



Soul to Possess

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: A dark, deviant love wasn't part of the plan... until fate delivered her to a monster.

Genevieve had nothing left to lose—no family, no future, and no one waiting for her but a man she'd never met. A stranger with a ranch and a promise of forever.

But the snowstorm had other plans.

When she stumbles into the wrong cabin in the middle of nowhere, she's captured by a reclusive genius with a body count—and a taste for control. Atticus doesn't let people in. He silences them. Yet something about the wide-eyed girl with the soft voice and pretty blue eyes makes him hesitate.

She calls him Master. He calls her Bluebell.

And in the darkness, something twisted and tender blooms.

He offers her a choice: stay in the shadows with him—or keep chasing a life that was never hers to begin with. But Gennie's heart is no longer her own... and when she leaves, she realizes monsters don't just haunt—they claim.

In this scorching, psychological dark romance trilogy, obsession meets devotion, control meets surrender, and love wears the face of the unthinkable.

Will she choose the man who waited for her... or the one who would burn the world to keep her?

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Chapter One

I used to think silence was peace. That stillness meant safety. That quiet could be a balm. But I was wrong. Silence is only comforting when there's someone on the other side of it. Now, it's just... the hollow echo of my own breath.

I live in a town so small, you can drive through it without realizing you ever arrived. The kind of place where time doesn't just move slow—it curdles. Where smiles are tight, conversations are shallow, and the air always smells faintly of rot and old pine.

Virginia in early spring is wet, stubborn, and moody. The sky can't decide whether it's done with winter, or still grieving something no one talks about. The trees are bare, but not beautiful. Just brittle. Like they've been holding their breath too long.

I know the feeling. The heater kicks on with a violent clunk, rattling through the walls like something trying to escape. I'm still curled on the secondhand loveseat in the living room, knees tucked under a blanket that doesn't match the couch or anything else in this house. I haven't turned on a light. There's no need. Dim gray is all I need to see.

On the coffee table, a mug of tea has gone cold. The surface is skimmed with a thin film, forgotten. I reach for it anyway, more out of habit than hope. Everything I do now is out of habit. Breathing. Working. Waiting. Existing.

The mail came an hour ago. I didn't check it until now. A single envelope, a local paper, a grocery flyer. Junk. All of it. But something about the weight of the paper felt heavier today. I don't know why. I unfold the newspaper lazily, expecting the

same obituaries and high school football drama.

But something catches my eye. Tucked in the back pages of the newspaper—between listings for used farm equipment and church bake sales—a small, boxed ad sat nestled in the "Personals" column. No fanfare. No bold headline. Just this:

No headline. Just a block of bold text. Centered. Typewritten. Precise.

“Widowed rancher in South Dakota seeks woman willing to relocate. This is not a dating ad. I’m not looking for games or fantasies. I want a partner. A quiet life. A reason to cook breakfast for someone again. I have room. Land. Dogs. Horses. Reading Space. You’d have your own room to start. We take it slow. Write me a letter if you’re curious.”

No phone number. Just a PO Box. My chest tightens. Not in that romantic way. Not in a flutter. It’s sharper than that. Like the edge of something I buried long ago just pierced the surface again. Who still writes letters? Who asks for slowness? Who says partner instead of wife, or girl, or soulmate?

I reread the clipping. Again. And again. My hand trembles slightly, the way it does when I forget to eat. But I’ve eaten today. This is something else. Something raw. I don’t believe in fate. Not anymore. But I believe in accidents that feel like fate. I believe in paper cuts that bleed more than they should.

This ad is both. I should throw it away. Burn it. It’s insane. A scam. Or worse. But instead—I go to the kitchen and pull out a notebook I haven’t touched in three years. It still smells faintly of dust and lemon cleaner. I write the word Hello. And from there, I don’t stop. Not for a long time.

Hello.

To the man in South Dakota,

I don't know what made me read your ad three times in a row. Maybe it was the way you didn't pretend. Or the way it didn't sound like a man trying to sell himself. You didn't write it like a trap, or a fantasy. You just said what you wanted. Plain and bare.

I miss plain. I've spent a long time in a world where everyone wears ten masks, and love sounds like a marketing campaign. Everyone's trying to be desirable. You weren't. You were just... honest. I won't pretend I'm something I'm not either.

I'm thirty-one. I live in a rented house that smells like mildew when it rains. I work a job that drains me so dry, sometimes I come home and stare at the ceiling for hours because I can't figure out what else to do. I have no husband, no children, no dog. I had a fish once, but it died when the power went out and the water got too cold.

I don't know what I expected life to be. Not this. I'm not conventionally beautiful. I wear my hair up most days, because it's easier than seeing what it looks like down. I'm too quiet in public and too loud in my own head. But if you're really looking for someone to cook breakfast for...

Maybe I'm the kind of person who remembers how people like their eggs.

Maybe I'm someone who still believes in long silences that don't have to be filled. Maybe I'm still brave enough—just barely—to write this letter and send it, even if nothing comes of it.

So...If you're real, and you're still reading...

Write me back.

I'm not asking for magic. Just something honest.

—Genevieve

P.S. I like black coffee, thunderstorms, and books that ruin me. I hate the sound of ticking clocks and I haven't danced in five years. Make of that what you will.

I folded the letter three times—neat, precise, like I could control something—and slipped it into the envelope. Then I froze. Return address. My hand hovered over the top left corner, pen tip trembling. Writing it down felt like peeling back skin. Like giving away the part of myself I usually keep hidden. What if he laughed? What if he showed someone? What if nothing came back? But if I didn't include it... he couldn't reply.

And I wanted him to. God, I wanted him to. So I wrote it. Slowly. In my cleanest handwriting. Not the address to my home—no. That felt too bare. I gave Maddie's instead. She'd understand. Or pretend to, which was almost the same. Then I sealed the envelope. Dust and glue and the tiniest taste of courage.

Outside, the sky had that spring grayness that pressed down without breaking open. Virginia was cold this time of year—not Wisconsin cold, but enough to bite. I pulled my threadbare sweater tighter and told myself I wasn't being dramatic. It wasn't just a letter. It was a line thrown into the dark. A dare.

The post office was four blocks away. I walked instead of driving. The letter was light in my pocket, but it felt heavy, like something alive.

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I passed Mrs. Erwin's flower shop and didn't look in. Not because I wasn't curious—because I was. I always slowed down just a little when I smelled soil and stems and something blooming. But I'd made the mistake of going in once last year. I'd asked how much a single daffodil cost, and the clerk said, "You don't want just one, do you?" with this kind of laugh that made me feel like my loneliness had teeth.

Now I just passed by. Two blocks later, I paused at the corner where the old school stood abandoned. Red bricks chipped raw. The rusted fence still half-standing. I used to come here at night and sit on the swing set behind the cafeteria, just to hear the creak of chains and pretend I was someone still small enough to be carried.

I hadn't told anyone that. Ever. I crossed the street without looking both ways. Maybe part of me hoped something would force the moment—make the decision for me. But no cars came. Nothing ever does, in this town. At the post office, I stood in front of the mailbox with my fingers clenched around the envelope.

It would be so easy not to. Easy to take it home, slide it into a drawer. Pretend I'd mailed it. Lie to myself. Again. But I didn't. I fed the letter into the dark metal mouth and heard the thunk as it landed. And that sound was louder than it should've been.

I stayed there a second longer than I should've, staring at the mailbox like it could give me something back. It didn't. Just swallowed the letter whole, like it had a thousand others.

When I finally turned to leave, Maddie's car was already idling at the curb. Her little rust-pocked Honda looked like it was held together by bumper stickers and spite. She leaned out the window, hair pulled up in a messy knot, sunglasses too big for her

face.

“Tell me that was what I think it was,” she said.

I slid into the passenger seat, still trying to catch up to her energy. “Define what you think it was.” She gave me a look. “A letter. To a stranger. From an ad you found in an actual newspaper, like it’s 1997. You’re not subtle, G.”

“I didn’t say I was trying to be.” I tugged the seatbelt, clicking it into place. “And it wasn’t just an ad.” Maddie snorted. “It’s never just an ad. It’s a cry for help printed in ink. So. Spill.”

She’d been like this since we were seventeen—part sarcasm, part lifeline. The kind of person who could talk you out of drinking bleach and into dyeing your hair blue instead. She found me when I didn’t know I needed finding—sophomore year, bathroom stall, eyeliner smudged, trying to disappear.

And she didn’t let me.

“You gonna judge me?” I asked quietly.

She turned the radio down. “Never for wanting something real. Just maybe for mailing your return address to a potential axe murderer.”

I smiled. It felt cracked. “I used yours.”

She paused. Then: “Good. I always wanted to be a part of your true crime documentary.”

We didn’t say anything for a moment. Just the sound of the heater groaning and some indie band singing about ghosts and regrets. Then Maddie reached over and laced her

fingers through mine, like she always did when she sensed I was sinking.

“You’re not crazy, Gennie. You’re just brave in ways most people never have to be.” I looked out the window. The sky hadn’t changed. But something in me had. A tiny shift. Like a seed under soil, cracking open.

She drove toward the diner without asking if I was hungry. Maddie always knew when I needed to be somewhere with noise and light and coffee that tasted like burnt earth. We pulled into the same cracked parking lot we always did, the yellow lines long since faded to ghosts.

Inside, the booths were half full—truckers, old couples, a girl in scrubs scrolling her phone with one hand, toast in the other. We slid into the corner booth. Maddie always took the outside so I could sit with my back to the wall.

She used to say it was a “trauma-informed seating plan.” I didn’t correct her.

“You gonna tell me what he said that got under your skin?” she asked after the waitress poured our coffee.

I blinked at the cup. “It wasn’t what he said. It was what he didn’t.”

Maddie tilted her head.

I stirred cream into my coffee even though I never drank it that way. “He didn’t use clichés. Didn’t ask for nudes or list his requirements like it was a job interview. He said something about wanting someone to build a life with. Someone who’d stay even when things weren’t good.”

Maddie was quiet for a long beat.

“That sounds like what you used to write in your notebook. Freshman year. Back when you were still trying to pretend you didn’t care that no one sat with you at lunch.”

I gave a soft laugh. “You remember that?”

“I remember everything,” she said. “I remember the first time I saw you on the roof of the school library, not jumping, just sitting. Like you wanted the wind to do something for you that you couldn’t ask for.”

