if she burned. “You don't know what you're saying.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:38 pm*

Her defiance nested in her stare. She bent away from me, folding in half, scooping her hair off her neck as she did it. That stunningly beautiful tattoo of an open eye was exposed. The blue iris pierced my soul.

The day I'd first seen it, I'd been pressing Georgia onto the bed. Fighting with her had excited the most primal part of me. And with her face in the mattress, I could avoid her judgment. Then I'd pushed her hair aside. That inked eye was here. It had stripped away my courage and replaced it with loathing.

"I do know what I'm saying. I knew it when I had this needled into my skin the day after my mother died. Death makes you look back at your actions, realize what you'd change if you could. This is here to remind me of that."

I digested everything she'd told me. "Your mother is dead?"

"Cancer gets all the wrong people," she said, not yet facing me. "We moved next to one of the best hospitals in the country. Best treatments, best doctors, best everything. It didn't matter."

She'd always spoken about her mother so fondly. Everything had been a constant worry, afraid to leave her alone... to let her suffer. And she was dead? The unfairness blackened my mood further.

Her head turned. I could see part of her wistful smile. "I told you before that I never knew my dad. But I did know his money. He left so much for her. For us. Treatment wasn't a burden." Her laugh sounded like a stone was rolling across her sternum. "All that cash didn't matter. You can't buy immortality."

Watching her, I was reminded of the women from classic paintings who always wore such placid expressions. She was crafted from quiet knowledge, her soul untouchable. “You've suffered through so much,” I said, reaching for her—then stopping. “How do you do it?”

Georgia rounded on me, her hair slipping over her back again. “What?”

“Keep fighting. Keep your head up high. How do you find the will to keep going and be so strong?” It was a plea that turned my voice ragged. She'd spoken about immortality—but to me, living forever was the worst curse imaginable.

Her hands came down on my shoulders. I could have thrown her off with ease, but her gentle weight was comforting. The mystery in her face was gone. She'd become the girl I'd known nine years ago - the young woman who'd been brave enough to tell me to kiss her.

She said, “You've been carrying around Anna for years. That death is a burden that's made you hate yourself and think you should be erased. But for me... when Mom passed... I realized how much it meant for me to live. That's what makes me strong, my love for her. My love for you.”

I pressed her against my chest and hid my face in her thick hair. Was my body built the same as everyone else? Could I handle this explosion of compassion that shoved at the back of my eyes like a tsunami?

“I love you so much,” I whispered against her scalp. “And I'm sorry. I'm so damn sorry.” They were just words but maybe, if I was this close, they'd sink in and mean more.

She didn't ask me what I was apologizing for.

Whether Georgia held me, or I held her, it wasn't clear. As a bundle of regret and soothing whispers, we sat on my bed and listened to the rain outside. It attacked the boarded windows. It wanted to come inside and flay us to pieces. Mother Nature was as likely to help as rip you to shreds. I didn't need the weather for that—I was amazing at cutting myself open on my own. I was doing it now as I combed my mind for solutions.

Just keeping Georgia alive wasn't enough anymore. Her beautiful heart deserved freedom. She deserved the whole fucking world. If I can find out where Emily is, my father will have nothing over me. I could free Georgia and my sister both.

The plan that was forming inside of me was knitting my soul back together. “I have an idea,” I said.

Pulling back, she stared at me. “For...?”

“Keeping you from my father. But it's risky, Georgia. There's a chance it could go wrong.”

With kind hands, she traced the curve of my ear. “A boy once told me the same line before he rescued me. I trusted him then. I trust him now.”

I wove our fingers together until our knuckles clicked into each other's gaps. The purple ribbon on her wrist rustled over my skin. “I'm going to kill my father.”

- Chapter Twenty-One -

Georgia Mary King

---

I listened to his plan with budding excitement.

There was no part of me that wanted anyone dead, but if there was a future in which we could save Conway's sister and keep me out of Facile's hands, I was eager for it.

We lay there, just talking, long into the night. We weren't even naked and yet it was beyond intimate. He made it easy to feel comfortable. Safe.

Clearing my throat, I rolled on my side. "I'm going to grab a glass of water."

He grunted, eyes shut.

Chuckling, I ran my hand over his broad back. He was gorgeous lying there—a dragon that rested. My dragon.

On bare feet I padded across the hall. It was dark, and I wasn't used to this part of the house. Two turns in, and I lost my sense of direction. "Dammit," I mumbled. Clouds hid the stars outside the boarded up windows.

Then I was deeper, and knew I was really lost.

My foot came down, the wood creaking. It was such a sharp noise that my heart skipped. Calm down, don't spook yourself. I got two more steps when a new sound hit my ears.

It was low, full of pain and dread. It floated between the studs in the wall. I pressed my ear there, focusing so hard that my vision went wobbly. It was just like the sounds I'd heard while being assaulted by the videos' audio day in and day out. I'd thought I was losing my mind.

Had those moans been real?

Standing, I searched the room. There wasn't any obvious door that I could see. A set of curtains draped across what looked like a boarded up window. Except this part of the house wasn't attached to the outer walls. There wouldn't be any windows.

Pushing the cloth aside, I saw that the boards were nailed onto top of a door. It swung open when I nudged it; I heard the frail cry again. Sensing the urgency in their tone, I walked through, then half-crept, half-jogged down the passage. Where did this go? I didn't know what part of the house this even was—I strained to see.

“Hello?” I whispered, my neck hairs standing on end.

There was another door, and though it had a lock, it was partially open. Light shone through and spread over the floorboards and more of that faded bird wallpaper. I was shaking as I swung it the rest of the way.

Inside that room was a true nightmare.

Six beds were lined up, three to a wall, in a space barely bigger than my own. The walls were covered in padding—hastily stuck there by duct tape and nails. It was an amateur job, but it had done its purpose. It kept the noise muffled so it could hardly

escape. And when I saw what was in the beds, my horror only grew.

Six women. Black straps held their limbs to the bed frames, blindfolds covering half of their face. They'd all been gagged, robbed of their senses... except for one. Furthest from the door, she'd managed to maneuver her gag out of her mouth a fraction. Just enough to call for help.

“Save me,” she groaned.

“Oh my god,” I cried, rushing to her side. “Are you okay? Who did this to you?” Unsure where to begin, or what to do, I started to yank at her straps. This scene was blowing my mind.

“This is a problem,” someone said behind me.

Needle-sharp terror rolled up my body. I began to turn; pain burst outward from the base of my skull.

Everything went black.

- Chapter Twenty-Two -

Georgia Mary King

---

I was cold. Why was I so cold?

The world swayed, and each time, it took my brain with it.

Pain cranked and flowed. The pendulum didn't stop; not until something connected violently with my cheek. Groaning, I looked around, my eyes struggling to focus.

“There she is,” Lonnie said, his voice barely louder than the ringing in my head. He stared at me, snapping his fingers. “Hey, hi. You all there? You with me? Come on, I didn't hit you that hard.”

Acid flooded through my veins. Lonnie had attacked me from behind. Where am I? Is this the same room? I lifted my head, searching rapidly. It was nearly pitch black—without Lonnie's phone glowing, it would've been. Behind him, just a few feet away, was a girl I'd never seen in person but automatically recognized. She was sitting in a chair in the corner. Her head hung low—I worried she was dead.

“Emily.” The name fell from my lips. Lonnie's face went slack. “Emily! Are you okay?”

“Conway is such a fucking idiot,” he sighed.



Struggling to stand, I noticed my hands were tied crudely behind me. My legs were bound to mid calf—I was sitting on the ground, propped against a rough stone-wall. I moved, and water splashed. It covered me up to my waist. “What's going on?” I asked, finally eyeing Lonnie.

“What's going on is my asshole brother didn't play by the rules.” He braced himself, straightening up to look at Emily. “Maybe I should have seen this coming. I thought for sure he'd hate himself too much to tell you about her, oh well. Doesn't matter now.”

There was finality in his words. I was busy focusing on all the loose ends and tying them together. “Those girls in the beds... that was you,” I said.

He crossed his arms, studying me. “I admit to being surprised to find you in there with them. I'd gone back to turn the light off, how silly of me to get halfway to my room before I remembered.”

Lonnie watched me eagerly, and I knew he was waiting for me to keep going. “Did you kidnap your own sister, too?”

“Bingo. Aren't you clever!” He reached down to pinch my cheek. I tried to bite him, and he just dodged with a laugh. “She was great leverage.”

My head was cracking in two. “You're the one working for your dad while he's locked up.” It was so fucking obvious now. “Did you think if you did this, he'd treat you better?” I asked. “Or was Conway right, you just get a kick out of fucking with him?”

“Oh,” he said. He looked genuinely surprised. “You haven't guessed by now? My dad had nothing to do with this. He couldn't have if he'd wanted to.”

Fear had kept me warm, but now, nothing sheltered me from the icy grip of shock.  
“Why not?”

“Because he's dead.”

Dead.

“Everyone was so scared of Dad. Mom, Conway, my sister, and you,” he went on, walking through the water. The light went with him, tracking on the walls as he made a small circle. “It's funny. He did his best workeverwhile being a corpse.”

Something glinted in his fingers. Something purple.

Thrashing in the water, I worked to get closer to him. He had the ribbon from Conway's gift. “That's mine!”

“What, this dumb thing?” Tucking it in his back pocket, he walked away. “You and my brother are way too sentimental. That's why you failed. Bye, now.”

Without his phone I couldn't see. In the distance I heard the rusty crunch of something shutting. I was blind and I had no idea where I was.

“Emily,” I hissed, shuffling agonizingly slow in her direction. Moving was nearly impossible. “Emily! Please, talk to me! My name is Georgia; I'm friends with your brother. He's been looking for you.” Please, be okay.

Water splashed in the dark. “Georgia,” she whispered. “Really?”

Rejuvenated by her voice, I inched closer. “Thank god, you're alive.”

“Alive... is a big word.” That same dark humor as Conway had. “I never thought I'd

meet you. But I always wanted to.”

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“You know who I am?”

“In a way. We were pen pals,” she chuckled. “Of a sort.”

I sat back on my calves heavily. “You wrote me those letters?”

“Feels like forever ago. You stopped replying, did you get sick of me?”

“I had to move,” I said. “My mother needed to be closer to a better hospital. For her treatment.”

She sensed the sadness in my tone. “I’m sorry.”

“Forget about that. We’ve got our own problems. Do you know where we are?”

“The cellar beneath the house.”

To think, she’d been so close all along. “How high will this water rise?” I asked anxiously.

“Lonnie told me that it gets as high as the stairs this time of year.”

We’ll drown for sure. “How does he know that? Conway said he’d been staying here since springtime.”

“I don’t know. It’s just what Lonnie said to me. He liked to tell me all sorts of awful things,” she said somberly. “Ways he’d hurt me, ways he’d torture Conway. He could

be lying about the water.”

“Let's not stick around to find out.” Filling my lungs, I screamed as loud as I could. I did it until my throat was scratchy and raw.

“No one will hear you,” Emily said. “I lost my voice twice.”

“I have to try!” I wished I could see in the damn dark. “I can't give up here.” Conway has suffered so much to save us both. I was grateful that she couldn't see me starting to cry. “I won't fucking stop fighting. Not while I'm still alive.”

He called me strong. I wouldn't let him be wrong so soon.

Emily was quiet. “There's a big pipe over in the corner,” she finally said, and I sensed her new hope taking root. “I saw it a few times when Lonnie was around. It has to thread up into the house. Maybe, if you're loud enough, Conway will hear.”

Navigating without my hands to brace a fall was deadly. I inched along, knees scooting, wading through the wetness. Unless I was wrong, it already seemed higher.

I thumped against the solid wall. Using my shoulder as guidance, I scraped along, following it until I came to a corner. I took it a few more feet—smooth metal collided with my chest. “I found it!” I shouted. Tensing my body, I banged against the hard surface with my shoulder—it thwonged. Again, I hit it, using force to create a catastrophe of sound.

He'll hear. He has to hear.

Breathing in until my ribs argued, I began to scream.

I screamed for help.

I screamed for Conway.

And when my voice faded hours later, I whispered for my mother.

- Chapter Twenty-Three -

Conway

---

I reached for her in the dark. I searched, hand moving, eager to find her familiar shape. When I opened my eyes, she wasn't next to me in the bed. "Georgia?" I called softly, sitting up to scan my room.

My windows were covered with wooden boards to keep out prying eyes and winter storms. They let in enough light to tell me it was daytime. Velvety blue shadows drifted over my walls. They hung on every chair, on my discarded shoes, but not on the woman I loved.

She was gone.

Rubbing my neck, I swung my legs over. She went to get a glass of water. I remembered that vividly. I must have fallen asleep before she came back. A spark popped in my brain. If she came back.

Changing into warm clothes and my boots, I hurried down the hall. This building was huge but Georgia had only a few places she could be. I checked her room first, cracking the door so hard and fast that it bounced off the wall.

No Georgia.

Fear started to cling to me. It nipped my heels as I raced through the house, searching the bathroom—had she wanted another bath? I searched the kitchen, and finally, the island itself. If Georgia loved anything it was being outside. She's here; of course she's here. It was impossible for her to be anywhere else.

Rounding the corner of the house, towards the docks, I saw Lonnie heading my way. His shoulders were swinging, eyebrows crunched low, making his pale eyes rotten-apple-black. I went to speak as we came together, but he was quicker. “She's gone.”

“What?” I asked, pulling up short. “How can she be gone?”

“She took one of the boats and left.” He clutched at his hair, his fury tangible. “Why didn't you listen to me? She used you! Her act was obvious as hell!”

No. It can't be. I wouldn't believe it. Storming past him, our arms slamming together so roughly he was thrown off balance, I ran towards the dock. The chain link gate was half-open. There was only one boat strung up on the post in the water, and still, I stood there, searching the waves for several minutes.

Lonnie was right. She'd taken a boat and fled.