My throat burned.

“I remember you had those cheap earbuds and played the same six sad songs over and over. You said they made you feel less alone. And when I asked to listen, you handed them to me like it was sacred.”

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“It was,” I whispered.

Maddie smiled, soft. “You’ve always wanted love to feel like survival. Like something you earn with your whole damn self.”

I looked down at the chipped mug in my hands. “Do you think that’s pathetic?”

“I think that’s human,” she said. “And I think you’ve always had more fight in you than anyone gives you credit for.”

The jukebox near the register clicked over to a new song—something old and low and smoky. A man singing about redemption like it was something you had to bleed for. I didn’t say anything for a while. But the letter was already out there. Floating in a world bigger than mine. And maybe, just maybe, it would find someone who saw me the way Maddie did—like I was worth answering.

Chapter Two

By the time the tenth morning dawned, I had stopped pretending I wasn’t checking the mailbox. I hadn’t meant to count the days. But there they were, tucked into my spine like splinters—each one sharper than the last. Each walk down the gravel shoulder of my street, past the neighbor’s collapsed fence and the junk car with ivy growing through the hood, I told myself: It’s fine if nothing’s there.

But I always looked. And when the box yawned open to nothing but grocery flyers and bills, I told myself again: You’re ridiculous. It was just a letter. You probably spelled the address wrong anyway. But on that morning—the tenth—it was there. A

single envelope. Cream-colored. Bent at one corner. My name on the front in a heavy, unfamiliar hand.

I didn't open it right away. Instead, I closed the mailbox carefully, like I might wake something if I banged it too loudly. I slid the letter into my coat pocket and walked back home from Maddie's slower than usual, the wind cutting across my cheekbones. It stung, but I liked it. Pain meant I wasn't dreaming. Inside, I didn't take off my coat. I sat down on the edge of the tub—of all places—and pulled the letter out like it was something sacred. I traced his handwriting first. The curves and pressure of it. Nothing practiced. Nothing showy. Just... deliberate.

Gennie,

I stared at your envelope for a long time before opening it. Not because I was suspicious. Because it's rare to get something real anymore. It felt real. You did. What made you write me?

You're the first person who's written me without trying to sell themselves. Most people tell me what they think I want to hear. Like I'm shopping for a woman, and they're listing features.

You didn't do that. You wrote like someone who meant it. Who wanted to be known.

I don't know what you look like, and I'm not asking. Not yet. What I know is this: you said you're tired of being alone. Me too.

I live on a ranch my grandfather left me. I run it mostly alone now. Horses, chickens, stubborn old dogs. I don't go into town unless I have to. I don't like crowds, or noise, or liars. But I miss having someone in the kitchen. I miss laughter that doesn't come from a screen. I miss hands reaching for mine when I'm not at my best. I want a life built from quiet things. Routines. Trust. Loyalty. I'm not offering fireworks. Just a

fire that never burns out.

If you want that too, write me back,

Marvin

He didn't ask for anything. Not a photo. Not a list of skills or stats or baggage. He just... answered. Like we were already in the middle of something. Like this was just the next part of a conversation we'd somehow always been having. Like I was known. If someone had asked me what else I might have expected, I don't know how I would have answered but it sure came as a shock. That did something to me.

My hands trembled as I read, not from cold but from the sudden, overwhelming hope of it. This letter—this quiet, creased piece of paper—was proof that I wasn't invisible. That someone, somewhere, saw the flicker of my voice on a page and answered it without needing to fix me, or question what I could offer in return. I held the letter to my chest like I could absorb some of it through my skin.

The weight of it was more than ink and words, it was want. Not lust, not desperation. Just a simple, stunning kind of want that made you feel something deep inside, made you wonder. And it wasn't just his. It was mine too. The part of me that still wished someone might choose me, not because I was convenient or broken in just the right way, but because they wanted to know me.

I sat there on the edge of the tub, in a coat I couldn't afford to replace, in a bathroom that still smelled faintly of mildew no matter how many times I scrubbed it—and for the first time in years, I let myself believe that maybe something was beginning. He had written me back. And that shouldn't have felt like a miracle. But it did.

Marvin,

I don't know what I expected when I sent that first letter. Probably nothing. Maybe that silence would fold over it and make it disappear, like everything else I've ever wanted. But you wrote back. And I haven't stopped reading your letter.

I guess I should tell you about me. I make coffee for a living. The kind that stains your clothes and doesn't taste like anything until you're desperate enough not to care. I read too much and talk too little. I keep an old paperback in my coat pocket like a charm, and my best friend says I flinch every time someone looks at me too long. I know you said about lonely, but do you ever get really lonely?

She's not wrong. I'm not good at parties. I forget birthdays. I sleep better when it rains. I crave things that don't fit into checkboxes, like silence that doesn't feel like punishment and hands that don't pull away too fast.

You asked me what made me write to you. The truth? It wasn't the ad. It was the way it felt like someone had finally stopped pretending. Like someone had the courage to say it plain. I want that. I want plain words that don't hide knives in them. I want real. I don't know what I'm expecting from this, and I won't lie and say I'm brave. I'm not. But I am curious. And maybe I'm hoping, just a little, that you're curious too.

Write me again?

Warmly,

Gennie

P.S. My favorite color is moss green. The dark kind, like forests right after it rains.

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I stared at the envelope for a long time before I sealed it. The ink had barely dried. My handwriting looked uncertain. Like it didn't want to take up space. I heard the door open behind me, soft creak, then the sound of Maddie's boots on the warped floorboards. She didn't say anything at first. Just crossed the room, picked up the mug I hadn't touched, and poured herself a sip like she'd been invited.

"You've been real quiet," she said, sitting on the arm of the couch. "Which usually means one of three things: you're either writing sad poetry again, you're about to delete another app and buy a book instead, or you're planning your escape."

I lifted my eyes. "I'm not writing poetry."

Her gaze dropped to the envelope in my hand. "What's that?"

I swallowed. "A reply."

Maddie took the envelope gently from me, like it might break. She read the name. Marvin.

"This the guy? Newspaper cowboy?"

I nodded.

"Are you sure?" she asked. But there was no judgment in it. Just... worry. The kind that builds up over time, after watching someone you love start over too many times without actually starting.

“No,” I said honestly. “But I sent the first letter. He wrote back. And I felt... seen.”

Maddie sat with that for a second. Then she passed the envelope back. “Well,” she said, “any man who makes you pull out real stationery and a pen probably deserves at least one more letter.”

I laughed, a breathy kind of laugh I wasn’t used to making. She didn’t smile, but I saw the warmth in her eyes. She was always doing that—looking at me like she was memorizing something she didn’t want to lose.

“You’re going to be okay,” Maddie said. “You just don’t know what kind of okay yet.”

I nodded, even though I didn’t believe it. Before I made it to the door, Maddie stopped me.

“Wait.” She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a tiny silver keychain—a horseshoe, faded and scratched. “Take this.”

I blinked. “From your glove box shrine?”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s a charm. You’re starting something, right? Might as well have a little luck with you.”

I turned it over in my hand. The edges were warm from her pocket, worn smooth from her thumb. It was stupid and sentimental and something she would never have given away without meaning it.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“If he turns out to be an axe murderer, I’m driving to South Dakota myself,” she

added, tossing me a wink. “And I’m bringing a shovel.”

I snorted. “To bury him?”

“To bring you home.”

And that—that’s what undid me a little. Not the joke, but the truth inside it. The way she said homelike it still meant something. Like I hadn’t already convinced myself I didn’t deserve one. It hit deeper than I expected. All the things I never said—about how lonely the nights were, how small the walls felt, how sometimes I talked out loud just to fill the silence—she didn’t need me to say them. She just knew. That was Maddie’s magic. She never needed the full confession to show up with a shovel.

I didn’t say anything else. Couldn’t. My throat was thick with the kind of grief that didn’t belong to a death, but to a thousand small losses stacked inside me like bricks. All the ways I’d stopped believing in good things. In people. In being chosen for something soft and permanent. I held the keychain like a lifeline. It was warm from her hand, and in mine it felt like more than just a trinket. It felt like belief. Like she was giving me some piece of her courage, just enough to keep me from turning back.

I walked out the door with the letter tucked into my coat, heart fluttering uneven and nervous, like it didn’t know whether to be afraid or hopeful. Maybe both. Because maybe—just maybe—this wasn’t the end of something. But the start of something different for a change.

Chapter Three

April 19th

Genevieve,

I wasn't sure you'd write back. Honestly, I figured I'd scared you off with the ad. Most people would've laughed. Hell, I laughed writing it. But you wrote me anyway. That counts for something.

You asked about the horses. There are five. They all have moods. One of them hates me. I admire that in an animal—clarity. You'd probably get along with her. The snow's melting here. It leaves behind the kind of mud that pulls your boots straight off. I almost lost a sock today. Thought of you when it happened. Wondered what you might think. Thought you'd probably make fun of me. I didn't mind.

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You asked if I ever get lonely. Yes. The kind that makes you ache deep inside, and just feel forlorn forever.

Tell me something you've never said out loud.

—M

Marvin,

I laughed at your sock story. Out loud. The kind that startled the cat and made the neighbor's dog bark. So, congratulations—you're officially the funniest person I've interacted with this week. Not that the competition's fierce. The barista at the gas station café called me "darlin'" and gave me a stale biscotti. I think that's the closest I've come to flirting in the last six months.

You asked me to tell you something I've never said out loud.

So here it is: Sometimes I lie awake at night and pretend I live inside a house that doesn't echo. A place where someone else's breathing fills the dark, steady and soft, and I'm not always the one who has to lock the doors or make the coffee or remember to buy more light bulbs. I pretend there's someone who knows how I take my tea and would notice if I didn't come home.

That's pathetic, isn't it? I didn't write to you because I was brave. I wrote to you because I was tired. Of pretending I don't want more. Of convincing myself that I'm too complicated or too damaged or too late. But your letter—it felt like the first time in a long time someone saw past the silence.

Tell me what kind of coffee you drink. Tell me what scares you. Tell me if you've ever fallen asleep somewhere you weren't supposed to.

I want to know the little things.

—Gennie

Gennie,

You're not pathetic. You're honest. That's rare. And brave, whether you meant it to be or not. You gave me something real, and I felt it hit in a place I forgot still worked.