“I told you,” he said behind me. “You always think you know better. Well, now our sister dies because you were too weak to do your job.”

He was hammering it home over and over. “Stop,” I said, glaring hotly at him. “Shut your damn mouth. I know I fucked up.”

“Do you, though? Or are you happy she got away?”

“I'm not...”



“Who matters more to you, brother. Georgia or Emily? Your sex toy or your flesh and blood?”

It was tempting to shove him into the waves. Instead I stomped up the path and back to the house. I had my own demons eating my heart. I didn't need Lonnie helping out. She really left. My mind was divided; she'd promised me she'd stay. I'd thought we'd worked it out, so that she was fine with playing along... fine with saving my sister...

...And fine with being used to trick my father.

That was your mistake, I told myself grimly. You thought she was fine being used. Who would be okay with that? My hastily crafted plan made over our body heat in bed involved her risking much more than me. I didn't want Facile to touch her. I would have stopped him from doing it.

Had she not believed me?

Of course not, idiot. Why would she? I'd tortured her. I'd humiliated her. I'd gone from being the one person she believed in, to showing her that monsters are real. That we're always waiting in the shadows until the time is right.

She said you weren't a monster. She'd lied to me.

But that felt wrong. It didn't... fuck, it made no sense. She'd told me she loved me. I'd felt that phrase sift through my blood and strengthened my soul. It had been real.

You know you can love someone and still betray them.

“Hey,” Lonnie said, waving his hand at me. He'd followed me into the front room of the house. “You still in there?”

Shaking myself, I eyed him closely. “I’m fine. I’m thinking about what has to happen next.”

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He slumped against the front door. “You're kidding. Conway, that ship has sailed—no pun intended. We had one plan, one good plan. Now it's over with.”

“You were just like this years ago,” I said, gritting my molars. “I asked you to help me search for Emily and you acted like you didn't care.”

“Because I didn't. Why would I care where she'd gone?”

“Then why the hell did you step up to help out with all of this?”

His smile was sickening. “Seeing her in danger would be sobering for anyone.”

Puffing myself up, I held out my palm. “Give me your phone.”

“What? Why?”

“I don't want you notifying Dad about any of this.”

He laughed viciously. “First, thanks for the vote of trust. Secondly, Georgia escaping will matter whether he knows now or later.”

I curled my fingers, clutching the air. “No. If he comes here, expecting her, I can surprise him easier. I can get him to tell me where Emily is. By force, if I have to.”

My brother's eyes narrowed. “You'd go that far?”

“Yes.”

Every tooth of his shined at me. It was a grin fit for an alligator about to take a bite out of its prey. “Fine. I won't get in the way of your suicide mission. Attack dad; try to get him to tell you where Emily is. I won't stop you.” He tugged his phone out of his back pocket. As he did, something fluttered to the ground.

Spiders crawled in my veins. Bending, I pinched the purple ribbon and held it up. This was from my gift to Georgia. She'd worn it on her wrist last night. Clung to it like it meant the world to her. “Why the hell do you have this?” I asked.

“Easy now,” he said smoothly, his hands coming up in defense. “It's just some trash I found on the ground.”

Images flashed through my head; her shining eyes as she saw the cake. The way she asked if she could keep the ribbon. Her hand caressing mine shyly as we sat together.

Our first kiss.

Backing Lonnie against the wall, I pressed my switchblade close to his throat. I didn't remember drawing it. He was still smiling, but the edges trembled, his skin going sallow. “What did you do to her?”

“Conway...”

“Where is she?”

He was breathing in quick, shallow bursts. His pupils darted down to my weapon, then to me. Our staring contest never seemed to end. I'd have kept it up until we turned to dust if I had to.

Outside, the wind howled. Rain had been falling on and off since I'd woken up. The sound of it hammered on the pipes, sending metallic bells throughout the house.

There wasn't a pattern to it. It was too loud, too random, to be just rain.

Lonnie swallowed. "She took the boat. You know she did."

"She wouldn't have," I said slowly. "You must have done something to it. Did you hide it, sink it?" The blade turned in my hands.

His eyes narrowed into slits. "You're insane. She abandoned you."

"Georgia wouldn't have run away from me. I know it in my gut."

"But she did!"

The clanging came again. That time, Lonnie glanced down at our feet. It was fast and if I hadn't been so focused on him, I would have missed it. I wouldn't have suspected a thing. "She's down there, isn't she?" I asked, torn between rage and wonderment. Not waiting for him to respond, I shoved him backwards into the wall.

He coughed, grasping the sea foam paint, holding himself there. If he moved, I didn't see it; I was already running outside. The rain soaked me fast. It had created long mires of muck around the house, the gravel vanishing under the thick brown water.

Puddles exploded under my feet. She's in the cellar! It made sense in a fucked up way. I was connected to this woman by a thread we'd formed over 187 days in the darkness. I knew she hadn't betrayed her promise.

I could feel her.

I could always feel her.

“Georgia!” I roared, ripping the cellar doors open. It was beyond black inside. Water poured down the steps; the place looked like a submerged cavern. I lifted out my phone and used the light on it to search.

The screen bounced off of the water's surface. I waded down, then down further, until I was freezing up to my hips. The whole basement was flooded. The banging sound stopped, echoing long after through the walls. “Conway! Over here, hurry! Please!”

Rushing with new determination, I shoved through the hallway. Boxes floated into me; I pushed them aside, cutting my shoulder on a rocky corner as the hallway took a sudden turn. I hadn't come down here before; Lonnie had told me there was nothing but mice and mold. Unaware of the second set of stairs, I slipped, tumbling and gulping brackish liquid. It was a miracle I didn't drop my phone.

“Conway!”

That voice... it wasn't Georgia. It itched at part of my brain.

“I'm coming!” I shouted, coughing. Half swimming, I shined my light ahead of me. It lit up two faces—both pale, and one of them barely keeping her nose above the water. “Georgia!” I gasped, grabbing her and lifting her in my arms.

She was soaked. But she was alive.

“You came,” she said weakly. Shivering, she nuzzled into me like I was the safest place in the world. “You heard me crying for help.”

Helplessly I kissed her. I couldn't stop myself; I didn't care about the situation. I needed to feel her... taste her... to know I hadn't lost her in the darkness.

“We have to get out,” she said, staring up at me. “Untie Emily. Hurry.”

“Emily?” I whispered, seeing the other girl—really seeing her. She was strapped to a chair, and even if I hadn't recognized her from the grainy phone pictures, I'd have known she was my sister. I'd spent too many nights huddling over a book with her in our tree house.

Emily had just enough energy to smile at me. The grooves under her eyes were concave. “It was Lonnie,” she whispered, shaking her head in despair. “Our little brother. He took me. He did it all.”

“Then he'll pay for it all, too.” Hoisting Georgia in a way that let me use my hands, I freed Emily from the chair. Cradling them both I struggled up and out of that oceanic dungeon. Emily looked worse in the light of the outside world. Setting them down, I removed the rest of their bonds.

“Where's Lonnie?” Georgia asked, looking around with nervous eyes.

“It's fine, he can't hurt you,” I said, squeezing her hand. I didn't want to let her go.

“But he'll hurt others.” Her fingers curled over her mouth, she was cringing. “I found them. The women upstairs.”

My guts whirled in a bloated knot. “What women?”

“He kidnapped them all! They're tied to beds, gagged so no one can hear them. He had so many of them, Conway.” She was quivering endlessly. “Don't let him get away. He'll do it all again, I know it.”

I didn't understand everything that was going on. But if Georgia had asked me to burn the whole island down, I would have. Going after my brother was an easy request.

If Lonnie hoped to escape, there was only one way he was going to manage it. Thudding down the slippery path I spotted movement in the only boat we had left. He looked up at the sound of my approach. “Lonnie!” I shouted.

Grabbing an oar, he tried to crack me in the head with it. I was much faster than he could pray to be. Slapping the oar into the floor of the boat, I ripped him out of it, dragging him along the dock. He fought me the whole way—but I was stronger. I was angrier. I had both a devil and an angel guiding my actions. There was no way for him to shake me off.

“You piece of shit!” I said, slamming him to the ground. “Were you going to let them drown in the cellar? And what the fuck is this about other women locked upstairs?”

He crab-crawled backwards as he stared up at me. There was something missing from his face. I didn't know what it was until I saw his little grin: he wasn't even ashamed.

“Listen,” he said, getting to his feet. “I know you're upset. But who will you believe? Me, or some dumb whore? I did this for your own good, Conway. Georgia was changing you from who you were meant to be!”

The last strand of faith snapped in me. My hands were on his throat, his shirt, throwing him back. He grabbed for my wrists as I tugged him by his collar. His body left a track in the mud all the way to the edge of the cliff. Behind me, the girls were shouting—the cacophony in my ears drowned them out.



Lonnie had the grace to look shocked. He started to wrestle with me, fighting to stop me from chucking him into the ocean. We tumbled hard to the ground, his shoulders sticking out over the cliff's ledge. "What did you hope would happen?" I asked. "What was your fucking goal in bringing me here?"

His defensive mask had shattered—he was done pretending to be on my side. "I wanted you to suffer. I didn't care who had to go down with you, as long as you crumbled into nothingness."

"But why? What did I do to you?"

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“Plenty!” he laughed sourly. “I always hated your damn guts. We had a good thing going, you set it on fire when you let Georgia go free. We could have stayed in that house, doing what we wanted to whoever we wanted after Mom was gone! Didn't you get that Dad was happy she was dead? She'd cramped his habits from the start.”

My tendons squeaked as I tightened my hold further. “Kidnapping girls isn't a fucking hobby.” Was that really what happened? Had our father's evil desires been unleashed without Mom to hold him back? Or had he done something to her to get her out of the picture?

Lonnie was laughing openly. “We could have buried them all like Anna! But then you had to go and play hero.”

“I wasn't playing,” I growled. “It was never a game.”

He dug his nails into my wrists until I bled. “It was, it still is.” The pain bloomed and he flashed a manic grin. “Go on and drop me. It would feel so good, right? I know it will. I had dad killed, and I wanted to dance after that.”

“Dad is dead?” I whispered, struggling to believe it. “I thought... but you said he'd asked you to help him with this.” Hadn't that been his motivation from the start?

“He did ask me for help. Help getting you to break him out of prison. He didn't want me to do shit! I'd gone in there, the only one who'd taken the time to visit him, and he still wanted you.”

“You're evil,” I said in wonderment. “I hated him too, but to kill him when he wasn't

a threat? He was never getting out of there; there was no breakout happening. It was all a damn lie!”

“You think I’m the evil one? That you only did horrible things because me and Dad were whispering in your ear? Do it, murder me and see how innocent you become. How many good deeds you suddenly do because we’re not around. You’re not special! You’re not better than me! Do it! Kill me, do it!”

The wind caressed my forehead. I breathed it in, letting it soothe me. Raindrops splattered heavily on my skin—the sky cracking open angrily. In my head, I heard Georgia speaking: I realized how much it meant for me to live.

“Do it,” he hissed, all teeth and gums.

Flexing, I heaved him upwards. “Conway!” Georgia screamed.

With a grunt, I spun, slamming him onto the solid ground. “No,” I said, pinning his arms behind his back. “I’m nothing like you or dad. I never was. I won’t start now.”

His expression crumbled. The playfulness in him vanished; Lonnie became infected with ugly rage. “Fuck you,” he cackled. “Let’s go to Hell together, huh? Bring Emily while you’re at it. One big happy fucking family!”

Georgia’s bare foot tapped into the mud beside me. “I thought you were going to do it,” she said. “For a minute I swear you were going to throw him over.”

“Without you, I might have,” I admitted.

Lonnie’s baby-blue eyes sank onto the woman I loved; he went limp. “Little peach,” he crooned, “Are you coming close because you feel safe? Does knowing my father is dead give you closure?”

“Shut up,” I said, putting my weight on his arms.

He ignored me, his smile full of dirt. “If Conway won't kill me, he's guaranteeing I'll be able to come after you again. If I can find my sister, you better believe I can find you. You'll never feel safe. How will you ever sleep again?”

She crouched, elbows on her knees, lowering herself to speak in a soft tone. “I want to thank you, Lonnie.”

My brother and I both went stiff. “What?” he asked, scowling.

“For nine years I've been terrified. I barely left my home, never trusted anyone to get close. You and your father haunted my nightmares.” New hatred started to rise in my blood. Then she set her perfect smile on me, stopping the feeling in its tracks.

She said, “When I see you defeated in the mud like this, I know how weak you are. I know that evil people can be taken down by men with good hearts.”

Georgia looked at me through her eyelashes. “I've never felt safer in my entire life.”

- Chapter Twenty-Four -

Georgia Mary King

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Emily had been starved so severely that she needed medical care for a week.

Conway was with her every day, and I was grateful he let me join him. Neither of us pushed her for details about her ordeal. When the police came to collect information, we chased them off, insisting she wasn't ready yet.

The truth was... she'd never be ready. But she did want to tell Conway and myself first.

Alone.

“Lonnie reached out to me a few months ago,” she said, staring at the ceiling. She looked so small in the hospital bed. “I was shocked. I was... happy.” Her hands crushed together in her lap. “I was living in an apartment off of my campus in Pennsylvania. Lonnie said he'd been looking for me forever. He had no clue that our uncle—mom's brother—had whisked me out of the country.”

“What?” Conway asked, stunned.

Her smile was apologetic. “I wanted you to come with me. I was too young to have any say. Uncle Mett, he was scared of Dad. I think Mom must have told him some

stuff, and I think she was planning to run with all of us kids.” She shrugged weakly. “I’m the only one he could get out of there, and then Dad went off the grid. He must have known the authorities would take all of his kids if they got in contact.”

“But how did Lonnie find you?” I asked.