Your letter—it was like stepping into a room I didn't know I'd been locked out of. One where someone else had left a light on for me. You asked about coffee. I take it black. Cheap stuff, usually. From a tin. No fancy names, no cream, no sugar. The kind of brew that tastes like a bad decision and keeps you awake anyway. Same brand my dad drank, and I hated that man, but habits die slower than people do.

You asked what scares me. Here's something: I'm afraid of being forgotten by the time I'm gone. Not missed—just erased. Like I was never here to begin with. Some days I look in the mirror and feel like I'm already halfway gone.

And yeah—I've fallen asleep where I wasn't supposed to. In the back of a feed truck once, after a fight with my brother. Woke up with straw in my ears and frost on my eyelashes. I was seventeen and stupid and sure I'd never need anyone. That aged poorly.

Gennie... if I were there, I'd make your coffee the way you like it. I'd remember the light bulbs. I'd leave the door unlocked when you said you were on your way home. Not because I'm good at any of this—but because I'd want to try.

Tell me what kind of music makes you feel like your ribs might break from holding it all in.

Tell me what you'd do if no one was watching.

—M

Marvin,

You say things like you're carving them into wood. Sharp and permanent and real. I think I reread your letter five times before I folded it up and tucked it under my pillow like a teenager with a crush. Maybe I am. Maybe that's exactly what this is—a slow, strange, impossible crush that feels a little too sacred to name.

I tried to imagine you in that feed truck, all frost-bitten and stubborn. Part of me wanted to laugh. The other part wanted to climb in next to you and stay until spring. You asked about music. What makes me feel like I'm unraveling in all the right ways.

There's a song—old, slow, kind of haunting. The kind that sounds like it's been soaked in whiskey and cigarette smoke. I played it once in the car, and the sun was low enough to make everything look like memory. "I'm so lonesome I could cry" I cried so hard I had to pull over. Not because I was sad—because it felt like it cracked something open that had been locked tight too long. That's the kind of music I go back to. The kind that lets you bleed a little quieter.

And if no one was watching? I think I'd dance. Not well, not gracefully. But like the kind of girl who used to spin in the kitchen in bare feet, chasing a kind of joy that didn't ask questions. I'd wear red lipstick for no one. Eat cake with my fingers. Read poems out loud to myself just to hear the words take up space.

I'd write letters to strangers.

I'd write to you.

Tell me the worst thing you ever regretted.

Tell me what makes you stay, even when it's easier to go.

—G

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Genevieve,

I read your letter with a hand on my jaw, like pressing hard enough might keep something from slipping loose in me. You wrote about dancing in bare feet and eating cake with your fingers, and I swear I could see it—your shoulders unburdened, your mouth soft with sugar, joy leaking out of you in quiet defiance. I'd watch that. I'd memorize it. And if I was brave enough, I'd join you. Not well, not gracefully. But I'd try. Just to keep you spinning.

You asked about regret. There's a girl I loved once—years ago. I loved her in the way boys sometimes love—like gripping a thing too tightly and then watching it die anyway. She wanted to run and I let her, told myself it was kindness. That she needed space. What she needed was someone who wouldn't give up. And I did. I watched her walk away and I didn't follow. I don't even remember what I said—but I remember everything I didn't.

That's the worst thing. The not-saying. The silence I stitched around someone who needed words. You asked what makes me stay. It's this strange thing: the land here is mostly mud and fences and frostbite, but it holds me. The horses, the quiet, the morning light over the barn roof—I think I belong to it more than it belongs to me. And now, these letters. You. Somehow that keeps me from disappearing.

I stay for the sound of hooves in the cold, for the promise of something tender growing wild in a hard place. For the thought that maybe someone, somewhere, still knows how I take my coffee.

Tell me what makes you angry.

Tell me the softest thing anyone's ever done for you.

—M

Marvin,

It's been two months. Sixty-something days. Maybe more. I've lost count, but not in the absentminded way—more like the way you lose count of heartbeats. You just trust they're still happening, even if you're not measuring them anymore.

Your letters feel like they arrive through some sacred, secret channel. Like the universe still knows how to deliver something right to the hollowest parts of me. I don't even wait to get inside anymore. I open them right there by the mailbox, paper trembling like skin in the cold, trying to drink in every word before it vanishes.

You asked what makes me angry. I used to say nothing. I thought being angry made me look bitter, or small, or—God forbid—ungrateful. But I am angry, Marvin. I'm angry at the way people disappear while you're still looking at them. At the way love becomes currency. At how loneliness makes you question your worth, like the absence of company means you're unlovable. I'm angry at how long I stayed quiet about the things that hurt me because I thought naming them would make them worse. Turns out silence is what does the real damage.

You asked about softness. When my mother died, I stopped eating for a while. Not on purpose. Just... forgot how. Grief turned food to dust in my mouth. There was this boy—barely a friend—who showed up with a thermos full of homemade soup. I told him I wasn't hungry. He didn't argue. Just sat on the porch next to me and drank his share while mine sat warm between us. He didn't push. Didn't speak. Just stayed. And I swear, that silence healed something in me before the food ever did.

That's what softness is. Not noise. Not grand gestures. Just someone staying, even

when you've got nothing to offer but your broken parts.

You say the land holds you. I think these letters are starting to hold me. But sometimes I wonder—what would it feel like to be held by the person writing them? Tell me what you imagine when you think of me there. On your land. In your space. What it would feel like. What you'd do if I showed up tomorrow.

—G

Genevieve,

I read your letter sitting on the barn steps, boots untied, a horse chewing hay beside me like the world wasn't quietly shifting under my feet. Sixty-something days. That sounds both too many and not nearly enough. You asked what I imagine when I think of you here.

At first, I tried to be practical about it—wondered if you'd hate the smell of manure in the mornings or if you'd mind how the wind never seems to stop blowing out here, like the sky's always exhaling something it doesn't want. But then I gave up trying to be reasonable. That's not where you live for me. You live in the unreasonable places. The heart-deep places.

I imagine you walking down the path behind the barn, bare feet in the dew-damp grass, coffee in your hand, your hair still sleep-warm. I imagine your laugh echoing off the fence rails, your shadow tangled up with mine at sunset. I imagine finding you in the kitchen—not doing anything in particular, just being—and realizing how easily the house could start to feel like a home again.

I imagine you in my truck, legs on the dash, some dusty old song on the radio that we both pretend not to love. And if you showed up tomorrow? I'd meet you at the edge of the drive, heart in my throat. I wouldn't try to impress you. Wouldn't tidy up the

mess or hide the worn parts. I'd just stand there, sunburned and stupidly hopeful, and say, "You're here," like it was the most important sentence I've ever spoken.

You said the letters are starting to hold you. Gennie... maybe they're meant to carry you somewhere. Not yet. I'm not asking. But I'm starting to wonder what it would feel like to stop wondering. Tell me what scares you about coming here. Tell me what part of yourself you're most afraid I'll see.

—M

Marvin,

I sat with your letter in my lap for a long time before I opened it. Not because I didn't want to read it. I did, but because something about the way your name is written in that sharp, steady way makes my hands shake a little. Like my body already knows your words are going to wreck me before my brain catches up. You asked what scares me about coming there.

It's not the horses. Or the wind. Or even the silence, though I imagine it settles over the house like a second skin. I think what scares me is what happens if I like it. If I start to belong there, in ways I've never quite belonged anywhere. And then what? What if it's not just a place I visit, but one I miss when I leave? What if I don't want to leave at all?

What if I see you and you're everything I've built up in my head—and worse, what if you're not? What if I'm not? I've spent years learning how to live in the in-between places. Half-loved. Half-healed. Half-hoping. And writing to you has started to unteach all of that. You don't feel like a halfway thing. You feel like a leap. You asked what I'm afraid you'll see in me.

The need. The parts I've kept hidden under charm and competence and too-loud

laughter. The girl who still hasn't forgiven herself for the ways she fell apart. The one who sometimes stares at her own reflection like she's looking at a ghost she's still trying to make peace with. You might see that and turn away. Or worse—you might stay.

And I don't know which terrifies me more.

But I keep writing you back. That must mean something. Tell me the first thing you'd say to me if I was standing in your kitchen tomorrow morning. Tell me what you think I'd leave behind if I came and didn't go.

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—G

Gennie,

There's a knot in my chest I can't quite get loose after reading your letter. It's the kind that doesn't come from pain exactly—but from recognition. Like finding a forgotten photograph of someone you used to be, and realizing you're still trying to make eye contact with them.

You said you're afraid of coming here and not wanting to leave. I think about that more than I should. What it would mean if you came and the world didn't fall apart—but instead, fell into place. What it would feel like to watch you turn the porch light on at dusk, to hear your voice in the next room, casual, ordinary, permanent. Not just passing through. Not just borrowed time.

You asked what I'd say if you showed up in my kitchen tomorrow. I think I'd say, "You made it." Simple, maybe. But not small. Because that's what this is starting to feel like—like survival. Like choosing to keep going long enough to arrive somewhere you weren't sure existed. And if you came and didn't stay?

You'd leave behind a hollow in the silence that was never there before. Your mug on the counter, still half-full. Your scent in the sheets. The mark of someone who didn't just visit—but changed the shape of things. You'd leave me different. And I don't think I'd want to go back.

Gennie, I've been writing you for two months and some change. It still feels like the most honest thing I do all week. But maybe it's time we found out if the thing we're

building here has legs outside the page. Would you come? Not just in theory. Not just someday. I'll send the ticket. I'll wait at the edge of the drive, just like I said. You don't have to decide now. But you could. Tell me what color the sky was the last time you felt sure. Tell me what it would take to get you here.

—M

Marvin,

The sky was lavender.

The kind of soft, aching purple that happens just after the sun dips low but before the stars show up to prove the dark won't last. I was sitting in my car outside my home, engine off, radio low. I'd just signed the contract for a new job across town—nothing fancy, just something that didn't smell like someone else's sadness. I felt scared and brave and weightless all at once. That's the last time I felt sure. Until now.

You said, you'd say: "You made it." And I felt something in me break open in the gentlest possible way. Because for so long, I've been the girl who almost makes it. The one who stands on thresholds but never walks through. The one who writes letters but never gets in the car. I've lived too long in the what-ifs. The almos. The nearlys. But you—us—this doesn't feel like almost. It feels like arrival. Like something I've been moving toward without realizing I was heading somewhere at all.