Her cheeks went crimson. “It was my fault. When I heard on the news about you, Georgia, I had to know if Conway and Lonnie were okay. I needed to know how bad it was.” She rocked side to side. “Uncle Mett was afraid of Dad locating me. Still, I convinced him to arrange for a postal box here. I said I missed my old friends terribly, that I’d be careful not to tell them where I was while writing them letters. Reluctantly, he helped me set everything up. He had no idea who I was really talking to.”

A spike of venomous guilt attacked my body. I hugged myself tighter.

“Lonnie found your old address,” she said. “The current owners had some of my letters you’d never received. They gave them to him, I guess, because he used them to find my campus. I’d gotten bold and said where I’d be attending college when I returned to the states.”

I shivered and struggled to stop. “That’s how he knew about the book I liked.” And the damn lemonade.

Her eyes were shining with unshed tears. “Yes. It’s all my fault. I’d asked for those details, but I never thought someone else would read my letters. I’m so sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known,” I said quickly. I ached to soothe her guilt.

Conway reached over, grasping her hands in one of his. “Lonnie would have found another way to hurt us all. You’re not responsible for his actions. I’m just grateful

you're alive, Emily.” He hung his head, fighting down a wave of emotion. “He tricked all of us.”

“What will you do now?” I asked her.

Emily looked out the window. The sun made her light skin glow. “I’ll go back to college in Pennsylvania. I was close to finishing my last semester. I’m going to become a social worker, help families that really need it before they end up like ours.” She looked fondly at her brother. “And you?”

“If you're living in Pennsylvania, then so am I. After all this time apart, I'm not losing another day.”

She laughed—it was the sweetest sound. “Georgia, do you mind living in Pennsylvania?” she asked it knowingly.

“No. Not if that's where he's going,” I said, sitting closer to Conway. “I’ll figure the rest out as it comes.”

He stared at me for a long minute. I was ready for him to argue against my plan. Conway was the type to deny we could be together, or to try and make me think it over twenty times because it was too rash.

His hands wrapped around mine firmly as two trees that had grown together. “We’ll figure it out together.”

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“They're calling you the ‘Lightning Strikes Twice Girl’,” Chelsea said, showing me the website on her phone.

The news was having a field day with my story. One girl kidnapped twice by the same family. It was messed up—people loved messed up stuff. “Isn't lightning striking twice supposed to be a good thing?” I asked, clicking my tongue.

“Why would it be? It's lightning! That stuff kills!” The second she said “kills” she went pale. “I'm sorry. Oh, that was insensitive.” Jumping on me, she gave me a huge hug. I'd gotten used to this treatment. Chelsea hadn't stopped tiptoeing around me since I'd returned.

Apparently, she blamed herself. I'd assured her multiple times that none of what happened was her fault. But she still felt responsible since she'd been the one to coerce me into going to the party.



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I didn't point out that Conway would have found me wherever I was. Part of my campaign was convincing everyone that he wasn't involved in any of the crimes. Lonnie had tried to pin some of it on him—another act of vengeance. But every woman in the house confirmed they'd never seen Conway. Not once.

Lonnie had thrown them in the white van, transported them to the island he'd been squatting in then hid them inside. His first victim had been there for a year.

Watching them getting helped into the ambulances that had arrived on the mainland was both reassuring and unsettling. Conway had made the phone call for help. The police had sent boats. It was a mess as they tried to make sense of what had gone down on our little island.

The prison Facile had been locked up in confirmed his death. He'd been booked in there under a false name, which was how he'd escaped detection for so long. Fake identities are cheap in Mexico.

The inmate who'd stabbed him had already taken a plea deal in exchange for revealing Lonnie had paid him to do it. That was the last thing I'd heard about the case—it wasn't going to trial. There was no need. Lonnie had quietly stated he was guilty. No one knew why, though I had a guess that it was his last rebellion against his own father.

Facile had run.

Lonnie had no intention of shrugging off the blame.

“Thank you for checking in on me,” I said, holding Chelsea by her arms. “And for the fruit basket.” She'd brought me one every single day since I'd been home. “But I need to go.”

Her face shifted. “Can I point out that I'm struggling with you spending so much time aroundhim?”

I tried to laugh her worries off. It came out hollow. “I get it. Conway isn't exactly the shining knight you expect him to be. But Chelsea, please trust me. He's been through as much trauma as I have.”

“Is this where you say he's the only one who understands you?” Her comment took the wind from my sails. Sighing, she gave me one more hug. “You're a grown ass woman, you know what your heart and mind need more than I ever will.”

She tried to disengage but I gripped her tight.

“Georgia?” she whispered.

“Shh, shut up and keep hugging me.” Chelsea petted my hair, rocking me gently. “Thank you,” I said into her shirt. “You're the first person to say that. Ever.”

My friend guided my face up, rubbing away my tears with a half-smile. “Your mom would have.”

I started to disagree then stopped myself. I put my hand on the back of my neck. Chelsea had gotten to know my mother in her last two weeks at hospice. She'd been there as a volunteer, it was how we'd met. I was always grateful for the ridiculous hats she'd bring in to try and cheer Mom up.

My mother had loved it.

She would have loved Conway, too, if she'd gotten to know him.

“You're right,” I finally said. Sniffing, I danced backwards, grabbing a tissue to clear my nose. “If she could see me now, she'd know what I feel for him is real.”

Grabbing her hips, Chelsea pretended to roll her eyes. “Then get going. Mr. Real is waiting for you.”

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“Are you sure this is the place?” The man who spoke was gruff, his thick body wrapped in a thicker black jacket.

Of course this is it, I thought, staring at Conway's profile. The sun had turned the sky into a melted sea of raspberries and egg yolks. A few clouds dulled the colors. They lit Conway up on every hard corner of his face.

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “She's here.”

The officer grunted. He kept eyeballing Conway like he was a rabid dog. Most of the media had painted him as less of a hero, more of a slippery accomplice. They kept creating headlines like “Will the Horror Island's Brother Show his True Colors?” and “Freedom for the Guilty” with photos of him next to the white van.

I wanted to burn all the papers to the ground.

Waving his arm, the officer directed the men with their shovels to begin digging. While arranging the plans to excavate the site, Conway had made it clear he wanted to help dig. They'd said no. He'd stormed off, threatening to go out alone before everyone else and do it himself.

Talking him out of that had been... a challenge.

Sliding my hand in his, I traced the indent on his pinky. He gripped me back, tight and firm and never loosening. We stood with the sun at our backs as the men revealed the bones in the cold ground.

Anna.

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In my hand his grip collapsed. All of his body's tension had centered in his face and his neck. I stared as he lived through the nightmarish memories that this poor girl's bones brought forth. She'd been dug free, and so had his heavy shame.

“Hey,” I said, tugging at him. He resisted me—I curled myself around his body, my arm around his shoulders, the other across his collarbones. “Hey, look at me.”

He did; his pupils were as empty as the newly dug grave. That rich pain wrapped around my lungs, my heart, until I felt dried out inside. “I know what you're going to say,” he whispered.

“It's not your fault. You have to know that.”