You said you'd send the ticket. I want it. I want the drive up your long gravel road and the way my heart will beat when I see you leaning against your truck, hands shoved in your pockets like you're trying to look casual but failing miserably. I want your mismatched mugs and the smell of hay and whatever silence exists between two people who finally have nothing left to say on paper. I'm scared, Marvin. God, I'm scared. But I'm also ready. Send the ticket. I'll start packing.

—G

Gennie,

I read your letter in the truck with the windows down, your words catching on the wind like something too fragile to hold and too true to ignore. You're scared but ready. That's enough for me. I made good on what I said.

There's a ticket tucked into this envelope—one way. The flight lands in Sioux Falls the second week of September. It's the closest window that gives you enough daylight to catch the regional bus out here before the last one leaves town. We only have one bus come out here, twice a year, and the first ride has already happened. After that, we're back to hitched rides and snow tires and hoping the sky doesn't trap you on the wrong side of the mountain. So if you come, come knowing there's a chance the weather will try to stop you. But also know I won't.

The fare's paid. Bus included. I added four hundred in cash for food and whatever else you need on the way. Snacks. A motel if you get tired. Something pretty to wear if it makes the whole thing feel more real. Spend it how you want. Or don't. Just know it's yours.

Gennie, I don't know what kind of grace it is to be chosen by someone like you. But I'll try to be the kind of place you can land. Rough edges and all. I'll be there at the edge of the drive. And yeah, I'll be trying to look casual. But I won't pull it off. Not even close.

Get here safe.

—M

Marvin,

I bought a new suitcase.

It still smells like plastic and possibility. I laid it open on my bed and just stared at it for a while, like it might whisper instructions. Like it might know how to hold the version of me who's brave enough to board a plane for someone she's never touched but already trusts.

I keep thinking about your driveway. The long stretch of gravel. The way you said you'd be waiting there. I can already see you—boots dusted, sun behind your shoulders, trying to look calm but probably wringing your hands in your pockets.

I'll be on the flight. September 13th. I wrote it down in three places, just in case my nerves try to pretend I imagined it. I packed the red sweater I told you about—the one that makes me feel like someone worth looking at. I packed a book I probably won't read, my kindle, and your letters, every last one of them. They feel like a roadmap. Like proof. I don't know what it'll feel like to be near you. To hear your voice without paper between us. But I know I want to find out. Save me a mug. I'm coming.

—G

Chapter Four

The horses were already sweating by the time the sun cleared the ridge. Flies hummed like static around their flanks, and the grass hissed when I brushed through it, dry from too many days without rain. I liked the quiet out here. No screaming sirens. No concrete pulsing beneath my feet. Just wind and dust and the honest weight of work.

I reached the pasture fence, tapped the old rusted latch with my boot, and watched it swing wide. The gelding closest to me flicked an ear but didn't lift his head. Smart thing—he knew I wasn't here to fuck with him. Just needed to count them. Make sure

everything was where it should be. That's the trick to peace, I've found. Knowing where everything is. Who's where they belong.

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I leaned against the fence post, pulled an apple from my back pocket, and took a bite. Juice ran down my wrist. I let it. Out here, there was no one to impress. No mirrors. No eyes. Except mine.

They always said my eyes were green like something alive. Emeralds. Grass. Some other tired metaphor. But out here, no one says anything. Out here, I'm just a man with a fence and a mouth full of apple and the kind of stillness that makes people nervous if they're not used to it. I didn't come here to disappear. Not exactly. I came because the city stopped being quiet enough for me to think. People don't notice you when you're quiet, until you make them. I made too many people notice.

So I left. Built the cabin myself. Every board. Every nail. My father would've called it obsessive. I call it control. There's comfort in knowing a structure down to its bones. A redtail hawk cut across the sky overhead, screeching like it was chasing offghosts. I smiled. There were no ghosts here. I'd made sure of that.

Back at the house, I had ribs slow-smoking in the pit and something half-finished drying on the worktable in the barn. I'd get to that later. Right now, I wanted to breathe. The world out here is honest. It doesn't lie to you with glossy windows or polished shoes. It's dirt and blood and breath. It's mine. And today, it feels still enough to hold something new.

By the time I made it back to the house, the ribs had gone tender, smoke curling in lazy spirals from the chimney like it had nowhere better to be. I opened the pit, flipped one of the bones with a gloved hand, and watched the meat separate like it was relieved to let go. I liked that. The breaking apart of things. The way heat or time or pressure always told the truth eventually.

Inside, the cabin held that golden-hour hush—shadows soft at the edges, wood floors still warm from sun. I left my boots by the door, wiped my hands on a rag, and grabbed a beer from the fridge I'd stocked more out of habit than necessity. I wasn't much for drinking, but I liked the sound of the cap hitting the counter. Reminded me there was something to take the edge off, if I ever wanted to.

Didn't mean I ever did. I had other more important ways to divulge myself of the edge. I stood at the sink, watching the way dusk settled across the back field like a woman wrapping herself in silk. Slow. Unbothered.

That's when I thought of her. The one I called when my hands itched too long without a body to tether them. I didn't know her last name. Didn't care. She liked it that way. She came when I said, left when I was done, and didn't ask why I always locked the door after she walked in. I picked up my phone, stared at her name. Just an initial.

L.Easy. But I didn't hit the "text" button. Not yet. Instead, I walked to the back room. Past the shelves lined with old tools and bones I'd carved down to something that almost looked holy. Past the trapdoor beneath the rug. Past the quiet hum of things that weren't quite dead.

I opened the drawer where I kept the letters. Folded, organized. Nothing romantic. Not yet. Just names. Ages. Bus routes. A system I'd paid to keep running. One girl hadn't made it. Changed her mind at the last second. I never blamed them. That's the trick with choice. People think they have it until they don't. But the driver always remembered his job. He owed me more than he wanted to admit. Still, it had been a while since anything felt... ripe.

I tapped my fingers against the edge of the drawer and thought again about L.Her perfume always lingered. Fake vanilla and cheaper desperation. She wasn't the kind you write about. But she'd do, if the blood got too loud. I shut the drawer.

The three sharp raps on the door echoed like a sinister symphony, a prelude to the night's dark dance. Midnight, the witching hour, and she was always on time. I could feel the anticipation coursing through my veins, knowing she was already undressing me with her imagination, her mind a whirl of forbidden desires. I opened the door, and there she was, clad in a leather jacket that molded to her body like a second skin, paired with tight black jeans that left little to the imagination. Her lips, a vivid, dangerous red, promised sin and surrender.

“Same rules?” she asked, her voice a low, throaty purr that sent a shiver down my spine. Her eyes locked onto the pulse in my throat, a silent promise of where she wanted to sink her teeth first.

“No speaking unless I ask a question,” I replied, the finality of my words echoed by the click of the lock behind her. She nodded, a subtle movement that spoke volumes. The way she handed over control, the unspoken agreement between us, was intoxicating. Others came to me for pleasure. She came to me to lose herself completely.

She didn't flinch when I took her phone, didn't question the drawn blinds. Her gaze, dark and unblinking, followed me across the room, tracking my hand as I pulled the heavy rope from the drawer—each movement a promise of a night she wouldn't forget. I bound her wrists behind her back, tight enough to make her breath hitch, a sound that sent a wave of dark satisfaction through me.

“Pain or just control tonight?” I asked, my voice a low growl that seemed to vibrate the very air between us.

Her pupils dilated, swallowing the irises. “Both,” she rasped, the word barely a whisper, a plea for more.

I gripped her chin, forcing her to look into my eyes, and led her to the center of the room, pushing her down until she knelt before me. Her eyes, wide and desperate, searched my face for a flicker of tenderness. She wouldn't find it. Her 'plea' for tenderness was met with a smirk that held no warmth. I was going to enjoy this. Enjoy pushing her to her limits and beyond. My fingers traced the delicate line of her jaw, a contrast to the rough, almost violent way I intended to take her. I wanted to hear her scream, to see the fear and excitement mix in her eyes as I showed her the true depth of my depravity.

I started with her jacket, slowly peeling it off her shoulders, feeling her shiver as the cool air hit her exposed skin. Her black lace bra barely contained her heaving breasts, and I could see her nipples hardening through the thin fabric. I leaned down, my breath hot on her ear.

"I know you think you want this." I whispered. I trailed my fingers down her spine, feeling her arch into my touch, an involuntary reaction to my dominance. I unhooked her bra, the straps digging into her skin as I roughly pulled it off, letting it fall to the floor, forgotten. Her jeans were next, and I could see the wet spot on her thigh-high stockings, a clear sign of her body's betrayal, her arousal evident despite her mind's protests. I pushed her back onto the floor, her bound wrists digging into the small of her back, forcing her to arch her back and expose her completely to me. I spread her legs wide, ignoring her muffled protests, and took in the sight before me. She was mine to do with as I pleased, and I intended to take full advantage.

I wanted to hear her beg, to see the struggle in her eyes as she tried to reconcile her body's reactions to me, with what she thought good girls ought to be. I lean down, my breath hot on her ear. "Shh," I whisper, silencing her feeble attempts at resistance. "You're mine tonight. Every inch of you belongs to me." And with that, I set to work, exploring her body with a mix of roughness and precision, leaving her in no doubt as to who was in control.

I took my time, drinking in the sight of her, the way her chest heaved with anticipation, the way her hips lifted slightly, begging for my touch. I started at her ankles, trailing my fingers up her calves, her thighs, before finally, slowly, dragging a single finger through her soaked folds. She moaned, a low, guttural sound that sent a jolt of desire straight to my cock. I circled her clit, feeling it throb under my touch, before plunging two fingers deep inside her. She cried out, her back arching off the floor as I began to move my fingers in and out of her, curling them to hit that sweet spot inside.

But I wanted more. I wanted to see her squirm, to hear her beg. I pulled my fingers out and brought them to my mouth, licking her juices off them slowly, savoring her taste. Her eyes followed my movement, her chest heaving with anticipation. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small, sharp knife, the blade glinting in the dim light. I traced the cool metal along her thigh, watching as goosebumps broke out across her skin. I brought the knife to her pussy, slowly dragging the flat side of the blade through her folds, feeling her shudder with a mix of fear and excitement. I could smell her arousal, could see her body trembling with need. I leaned down, my breath hot on her ear. "You shouldn't trust me." I whisper, and she winces in response, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and desire.