“You said it before, and even if you're right, this isn't fair.” He shut his eyes then he looked back at the men loading the bones onto a stretcher. Cameras flashed, and people with badges sipped their cups of coffee—for them, this was a job well done. “Anna deserved a better fate than this.”

Dagger after dagger cut off chunks of my spirit. It was incredibly hard to watch the man I loved suffer. But he was right—Anna deserved more. Over his shoulder, I saw movement. There was two people coming our way - a woman and a man.

I didn't recognize them, but for some reason, Conway squinted at her like he was seeing a ghost. “Hello,” she said, her hands wringing together. The man next to her was grabbing her elbow; they leaned together, two people who couldn't stay on their feet without each other. “Are you Conway? The one who helped find Anna?”

I stepped back, both of us facing the strangers. “Yes,” Conway said, his skin white as ivory.

The man's smile looked out of place. He hadn't worn it in a long time. “I'm Nolan. This is Sherry. We're Anna's parents.”

Amazed, I looked at them both closer. Was that why Conway seemed so unsettled? Could he recognize parts of the girl who'd died in her mother?

Sherry held out her hand; it was shaking. “We just wanted—” she couldn't finish, covering her mouth, tears finally breaking free. Her sadness caught me in a choke hold.

Nolan patted his wife's shoulder, looking seriously at Conway. “Thank you. You can't imagine how much it destroyed us wondering all these years what happened to our little girl. But you brought her back to us. We can find peace, now. That's... that's a gift we'll forever be grateful for.”

Conway's expression melted. Then it bunched together again, and I knew he was holding back his own tears. This was a man laid so low by his guilt, that seeing the parents of the girl who haunted him should have broken what was left of him.

Reaching out, he hugged them both. They fell into Conway, all of them mumbling, speaking softly of regrets and insisting things would be all right. I watched it with amazement—somehow not feeling out of place.

I was seeing the man I love grow full again, shedding his self-loathing for the first time in years. There was no better feeling. And maybe it would take time for him to truly heal... but I believed it would happen.

We'd found each other. We'd broken each other. We could be fixed.

We could live again.

- Epilogue -

Conway

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The ropes cut into my hands. Sweat blurred my eyes. Digging deep, I contorted my body and tossed the empty pallet onto the pile in the truck. It clattered there among the rest, wood particles flitting through the golden beams of sunset.

This was hard work-the kind that drained your body and made the day fly by.

It was perfect for me.

“Good work today,” Vick said, waving as I passed.

My nod was sharp. “Thanks.” Vick was the master foreman, and he'd taken a liking to me once he'd seen how dedicated I was to the job. I never explained to him that I did the physical labor with such gusto because it kept my mind from wandering.

I was lucky I'd gotten the position at all. I had a sparse work history; almost everything had been under the table. When I'd shown up to apply, Vick had crossed his arms, looked me over, and said I was a big ass man. I'd laughed and agreed. Clasp my shoulder, he'd given me a single shift to prove myself.

After watching me for three hours, he'd hired me on the spot, saying I was worth the cost of two men.



In the corner of the parking lot was a jungle green Charger. It was nicer than I needed—a gift from Georgia for my birthday. She'd refused to return it. And after I'd taken it out on the road, I'd admitted I adored it.

Climbing into my car, I tossed my bag on the passenger seat. The sun was at the right position on the horizon to blind me. Setting my shades in place, I cranked the radio and drove down the street. I didn't listen to music. I always listened to the news.

While Georgia was sick of hearing about Horror Island—as everyone called our debacle—I was compelled to listen. Two months had gone by since the day I'd saved Georgia and my sister from Lonnie. No one brought up the event much. It'd been replaced by fresher tragedies.

But one of the kidnapped girls was going to write a book about her ordeal. That meant people were chatting again. I'd heard clips from a morning talk show segment about it multiple days in a row. Now, I tuned in right in the middle of one.

“...Was only nineteen when she was yanked from her bed by Lonnie Adams, the youngest son of the late, but just as terrifying, Facile Adams.”

It wasn't healthy how obsessed I was with this story. I knew that. I just didn't know how to turn off the part of my brain that needed to understand how. How had my brother done all of this and kept it hidden from me? He'd been a puppet master. I'd never seen the damn strings.

“We have with us Felicia Quail,” a voice on the radio said.

The one writing the book, I thought, turning the volume up.

“Felicia, could you tell us a little about what you went through on the island?”

“Sure,” she said, the right amount of confidence gained from multiple interviews. “I was kept in a room I barely saw. I was gagged and blindfolded. But I could hear other people, other women. I didn't know how many at the time.”

“That's awful,” the hostess gushed, sounding way too delighted.

“It was. It definitely was.”

“Did you think you'd make it out alive?”

There was a long pause. I gripped the steering wheel, darting my eyes from the radio to the road. Felecia said, “No. Not until Georgia arrived.”

Hearing someone else say her name made all of my muscles knot up.

“Georgia Mary King,” the hostess said. “The woman who'd been kidnapped once before.”

“Yes. So, sometimes, Lonnie would come into the room. He'd take us somewhere else in the house, he'd—do things to us. I'd try to shout every time, but it was hard. Anyway, one night when he tied me back to the bed, the gag wasn't on right. I was able to scream for help. I thought it was pointless but I hoped and hoped and... it happened. Someone heard me.”

Each breath I took was forced. My heart was slamming in my chest, experiencing all the adrenaline Felecia must have been the night Georgia had found her.

“Do you think, if Georgia hadn't been kidnapped that second time, that you would have ever been found?”

“I don't,” she said bluntly.

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“Then she saved your life.”

“Yes, and that's why I've written a dedication in my book for her.”

“That's right!” the other woman crowed. “You can pick up Felecia Quail's true story of her time on Horror Island this Thursday, and we'll have—” I'd parked my car and cut the engine.

Multiple publishers had begged Georgia to sell them the rights to her story. She'd refused them all. “I'm done living that,” she'd said. “I'm ready to start something new.”

Unlocking the main gate to the complex, I climbed the stairs to the third floor. Georgia had requested that wherever we lived was up high. That, and it had to have an open-air patio. I would have worked five jobs if I'd had to in order to give her all of that.

Cracking the front door, I stepped inside. It was a large, open floor plan apartment that we'd moved into. Bright yellow counters, white walls, and hard wood floors—her friend Chelsea had called it “stylish” and I'd just shrugged.

The only reason I lived here... was because she did.

Georgia was facing away from me in the kitchen. She'd tied her long hair up in a tail. The blue eye on the nape of her neck watched me. Once, that image had brought my guts into my throat; I'd been shaken to my core. But now, seeing it, I was reminded of the plaintive wish the woman I loved had made to me.

If I'd run with her nine years ago, what would be different?

I'd spent so much of my time living as a martyr, thinking that every minute of distress at my father's side was worth it if there was a chance he could lead me to Emily. The bitter irony was that I'd never discovered a thing.

Lonnie was the one who'd found our sister.

The memory of everything I'd done in the name of the greater good was a constant knife in my chest. It kept me awake at night, tossing in my own stressful sweat. I'd have lain there anxiously, if not for the sweet, strong woman at my side.

Whenever I woke in distress, she'd wrap herself around me. Her hand would link with mine, our pinky fingers curling into an unbreakable knot. Georgia had helped me see that living a life full of regrets helped no one, least of all myself.

She turned at the sound of my foot on the floor. Blatant fear swam in her eyes. It didn't last more than a fraction of a second, gone as she recognized me. As brave as she was, her muscle memory would take years to shake off her instincts.

I knew I was responsible for much of her latent fear. The relief in her smile healed some of my shame. "Conway, hi!"

"Sorry, I have a habit of walking quietly. Didn't mean to scare you." Dropping my things on the kitchen island, I circled it, hurrying to scoop her into my arms. "You look so sexy with your hair up," I said, wrapping my hand in her ponytail.

She thrust her chest out, hands gripping the counter behind her. Tiny goose bumps rippled up her arms and neck. "That feels good. Tell me more about how sexy I look."

Breathing in the perfume of her warm skin, I shut my eyes. Her pulse flapped like a

sparrow's wings against my chest. When I leaned in, her breasts brushed over my muscles—her nipples were already hard.

My cock raged to life in my pants. The growl slid out from between my teeth, filling the air of the kitchen, joining her constant, and quickening gasps. I thought about how easy it would be to turn her around with my fist in her hair.

How quickly I could rip her clothes off, forcing her legs apart. Her pussy wet... needy.

What a gorgeous red her ass would be if I spanked it. She'd scream and moan and nothing would get between filling her with my fat cock and me.

Would she argue, worried the neighbors would hear? I didn't care—I wanted them to hear. I wanted everyone to know Georgia belonged to me.

No. She doesn't belong to you.

This wasn't a bare room in the middle of an empty house. This was the real world, with jobs, bills, and police waiting for me to misstep so they could throw me in prison along with my brother. And I probably belonged there.

“What is it?” she asked, watching me as I broke apart from our tangled limbs. “Ever since we've left the island, you haven't... we haven't...”

Fucked. We hadn't fucked. I'd barely touched her.

Hanging my head, I bent over the counter. “I know. I'm painfully aware.”

“Is it me, did I do—”

“No!” Whirling on her, I made tight fists. “Don't think that for a second.”

“Then what's going on, Conway?” She reached for me and I stepped back. The pain that stained her blue eyes was poisonous. “Talk to me. After everything, surely you can tell me what's wrong.”

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“It's me. I'm wrong.” Pressing my molars together until my skull throbbed, I shook my head rapidly. “You think I don't want to touch you? Georgia, you're the only thing I crave. I'd swim the damn ocean to get to you. But I realized something about myself.”

She considered me with her fine eyebrows furrowed. “What?”

“Lonnie's right. I was never evil because of anyone else. It was always inside of me.”

“Conway, nothing your brother said meant anything. He was a terrible person.”

“So am I.” Outside our window the sun had set. “I thought I tortured you... twisted you... treated you so cruelly because I had to do it. But when I'm with you now, even in the bright fucking sun, I still see the shadows. I want to hurt you, Georgia.” Pulled forward by my urge, I tilted her face up to me. “I want to make you bow and break all for me. Just for me. How can that be okay?”

Her tremble went through her bones. “It's okay because I want it, too.”

I froze. “You what?”

“I want what you're talking about.” She grabbed my wrist, pushing her cheek into that hand while she shut her eyes. Her lashes lay thick as soot from a forest fire on her skin. “You said once that I'm strong. Well, do you know how scared I've been lately? I'm too nervous to ask you directly about this dirty stuff. I even downloaded a stupid BDSM porno the other night, thinking we'd watch it together and you'd get the hint, but I deleted it instead.”

All my senses swayed like kelp in the deepest part of the sea. “What are you saying?”

Her eyes caught the first beam of moonlight as the white circle settled outside the window beside us. “I want the pain you bring. I never felt so excited before.” She blushed but she dared me to say she was wrong. “I love you. As dark as you can be, you're also my source of safety. Life is balance. Even in sex.”

What were words in the face of her raw honesty? When she said she needed me, my heart had fluttered. Then she'd said “sex” and my cock had stiffened.

Brushing my nose along the back of her ear, I whispered, “Do you mean all that?”

“I'm tired of walking on eggshells, Conway. You're the boy I had my first crush on. Now, you're the man who opened my mind to how I love to be fucked. Stop coddling me. You know what I've gone through. If anyone in this world can handle you, it's me.”

The manacles holding back the monster inside of me shattered. Her acceptance freed me, all of me, for better or worse.

With ease I turned her around, crushing my chest against her spine. Her breasts formed deep cleavage as they hung over the sink. “Fine,” I whispered. “No more avoiding this. I'll fuck you as hard, as fierce, as you've been aching for. Spread your legs for me. Wide as you can. I want access to this greedy pussy.”

Every sinew in her body was taut. She parted her thighs and balanced on the balls of her feet—expectant. I was drawn to her perfectly plump ass. Lust had built up from week upon week of being celibate. Well, almost—I'd jerked myself off whenever I could to the perverse thoughts of Georgia in my grasp. I'd always erupt easily just thinking about her.



My nails grazed up the backs of her thighs. She jerked slightly from my touch. “Regretting being so honest?” I asked.

“No, just excited,” she said, looking over her shoulder.

Tracing her back, I palmed her hips, where her pink skirt fell in waves. Folding it upwards, I revealed the round globes of her ass. Her panties were white as virgin snow. They made a lovely sound when I tore them in two. “Hey!” she cried.

“These belong to someone innocent,” I said, dropping them to the floor. Cradling her puffy lower lips, I squeezed until she shivered. “This slutty pussy isn’t innocent, though, is it?” My thumb wedged through the crack of her ass. “This is mine, and my pussy is filthy. It loves cock, it dreams of being stretched just to the point of breaking.”

“Yes,” she groaned. Her hips swayed. Parting her labia, I ran two fingers through her juice. She was soaked.

Inching my jeans down my hips, I left them mostly on. They hung there as I freed my cock from my boxers. I stroked it from base to tip. “Touch yourself,” I growled. “Finger your greedy clit. I want you to get yourself to the edge, but don’t you dare come until I say so.”

Georgia didn’t hesitate. She obeyed me with natural ease, and that made my dick expand with an even greater rush of lust. This amazing woman had accepted me—broken as I was—and that level of comfort was new. I wanted to control her and I didn’t hate myself for seeking such a corrupted desire.

I watched from behind as she rubbed her clitoris. “Turn around,” I said. She did, her back pressing into the counter. We faced off, a foot away, each of us masturbating. I lowered myself to my knees—her pussy was right in front of me.

Breathing her in, I shuddered, jerking myself frantically.

“Not so close,” she whimpered.

“Why? I want to watch your little clit bounce. I want to see how pink you get, how your lips swell as you get close to orgasm.” Smirking, I put my cheek on her hip. She was blushing madly overhead, staring down at me. “Look at how wet you are. There are strings of it sticking to your fingers.”

“Please...”