I pressed the tip of the knife gently against her clit, just enough to make her gasp, and then I began to move my fingers inside her again, slow and deep. I could feel her body tensing, her breath coming in short gasps as I brought her to the edge of orgasm. I could see the pleasure and pain mixing in her eyes, and it was intoxicating. I increased the pressure of the knife slightly, enough to make her cry out, and then I let her fall over the edge, her body convulsing with her release.

But I wasn't done with her yet. I stood up, unbuckling my belt, and she watched, wide-eyed, as I slowly pulled it off, the leather hissing through the loops. I folded it in half, the buckle digging into my palm, and brought it down across her thighs, hard enough to leave a mark. She cried out, her body jerking from the impact, and I did it

again, and again, each strike eliciting a cry of pleasure and pain from her lips.

Her pussy was glistening, her clit swollen and begging for more attention. I dropped the belt and fell to my knees, burying my face between her legs. I licked and sucked, my tongue circling her clit, my fingers plunging deep inside her. She was a writhing, moaning mess beneath me, her body trembling with the effort of holding back her orgasm. I could feel her tightening around me again, and this time, I let her go, my fingers and tongue working in tandem to push her over the edge once more.

As her body convulsed with her second orgasm, I stood up, unzipping my pants and pulling out my rock-hard cock. I stroked myself once, twice, before positioning myself at her entrance and slamming home. She cried out, her body stretching to accommodate me, and I began to move, my hips snapping against hers as I fucked her with wild abandon.

I reached down, gripping her throat again, squeezing gently as I pounded into her. Her eyes rolled back, her mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure. I could feel her tighten around me, her body coiling once more, and this time, I let myself go with her, my cock pulsing as I filled her with my release.

I collapsed on top of her, our chests heaving in unison as we came down from our high. I could feel her heart pounding against mine, her body slick with sweat. I rolled off her, pulling her into my arms, and she snuggled against me, her breathing slowly returning to normal. I ran my fingers through her hair, gripping it tightly and pulling her head back to expose her neck. I leaned down and bit her, hard enough to leave a mark, to draw blood. She gasped, her body arching into mine, and I could feel her pulse racing under my lips. I licked the blood away, savoring the taste of her, and she shivered in my arms, her body responding to the dark, depraved act.

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“Now get the fuck out of my house.”

She blinked up at me, dazed. For a second, I could see the confusion working its way across her face—the kind that always came after. Like maybe she thought the ache between her legs meant something different this time. It didn’t.

“Don’t make me say it again,” I added, voice flat, fingers already reaching for the cigarette tucked behind the whiskey bottle on the side table. She scrambled for her clothes, the silence between us now thick with shame. I didn’t watch her dress. I didn’t need to. I already knew what she looked like leaving. The door slammed behind her, sharp and final.

I exhaled smoke and leaned back into the leather chair, watching the ceiling like it might answer a question I hadn’t asked out loud. I didn’t fuck for comfort. I didn’t bite for connection. I just liked the way people bled when they trusted you not to make them. But tonight, it hadn’t helped. I still felt... off. Unsatisfied. Like my skin was a size too small and my pulse wasn’t syncing right with the silence in this place.

I stood, the floor cool under my bare feet as I crossed to the cabinet in the corner. Dust hadn’t settled on the oak yet—I cleaned it often. Like an altar. The key around my neck slid against my chest as I leaned down and fit it into the old brass lock. A perfect click. Smooth. Familiar. Not for pleasure. For clarity. For purpose.

The drawer groaned as I pulled it open. Manila folders, lined up like soldiers, edges worn, corners stained. Each one was a life. A habit. A string of vulnerabilities cataloged and alphabetized. My system was cleaner than any database. More intimate than fingerprints.

I slid out the one I'd marked in red ink. Natalie. Waitress. Twenty-six. Brown hair—thin at the ends, dyed blonde, like she was always trying to outrun herself. I'd watched her enough to know she used fake tan in the winter. Bit her nails. Stole fries off plates when the cook wasn't looking. Pretty, in a tired, soft kind of way. A girl no one looked at twice unless she was laughing.

But I watched. I watched the way she walked home with her head down and her keys already laced between her fingers—like she thought that would help. I watched how she never locked her front door until the third try. How she sometimes cried in the breakroom bathroom between shifts and came out pretending her allergies were acting up.

Routine was her religion. And I'd made it mine, too. Thursdays, early shift. Bus home by 3:40. Always the third row, window seat. Always her left earbud in first. I could draw her life in the dark. She wasn't the first. She wouldn't be the last. But she'd do. I tapped the edge of the folder, watching the bloodflake off my knuckle where it cracked earlier. From what, I couldn't remember. Biting down too hard? Gripping something too long? I liked the pain. Liked the reminder that I was still wearing this skin, even if it never quite fit.

This wasn't obsession. Obsession was messy. This was orchestration. Planning. Watching. Controlling. A symphony of inevitability. The next time the driver passed through South Haven, Natalie would be there. Bags at her feet. Phone in her hand. Maybe she'd text a friend that she was heading to her sister's for the weekend. That she'd be back Monday. That she just needed a break. She wouldn't make it past Friday night. And the driver? He wouldn't ask questions. Not anymore. Not since last winter—when I showed him what happened to the last man who talked too much. Sometimes loyalty grows best when it's rooted in fear.

I slipped Natalie's folder back into its place and shut the drawer gently, like tucking a child in for sleep. Click. That sound, right there. Final. Absolute. There was work to

do. Tools to sharpen. A barn to clean out. Bleach. Plastic wrap. Hooks. No one ever really notices when a girl like Natalie disappears. The world just finds ways to explain it. Maybe she ran. Maybe she overdosed. Maybe she finally cracked. By the time anyone starts asking questions, I've already disassembled the story.

Rebuilt her into something new. And when I'm done? She'll be beautiful.

Chapter Five

The air was beginning to shift, a palpable change that prickled the skin and sent a shiver down the spine. Still warm, still clinging to the last illusions of summer, but beneath the deceptive facade of soft blue skies and the lullaby of chirping crickets, there was an underlying scent of change. A promise of cold winds to come. Of endings.

I fucking loved this time of year. There was something about the impending darkness that spoke to the depths of my soul, a mirror to the void within me. The land turned inward, just like I did, retreating into the shadows as the world prepared for the inevitable descent into winter.

Out in the barn, my tools were laid out with meticulous care, each one sharp and clean, glinting menacingly in the dim light. They were my instruments, my extensions, and I treated them with the same reverence a musician might afford their prized possessions. The plastic sheets on the floor had been changed last week, a precautionary measure to ensure that when the moment came, I would be ready. Chaos was for amateurs, for the messy ones who got caught. I was neither messy nor an amateur. I was a maestro of mayhem, an artist of annihilation, and my canvas was the very fabric of human existence.

But tonight, I craved something different. I didn't want clean. I didn't want planned. The folder drawer had been closed for days, the profiles within untouched.

Meredith's wide, naive grin stared up at me from the top layer, a silent promise of an easy mark, a predictable end. I could memorize any life I wanted and end it just as easily, but where was the fucking fun in that? Predictability was becoming a chore, a crutch, and I yearned for the spark of unpredictability, the thrill of the unknown.

I lit a cigarette and stepped onto the porch, letting the wind cut across my bare chest like a thousand tiny knives. The horses were quiet tonight, their usual restless energy replaced by an eerie stillness. Even they could feel it—the slow ripple of tension building beneath the ground, the promise of something different, something coming.

I knew who to put this on. Harold "Harry" Thompson, the bus driver. A reliable man, gruff and weathered by life, but with a spark of fear in his eyes whenever he looked at me. He knew what I was capable of, and that knowledge was a powerful tool. I needed to see him, to feel his fear up close, to ensure he understood the gravity of my request.

I made my way to Harry's house, the engine of my truck purring softly as I navigated the familiar roads. The night was alive with the hum of unseen creatures, the rustle of leaves, and the distant hoot of an owl. The world was a symphony of life, and I was the conductor, orchestrating the dance of death and despair.

Harry's house was a small, rundown affair, tucked away on a quiet street on the outskirts of town. The paint was peeling, and the roof sagged slightly, but there was a warmth about the place, a sense of home that I couldn't help but envy. I parked the car and made my way to the door, my steps purposeful, my heart pounding in my chest with a mix of anticipation and dread.

I knocked sharply, the sound echoing through the house like a gunshot. Harry answered the door, his eyes widening slightly as he took in my appearance. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, with a beard that was more salt than pepper. His hands were calloused from years of hard work, and there was a weariness in his eyes that

spoke of a life lived on the edge.

"Atticus," he acknowledged, his voice a low rumble. "What brings you here?" His eyes were wide with fear, perfect. I didn't waste time on pleasantries. "I need a favor, Harry. Something a bit... different from our usual arrangements."

He nodded, stepping aside to let me in. "Come inside. Let's talk." I followed him into the living room, the smell of old wood and stale cigarette smoke filling my nostrils. The room was dimly lit, the only light coming from a single lamp in the corner, casting eerie shadows on the walls. Harry gestured for me to sit, but I declined, preferring to stand, to loom over him, to assert my dominance.

"I want you to bring me someone, Harry," I said, my voice steady, my eyes locked onto his. "Someone unexpected. Someone who won't be missed for a while. You know the type—loners, drifters, the forgotten ones. Someone you can spot on your route. Someone alone. Beautiful maybe, young, pretty. Groomable."

Harry's brow furrowed, and he leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine. "That's a risky game, Atticus. You know that."

I took a step closer, my voice dropping to a low, dangerous growl. "I want the challenge, Harry. I want to figure her out, to peel back the layers and expose her to the darkness within me. I want the hunt. The thrill of the unknown. And I want you to make it happen."

He exhaled slowly, a rasped sound that spoke volumes. "And what's in it for me?"

I smiled, a slow, predatory curve of my lips that held no warmth. "Your life, Harry. The lives of your family. I won't hesitate to cut out the tongue of every single person who lives in this house if you fail me. Starting with yours. I want you to imagine that, Harry. Imagine the blood, the screams, the sheer terror in their eyes as I take what I

want, as I leave them to bleed out, to drown in their own blood. That's what awaits them if you fail me."

His eyes widened in horror, and I could see the moment he truly understood the depths of my depravity, the lengths I would go to ensure my desires were met. "Y-yes, Atticus. I understand."

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I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small, sharp knife, the blade glinting menacingly in the low light. I pressed the tip gently against his throat, feeling his pulse race beneath my touch. "Good, Harry. Because I have such wonderful plans, and I wouldn't want anything to interrupt them. You see, I want to feel the fear, the desperation. I want to hear the pleas for mercy and know that I hold their lives in my hands. That's the power I crave, Harry. The power of life and death."

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat like a trapped animal. "Wh-what do you need me to do?"

"September fourteenth," I said, my voice a low, dangerous purr. "The south route. Bring me someone alone. Someone who won't be missed. You can spot them, Harry. The lonely ones, the forgotten ones. Bring me one of those, and I might just let you keep your tongue. But fail me, and your family will pay the price. Do you understand me, Harry? Do you understand what's at stake?"

He nodded, a jerky, involuntary movement, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. "Y-yes, Atticus. I'll bring her to you. I won't fail you."

I released him, stepping back to admire my handiwork. His face was pale, his eyes wide with a mix of fear and determination. Good. He understood. He knew what was at stake.

"I'll be watching you, Harry," I said, my voice a low, dangerous growl. "Every move you make, every breath you take, I'll be there, in the shadows, ensuring you don't fail me. Don't make me prove my point, Harry. Don't make me show you just how serious I am."

And with that, I turned and left, disappearing into the night as silently as I had come, leaving him to contemplate the gravity of our arrangement and the very real threat that hung over his head and the heads of those he held dear.

As I drove back home, the world seemed to hold its breath, the air thick with anticipation and the promise of violence. I could feel it in my bones, in the very marrow of my being—the knowledge that something extraordinary was coming, something that would test the very limits of my sanity and push me to the brink of madness.

And I fucking loved every bit of it.

For now, I had to wait. To bide my time and let Harry do his work, to let the pieces fall into place as they would. It was a torture of its own, this waiting, this anticipation, but it was a necessary evil. For the hunt was always the most exhilarating part, the chase, the stalking, the knowing that your prey was out there, unaware of the darkness that was closing in around them.

I spent the next few days in a state of heightened awareness, my senses honed to a razor's edge as I prepared for the unknown. I cleaned my tools with meticulous care, sharpening each one to a deadly point, ensuring that they were ready for the task at hand. I changed the plastic sheets in the barn, laying them out with precision, a silent promise of the blood that would soon stain them. I even went so far as to practice my strokes, my cuts, my strikes, each one a work of art, a testament to my skill and my dedication to the craft.

And all the while, I thought of her. The unknown. The nameless, faceless woman who would soon become my obsession, my fixation, my everything. I wondered what she looked like, what she sounded like, what she smelled like. I wondered what her story was, what demons she harbored, what secrets she kept. I wondered how she would taste, how she would feel beneath my touch, beneath the kiss of my blade.

The anticipation was a living, breathing thing, a monster that gnawed at the edges of my sanity, threatening to consume me whole. But I welcomed it, embraced it, let it fuel the fire that burned within me, the fire that demanded to be fed, to be sated, to be fulfilled.

I found myself pacing the floors of my house, my mind a whirlwind of dark thoughts and twisted desires. I would stand at the window, staring out into the night, imagining her out there, somewhere, unaware of the fate that awaited her, unaware of the darkness that was even now reaching out, tangling with her destiny, pulling her inexorably toward me.

I lit a cigarette with one hand and trailed the other across the rough wood of the porch railing, fingertips sticky with the faintest sheen of varnish and resin. Natalie hadn't screamed until the end. Most of them didn't.

But her mouth—those soft, curved lips—had become the centerpiece. I'd preserved them in clear acrylic, the curve caught mid-beg. Open. Aching. Beautiful. Her voice was gone, but that expression stayed. Suspended. Eternal.

She was on the wall now. A part of her, anyway. Hung above my drafting table like a saint's relic. The rest of her—well. Art didn't always have to hang. Some of it buried. Some of it burned. Some of it bled into the very foundation of the place. And yet she felt like a warm-up. A sketch before the masterpiece. The real next masterpiece hadn't arrived yet. But soon.

I took a drag and let the smoke claw at the back of my throat. The wind shifted, carrying the smell of pine and distant cattle—cover scents. I used to think that was enough, that layering the illusion of normalcy would keep me hidden. But now? Now I wanted her to see me. Whoever she was. The girl Harry would bring. A stranger. Unstudied. Untouched by my system, my structure. No folder. No plan. Just instinct and chemistry. Just chaos.

And if she didn't run—if she didn't flinch—if she looked past the mask and saw the rot and didn't look away? I'd burn the folders. All of them. I'd stop pretending I needed structure, or strategy, or secrets. I'd carve her into me. Carve me into her. One way or another. I flicked the cigarette off the porch, watching the ember spiral like a dying star into the grass. September 14th. One week. She was coming. And she didn't even know she'd already been claimed.

Chapter Six

The house felt smaller today. Like the walls had crept in overnight, heavy with memories that didn't belong to me anymore. The fridge still hummed like it had when I was seven. The same uneven floorboard by the pantry still creaked. And Maddie, my forever cheerleader stood in the doorway like she was trying to memorize me with her eyes.

"You packed the charger, right?" she asked, biting her thumbnail.

I held up my backpack. "Yes, Mom."

Maddie rolled her eyes, but her smile was too tight to be amused. "You're a brat."

"And you're going to cry as soon as I close the door."

Maddie didn't argue. She just looked at me the way only someone who's known every version of you can—like she already missed me, even though I was still standing there. I glanced down at my sneakers. Too white. Too clean. Like they hadn't touched all the places I've been—gas station bathrooms, hallway carpet where I'd curled up after fights, bus stop pavement slick with old rain. They looked new, but I wasn't. I was worn in quiet places. I was unraveling in a way no one could see.

And maybe that's why I was scared. Not of leaving. I've always known how to

leave—how to shut the door gently, so no one hears the ache. But, I was scared of arriving. Scared of stepping off the plane and not knowing who I'd be without the bruises. Scared to be looked at by someone who might see all the parts I've hidden.

Because I want to believe that somewhere out there, I get to become someone new. Someone that gets chosen. Kept. But belief is its own kind of dangerous. And right now, I am nothing but a suitcase full of maybes and a heart that still hopes someone out there is waiting to say: There you are. I've been looking for you.

“What if this is a mistake?” I asked quietly. The words slipped out, my breath falling from my lips in a sigh. “What if I just... disappear?”

Maddie stepped closer, pressed her forehead against mine. “Then you write. You scream into the void. You come home. Or you don't. Just—don't freeze. Don't turn around just because the unknown feels bigger than you.”

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She pulled back, tears glassing her lashes now. “Gennie, you’ve lived your whole life trying to be small enough not to scare anyone. This? This is big. This is yours. Even if it doesn’t turn out how you thought.”

I hugged her. Hard. The kind of hug that pressed all the breath out of my chest. The kind that said goodbye without saying it. Then I grabbed my bag, tucked the envelope with Marvin’s ticket and the \$400 down deep where it couldn’t go mysteriously missing, and stepped out onto the porch. The morning air was cool for September, giving me a chill as I wrapped my sweater tightly around my shoulders. I walked to the waiting Uber and slid inside. The driver gave me a nod. I gave the house one last look. And then I was gone.

The Uber pulled away, tires crunching against the gravel like it was chewing through everything I was leaving behind. I didn’t look back again. I told myself it was because I didn’t need to—but the truth was, I was afraid I’d see something in the window. Something small and ordinary. A coffee mug. A curtain twitch. A shadow. Something that would make me stay. The part of me deep down that was begging to find any reason not to go – warred with the part of me who wanted more than anything to see what we could be. What South Dakota held in store for me.

Instead, I kept my eyes ahead, watching as the neighborhood blurred into something unrecognizable. Trees, signs, intersections I’d memorized in childhood now looked foreign in motion, like the world was letting go of me the second I stepped outside the lines. It felt right. And wrong. Like pulling off a bandage and realizing the wound underneath had grown teeth.

The driver didn’t talk. I was grateful for that. I didn’t have the words to be anyone

else yet. Not the version of myself I was supposed to become once I landed. Not the brave girl. Not the fresh start. Instead, I pressed my forehead to the cool window and let the silence settle over me like a second skin.

What if no one was there on the other side? What if Marvin's offer was just a kindness he forgot he made? What if this was the kind of choice girls like me didn't survive? I didn't even realize I'd started to cry until a tear slid down my cheek and hit the collar of my sweater. No sobbing. No drama. Just... quiet leaking. I wiped it away before it had the chance to mean anything.

My phone buzzed in my lap. A text from Maddie.

Don't shrink to fit into places you've outgrown. And don't forget—you promised me you'd write.

I let out a breath that shook a little too much and typed back:

If I disappear, tell my story loud enough that someone might remember how it ends.

No one's forgetting you, Gen. No one ever could.

I turned off my phone after that. Not because I didn't want to hear more. But because I wanted the quiet to be mine. I needed to prepare myself for the coming journey. And somewhere—miles ahead, in a place I'd never been—someone else was waiting. That someone might lead to something... more...

The plane lifted with a groan, metal wings carving through low clouds like it was forcing its way into a sky that didn't want to let go. I didn't open the shade at first. I hadn't ever been on a plane like this before, and my tense body told of an

apprehension I hadn't realized I would have.

There was something sacred about pretending I was nowhere. Not grounded. Not in transit. Just suspended. Between the life I'd known and the life I hadn't lived yet. I imagined the clouds outside like cotton wrapped around the bruises of the world. Like maybe the sky could protect me from the gravity of becoming someone new. But eventually, curiosity won out. I cracked the window and looked down.

Houses blurred into stitched fields and highways that unraveled like veins across the skin of the country. It was dizzying, how small everything became when you left it behind. All the places that used to define me now looked like scribbles from this height. Like a past someone else had written. The woman beside me was asleep. Her mouth hung open slightly, her head tilted back like she trusted the sky to hold her.