“That works you up, doesn't it? When I point out how turned on you are?” Kissing her leg, I put my hand on top of hers. With my guidance she circled her clit faster, harder. “You're right there. You need to come—it almost hurts. Tell me.”

“I need to come,” she panted. “Let me come, tell me I can come.”

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“No.” Pulling her hand away, I grabbed her and lifted her in the air. She squeaked as I set her on the kitchen island. “Hands and knees.”

There was a flash of uncertainty in her stare. Keeping her on her toes was intoxicating. My nostrils flared, I chased after that sensation. Georgia scrambled into the position I'd asked for. Grabbing her blouse, I pulled it over her head—her ponytail swung like a bell.

Her breasts perched in her demi-cup bra. I reached for it, but she beat me, unclipping it and throwing it aside. “I didn't want you to tear it,” she said sheepishly.

“Face down. Reach back and spread yourself open for me.”

Looking away, she put her cheek to the cool surface of the marble. Her manicured fingers reached behind, opening herself up so I could see the inner, shiny walls of her cunt. Her asshole winked at me.

The best parts of her were eye level now. Leaning in, I took a slow, long lick of her pussy and crevice. Her moan was glorious; her shout of surprise when I spanked her even better.

“Don't let go, Georgia. Keep yourself wide open for me. Show off your pretty, hungry little pussy.” My open palm came down on her rear-end again. Each time I spanked her she jumped. By the fifth slap, she was rolling her hips, juice leaking down her inner thighs.

Running my index finger through her slit, I flicked her clit. “I need to come,” she

whined.

“I know. I can tell.” My finger was slippery. I rubbed the tip on her asshole, guiding it inside, past her tight, resisting ring. She opened for me eagerly. Georgia writhed, bucking on the insertion like it was my cock.

I fucked her asshole with my finger, petting her clit with my free hand. She was strong but I could read her signals. She wanted to obey me—wait to come—and she couldn't. “Fuck,” she cried out, shaking all over. “I can't hold back! I'm coming!”

She came hard, asshole flexing on me. Gripping my cock I fisted myself, my urge for my own release driving me wild. Watching her orgasm would never get old.

Pulling my finger free, I grabbed a paper towel from nearby and wiped myself clean. Then I shoved my pants and boxers all the way down, abandoning them on the floor. She sat up to face me, her feet dangling over the island's edge. “Sorry,” she said quickly. “I couldn't stop myself.”

She looked at my face and her breath caught. Did she see how truly obsessed with her I was? Had she glimpsed the creature she professed to love, the one that had dreamed of claiming her since the start?

I meant to speak; I kissed her instead, and that was just as well. I sucked on her lower lip, exploring the roof of her mouth. Her tongue rocked against mine and when I opened my eyes, I saw she was still staring at me.

No fear. No worry.

Only love.

Georgia ripped my shirt over my torso. Her fingertips swiped over my hard muscles,

as if it was the first time she'd seen me naked. We'd spent so much time in the dark, that fucking like this, in the middle of a well-lit room was novel.

I was tall enough that I could screw her as she sat on the island. Instead, I curled her in my arms and carried her through our home. "What's wrong?" she asked, clinging to me.

"Nothing," I said, settling her on the mattress. It was a huge bed with silken blankets the color of gold. "Except that we've lived here for over a month and I haven't fucked you in our own bed. Let's fix that."

Fanning her fingers through my hair, she dug in, bringing me down for another kiss. My body melded with hers under mine. Rocking together, I thrummed with pleasure at the sensation of my cock sandwiched between us. The pressure was glorious; I was ready for more.

Leaning over, I reached into the nightstand. I'd bought condoms forever ago, and the package sat, unopened still.

"Wait," she said, stopping me. "No condom."

I went still as a panther on the hunt. "Georgia, are you sure about this?"

"I am. And I think you are too. If you think about it, it's something we want, right? Both of us wouldn't regret a baby."

Her acceptance of me was full; she didn't just love me, she loved the idea of making another life with me. A baby. A family. Those things had never fit into my world. They couldn't have... until Georgia.

Flaring with the knowledge that someday her belly might swell with our child, I

gripped her hips and buried my shaft inside of her in one massive thrust. “Ahh,” I groaned, sinking in, reveling in the sensation of our bodies colliding. “Georgia!” Paradise surrounded my brain.

“I’m coming again,” she whimpered.

One spasm came, then another. The muscles in her pussy squeezed of their own accord as I climaxed deep inside of her. I saw nothing—felt nothing—but the existence of us. I fucked her like I was stuck in a loop. I’d already come but I kept thrusting. Nothing could end until I let it, and this—what we had—I wished it to go on forever.

But bodies aren’t as strong as desires. Eventually, I shivered and slowed; content to hold myself inside of her. Georgia’s wet walls flexed on me. Her aftershocks were their own brand of deliciousness.

I’d been terrified that if I touched her, I’d taint her. My brother’s words had worn on me like a curse: “You’re no better than me.” According to the woman I loved, he was wrong.

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Lying there in the low-burn of our body heat, listening to her undisturbed rhythm, I could believe she was right. And when I palmed her soft belly possessively, imagining us raising a baby someday...

I knew she had to be.

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Setting our glasses on the little table, I stretched out on the wicker couch. Georgia followed me onto the patio. The sun was high in the sky; the building's trim shielding us from the worst of it.

Smoothing her skirt, she dropped down next to me. "I'm happy you get Saturday off from work."

"Me too. Vick says that in five months, I can earn vacation time."

Her eyes focused on her hands in her lap. "Fantastic. We get to plan something super crazy normal, like a camping trip. Or a trip to Disney."

I snickered in amusement. "Do you even like Mickey Mouse?"

"Of course I do. Who doesn't like Mickey Mouse!" she answered too loudly, and then she laughed, her fingers pushing her hair behind her ears. "I'm sorry. Talking about vacations... work... our future and everything, it's just so weird. Isn't it?"

I circled her in my arms, chin settling on her shoulder. "Not weird. It's more like a

dream. I love you, Georgia Mary King.” Saying it created a flow of white warmth up my body.

“I love you too.” Our ankles crossed on top of each other on the coffee table. Overhead, the sun was bright enough that when I looked up, I had to shut my eyes. Colors filtered through my lids like a kaleidoscope; I breathed deep, marveling in the serenity of the fresh air.

Of being free.

“Are you ready?” she asked me.

Looking down, I spread the book on my knees. It was the one that came after *The Valley of the Horses*, the story I'd slipped her in secret forever ago. I crowded close, her body hot where it touched my arm. “I've waited forever to read this with you. I'm surprised you didn't already.”

“I couldn't handle it,” she said, voice dropping. “Reading it without you would have been too painful. Like I was moving on.”

Grasping her hands, I leaned down, kissing her plush lips as tenderly as you'd touch a snowflake, wishing it not to melt. Our tongues caressed, the sensation all butter and static. Georgia thrummed in my arms. Her head nuzzled into the perfect crook of my shoulder, fingernails resting on my chest. “Let's do this.”

I spread the pages to reveal the printed ink inside. “Here we go. The love story continues.”

And so did ours.