I didn't trust anything to hold me. I folded my sweater tighter around myself and leaned into the hum of the engine. It reminded me of a lullaby—one sung in a language I didn't know. One that promised change, but not safety. Beneath the white noise, my thoughts returned to one of Marvin's letters.

"Middlecross could be a fresh start, if you're ready. Things move slow here. People ask questions, but they don't press. I've got work if you want it. Room if you need it. Just say yes, and I'll make space for you."

It sounded simple. Soft. A breath after drowning for so many years in the pain of being forgotten. But I knew better. Nothing was ever that clean. Especially not for girls like me—the ones who left behind quiet damage and carried invisible scars in their carry-ons. Girls who smiled in mirrors but flinched at kindness. Girls who said yes to second chances because first ones had teeth.

A crackle of turbulence pulled me back. Just a jolt. Nothing serious. But enough to make the overhead bins groan. Enough to make my stomach tighten with dread.

Somewhere down there—between Sioux Falls and a town I couldn't yet imagine—was a man I'd never met, who might already be wondering if I was the one. It was a strange, haunting kind of hope. Not romantic. Not even safe. Just... magnetic. Like something I couldn't name was already circling me. Drawing closer with every mile.

I pressed my palm to the glass.

“Please,” I whispered, to no one in particular. “Let me be more than what I've survived.” The clouds outside didn't answer. But I swear—for half a second—I felt the plane tilt. Like maybe something out there heard me, and was listening in.

The Sioux Falls bus depot was colder than I expected. Not metaphorically cold—though it had that too, in the sterile lighting and echoing ceilings—but physically cold. A sharp, dry chill that bit through my sweater the moment I stepped inside. My fingers tingled, stiff from gripping the handle of my suitcase as I dragged it over the chipped linoleum.

Virginia in September still held onto summer with both hands, even though it had been chilly when I left yesterday. Here, the air already smelled like frost. Like brittle leaves and something older beneath them. Something sleeping under the dirt. Or trying to. I paused near a vending machine that looked like it hadn't worked since 2006 and fumbled with my phone. No bars. No Wi-Fi. Just a “Welcome to South Dakota” banner crookedly hanging over a peeling wall. Underneath, someone had graffitied “Land of God, Guns, and Ghosts.”

Charming. Not. I was starting to get a good idea on why Marvin had to take out an ad in a newspaper of all places. This place looked like it had been pulled straight out of 1999. I pulled out my coat from the top of my rolling duffel and shrugged it on

awkwardly.. Necessary and insufficient at the same time.

A voice crackled through the loudspeaker. Indistinct. Probably important. The few other passengers scattered across the depot benches didn't react. They just stared straight ahead like they'd been waiting since the last ice age. I made my way toward the small glass door that led out to the buses. A man was standing near a paper sign taped to a column—"Route 22B — Middlecross." He was tall, heavysset, dressed in layers like he'd prepared for the apocalypse. His face was half-obscured by a thick beard and a faded green cap, but his eyes caught mine immediately. Sharp. Too alert for someone doing a routine job.

"You Gennie?" he asked, stepping forward.

His voice was gravel. Not harsh, but aged and rubbed down to its essentials. It carried the kind of authority that didn't need volume.

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“Yes,” I said. “Genevieve, but—yeah. Gennie’s fine.”

He gave a short nod, like he already knew that. “Name’s Harry, I drive that bus over there. You’re the one headed to Marvin’s?”

“That’s right.”

Another nod. Like it wasn’t strange at all for a girl to hop a plane and a bus and land in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a coat and a ‘maybe’ waiting for her. Not to mention the weirdness about him knowing exactly who she was. Marvin had mentioned that everyone knew everyone down in Middlecross, and the bus driver had been the same for the past twenty odd years, but it still seemed odd.

“You’re cutting it close,” he said, glancing out the narrow depot window. “They’re calling for snow tonight. Early season blizzard, if you can believe it.”

I blinked. “Snow? Already?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Harry muttered. “Happened back in ’92. Killed hundreds of head of cattle. Power out for days. You wouldn’t think the land could turn on you that fast, but out here, the land’s got moods.”

I tried to smile, but it felt like my skin didn’t remember how. “Good thing I brought the big coat, then.”

He didn’t smile back. Instead, he turned and gestured toward the far end of the depot, where a single bus waited. It was older than the others, with flaking paint and a

slightly off-kilter license plate. The windows were so fogged over I couldn't see inside.

"Go ahead and get settled," Harry said. "Not a full ride today. Just you and a few others headed north. We'll be stopping through South Haven before Middlecross. Should be there before nightfall—weather willing." South Haven. The name pinged something strange in my chest. An unexpected flash of nerves. Like someone brushing their hand too close to a burn you'd forgotten was there. I tried to shrug it off, but the feeling lingered.

"Thanks," I said, gripping the handle of my suitcase tighter.

I hauled it toward the bus, boots crunching on the grit-covered pavement, every step feeling heavier than the one before. There was something about this moment—this small, transitional silence—that made my heart beat too loud in my ears. I could feel the change coming, the shift. Like the air itself was waiting for something to begin. Harry held the door of the bus open, watching me with a look I couldn't quite place.

Not interested. Not disinterested either. Just...aware. It gave me goosebumps, and I wished I had thought to bring some bear spray. Not for the bears, for the men in these parts looking at me with a sense of awareness that I didn't like.

"Middle seat's warmer," he said as I climbed the steps. "Engine heat doesn't reach the back."

"Good to know," I replied, taking a careful step past him making sure not to get anywhere near him. Heebie-jeebies activate.

The interior smelled like old coffee and older secrets. A woman sat near the front, bundled in scarves and muttering to herself. A teenage boy was slumped in the back row with headphones in, barely more than a shadow. I chose the third row, middle

seat, just like he suggested. Close to the front. Close to the door. If the heater didn't reach the back, I didn't care to be frozen to death.

The suitcase sat beside me like a second body, heavy and full of every version of myself I could take with me. I pressed my forehead to the cool window and watched as Harry climbed back into the driver's seat, adjusting the mirrors with surgical precision. The door hissed closed. The engine growled. And the bus began to move—slowly, surely—toward the first of many towns I'd never meant to know.

Chapter Seven

The bones had finished drying sometime around midnight. They were curled like white fingers, arranged in rows on the stainless-steel table in my shop out back, waiting to be repurposed. They always waited so patiently. That was the beautiful thing about the dead—they never rushed you. They didn't whine or question or demand. They simply offered. Again and again and again.

I washed my hands in the deep sink, the water ice-cold from the well pump. No heater out here. Just metal and silence and the thrum of my own skin. There was something reverent in the chill—it kept me alert, awake, aware. The way the cold bit into me reminded me that I was still human, at least on the surface. Still wearing the shape of one, anyway.

I turned the bones gently, brushing flecks of dried flesh from the delicate curve of a rib. She'd been small, that one. Fragile. So easy to lift. So light when she stopped struggling. I didn't remember her name. That's the trick of it. You can't remember names. Names give people too much weight. Names belong to women with futures, with plans, with someone waiting to hear from them. But bones... bones don't need names. Bones are mine.

My thumb dragged across the grain of her clavicle. Smooth. Not quite perfect. A

hairline fracture from where I'd gripped her too hard. I made a mental note not to use that piece for the centerpiece sculpture. Imperfections matter.

The wind outside kicked up dust against the siding. A hollow moan. A warning. A welcome. Snow was coming. I could feel it in my teeth. And she was coming too. The surprise girl.

The thought landed in my brain like warm blood on a frozen floor—an expanding heat, sudden and wrong. I breathed through my nose, slow and even. I'd been careful. Precise. Harry would make sure the bus took the right turn. The detour would look like an accident. A brief delay. A helpful suggestion. He was so good at making things feel normal.

And she would step off that bus with her big-city shoes and her soft, haunted eyes and not know that every inch of this had been sculpted for her. That every flake of snow, every frozen tree branch, every hollow mile of South Haven had been chosen. For her. For me. For us.

My hand curled into a fist before I realized what it was doing. Bone crunched under my palm, and I forced myself to let go. I couldn't break anything else. Not today. Today was for patience.

Soon. She'd learn the shape of this place. The weight of it. How it curled in on itself in the winter and became something else. She'd learn what it meant to be seen by someone like me. And if she ran? That was fine. The chase was part of it. I was good at chasing. Better at catching. And once the catching was done, I could make another fine piece of art.

I pulled off my gloves and wiped a smear of something dark from the side of the table. The scent of bleach burned the back of my throat, mixing with the faint, sweet rot that never quite left the air out here. It calmed me. Anchored me. This wasn't

about lust. Or love. This was about possession.

This was about knowing her in a way no one else ever had. Not her friends. Not her mother. Not her husband. Not the version of her that walked the world with small smiles and guarded steps. I would see the rest of her. The inside parts. The parts she hid even from herself. And when she finally broke? It wouldn't be the sound that mattered. It would be the silence after. That soft, reverent stillness where all the pretending stops. Where I could finally make her my masterpiece.

Chapter Eight

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A horrible grinding noise pulled me from sleep, metal chewing metal somewhere beneath the floor. I blinked up at the low ceiling of the bus, disoriented and heavy-limbed, like I'd been sleeping underwater. My cheek stuck slightly to the old wooden bench. I hadn't meant to sleep that deeply. It was a miracle I could even fall asleep on the thing.

Marvin must've paid extra. First class rural transit. The thought made me huff a tired laugh. My last mattress was a sagging heap of secondhand springs that pinched my spine in the same three places every night for what felt like fourteen years. It was strange—feeling my bodynotache in the middle of my back, but in my neck instead.

Even stranger to realize I might never sleep in that old bed again. The speakers crackled overhead, a deep male voice breaking through with the tact of a hammer.

“South Dakota. Stop number eighteen. Elizabeth—uh—Gennie, I mean. Your destination has been reached. Ranch is up ahead. Come up front. This is where you get off.”

I sat up too fast, heart thudding. They couldn't meanhere. The windows were nearly white with snow, blurring out everything beyond the glass like the world had disappeared. I hadn't even heard us stop. Groping for my bags, I shoved my notebook and kindle, between two sweaters, wiped the grit from my eyes, and stumbled down the narrow aisle toward the front. The cold hit me before the door even opened—leaking in around the frame like a warning. The driver stood just outside, bundled in layers, breath curling from his mouth in thick plumes. He wasn't smiling.

“Gennie?” he asked. His voice had a local lilt—grainy, worn. “This is your stop.”

I stared at him. “There’s... nothing here.”

His lips pulled tight. “Can’t take the bus further. Storm’s coming in quick. Roads are too slick. Last time we tried pushin’ through in this kinda mess, we slid off a ravine.” He rubbed his hands together like the cold had bones. “Ranch is about a half mile straight that way. Stakes in the ground mark the road.”

“Stakes,” I repeated, like maybe I’d misheard.

“Tall orange ones. You’ll see ‘em pokin’ up through the snow. Just follow those. You’ll make it.”

The words made it land wrong in my stomach. I was supposed to be greeted by Marvin’s old ranch truck, and a long gravel drive. Not blinding snow and a half mile walk. I stepped down onto the snow-covered ground with a crunch that swallowed everything else. The wind slapped me in the face, stinging and wet and unrelenting. I zipped my coat halfway before realizing it wasn’t enough and dropped my bags. It was only mid-September. Virginia didn’t look like this until January, if ever.

“You sure this is it?” I asked again.

He shrugged. “Address matches what I got. Ranch ain’t got a name, not on file. This is Marvin’s place just like I told ya. Someone’s expectin’ you though.”

A small shiver snaked down my spine. “Who?”

He paused. “Marvin. He just told me to drop you here. Sorry, ma’am. Nothing personal.”

Nothing personal. The words were a hook dragging through my gut. Not personal was exactly the kind of thing people said when it absolutely, one hundred percent was. I

looked around, squinting against the flurry. Trees loomed like silent witnesses in every direction. No signs. No buildings. No light. The whole world looked like it had been erased with a palette knife dipped in white.

“Guess I just keep walking,” I murmured.

He nodded solemnly. “Storm’s movin’ faster than we thought. You’d best not dawdle.”

A pause. Then, quieter: “Don’t stray off the path.” As he turned his back, and walked back into the bus.

I slung my bags over my shoulder, turning back one last time to meet his eyes. There was something there. Not regret. Not guilt. Something more complicated. Like he wanted to say something he couldn’t. Or wouldn’t.

“Yes, ma’am, well—good luck to ya,” the man called through the bus window, voice half-swallowed by the wind. “I hope you make it safely. Watch out for the bears. Otherwise, you should be fine.”

Bears? My head jerked up like I’d misheard him. But no. He’d said it with all the calm indifference of someone warning me to mind the potholes. Just bears. Casual man-eaters.

“What the hell am I supposed to do if I run into a bear?” I muttered under my breath, voice curling out in a puff of frost.

The man gave me a thumbs-up like we were old friends parting ways at a gas station, not him leaving me in a goddamn blizzard. There was something almost smug about it—like he knew this wasn’t normal. Like this whole setup wasn’t exactly what it looked like: a girl getting dropped off in the middle of nowhere with no working

phone, no backup plan, and no clue what the hell she was walking into.

I fixed him with a dead-eyed glare. “You, sir, are the single most helpful man I’ve ever met in the entirety of my deeply unfortunate life.”

He didn’t respond. Just rolled the window up and let the bus swallow him.

“Thanks,” I said anyway. Because I didn’t know what else to do. Because he was leaving, and I was not. With a sick grinding sound the bus pulled away with a horrible kind of finality. The tires spun briefly in the snow, then caught, and just like that—I was alone. I stood in the swirling cold, trying not to panic. This was fine. Totally fine. Half a mile wasn’t long. I could walk that in ten minutes. Maybe fifteen in this weather.

My decidedly un-gloved hands gripped the handles of my bags tighter. This was the start of everything. A new home. A husband. A life. It just... didn’t feel like a beginning. It felt more like an ending. This was it. The walk to forever. My shoes immediately betrayed me. They weren’t built for snow. Not this kind of snow. Not the kind that dragged at your ankles like a live thing, slipping between the seams and numbing your toes from the inside out. They were cheap, stiff, and already wet. The frayed hem of my jeans clung to my calves in freezing strips.

Still, I kept moving. Marvin had paid for my ticket, yes. But even that had made me feel like I had a debt I couldn’t afford. Even the \$400 he had given me was stretched thin with what little bit I had to buy. I hadn’t asked for boots. Or gloves. Or anything beyond what was absolutely necessary. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful. Or worse—needy.

The coat had been a gift. A thick wool thing with a faux fur collar and brass buttons that didn’t quite match. It was too big in the shoulders, and it smelled faintly like cedar and something darker. Something gold. But it was warm, and right now, warmth

was all that mattered. I wrapped it tighter around me and ducked into the wind.

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The stakes were where the driver said they'd be—tall and orange, poking through the drifts like bones. They guided the eye in a shaky, staggered line down what might've once been a road. There were no lights. No buildings. Not even fence posts or barbed wire. Just snow. Endless, blinding snow. It didn't look like a road so much as a corridor carved through the void.

Every step made my muscles scream. Every gust of wind stole my breath and turned it into something sharp. I kept my eyes on the stakes and told myself this was temporary. That I wasn't crazy for agreeing to this. That Marvin was trustworthy, and the ranch—wherever the hell it was—was real. That someone was waiting for me. That this wasn't some stupid horror story opening in real time. I didn't believe it. Not completely. But I needed to. Because the cold was starting to feel alive. And the further I walked, the more it felt like something was watching.

Just one foot in front of the other. Just keep going. You've made it this far. Half a mile isn't that far. It's nothing. You can do this. You wanted this.

The words looped in my head, desperate and hollow as the wind. A mantra spoken through chattering teeth. I tried to hype myself up as I dragged my frozen feet through the drifts, but every step felt like it might be my last. My thighs burned. My toes had gone numb hours—or minutes?—ago. Time was warped out here, swallowed by white.

It was supposed to be beautiful. The snow. That's what I told myself. I had dreamed of it. Romanticized it. Virginia rarely got snow like this—powdered, soft, cinematic. But this wasn't that. This was weaponized winter. This was survival.

I trudged on. Step. Step. Crunch. Step.

Then—light.

Faint at first. Distant and flickering. But real. And ahead of me. My breath caught. It didn't feel like hope exactly, but it was something close. Something sharp. Urgent. I picked up the pace, legs nearly giving out beneath me. The cold wasn't just around me now—it was in me. In my joints. In my chest. My fingertips burned as the nerves came back to life.

Just a little more. Just a little more. Almost there. As I got closer, the shape of the building came into view. Not a sprawling ranch like I'd imagined. Not some sun-warmed farmhouse with a wraparound porch and lights glowing from every window. No. It was a cabin. Small. Square. Plain.

One story, maybe three or four rooms max. No barn in sight. No stables. No outbuildings. No glow of floodlights marking fencing or pasture or animal shelters. Just this. This... box. My steps slowed. Something wasn't right. The air shifted. That strange pressure behind my ribs—foreboding, sharp and precise—settled in deeper.

Had I been catfished? Had I just dragged myself through a half-mile of blizzard for this? This was the future? This was the home I was supposed to build a life in? My breath came out in a hard, shaking exhale as I mounted the first step. The porch had no roof. Snow clung to the warped boards. The light I'd seen was coming from a crooked lamp above the door, its bulb blinking just slightly, like it might burn out at any moment.

I scanned the treeline, but there was nothing else. No silhouettes of other buildings. No distant fences. Just black sky and snow. Animals wouldn't be left in the dark like this... would they? The wind howled behind me, and I raised a trembling fist to knock.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sound was pitiful—muffled by my cold-reddened knuckles and the roaring in my ears. But it echoed through the door, louder than I expected. I stepped back instinctively, suddenly unsure. The silence that followed dragged out too long, straining my nerves to the breaking point. Then—

“What in the actualfuck.”

The voice on the other side of the door was deep, masculine, and pissed. I stumbled back down the step, slipping a little on the ice. My breath caught in my throat as adrenaline surged—cold and hot all at once.

What the hell did I just walk into?

The door yanked open with such force I flinched. A man filled the frame—broad, shirtless, and barefoot, standing in the swirling snow like he didn’t even feel it. His jeans clung low to his hips, worn and dusty, like they’d lived an entire life before today. His hair was a mess of auburn waves, long enough to catch in the wind and whip across a face that should’ve belonged to someone carved out of stone. But it was his eyes—sharp, glacial, a kind of cruel green—that held me frozen.

“What in the actual hell is a woman doing on my porch in the middle of a damn blizzard?”

His voice was sandpaper and smoke, rough and cutting, like it had been dragged through too many bad nights and never quite recovered. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I was cold. Wet. Lost. My lips were numb, and my brain felt just as frozen. This wasn’t what I imagined. Not even close. He stepped forward. Just a little. Enough to make the night feel smaller.

“Are you deaf?” he snapped. “Or just stupid?”

That woke something in me. The fear, sure. But also... something else. Something deeper. Unnamed.

“I—I was told this was the ranch,” I stammered. “I’m supposed to—someone was supposed to—Marvin—”

“For the love of God.” He rolled his eyes and slammed the door in my face. The silence that followed was worse than the shouting. Snow bit at my cheeks. My breath came out in ragged little clouds. I blinked at the wooden door like it had personally betrayed me. What the hell just happened? My knuckles cracked against it before I could think better. Once. Twice. Again.

“Marvin!” I shouted, absurdly. “Marvin, open the damn door right now!”

Heavy footsteps pounded inside, and then the door flew open again with a bang that made me stumble backward.

“Who the fuck is Marvin?”

I stared at him, throat dry. “Uh... you are?”

A pause. And then—he laughed. It wasn’t a kind laugh. It wasn’t anything I wanted to be the reason for. It felt like being undressed and spit-shined in the same breath. His smirk curved slowly across his mouth, wolfish and amused.

“I think I’d remember if my name was Marvin, little girl.”

Little girl.

The words scraped across my skin, and I hated how they made me feel. Small. Stupid. Not because they were true—but because there was a part of me that still wanted someone to take care of everything. Fix everything. Be the answer to every wrong question I'd ever asked.

“And who exactly are you looking for, hmm?” he asked. “This Marvin. Why?”

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself, glancing over my shoulder like maybe the bus would come back. Like maybe I still had a way out. But I didn't. I knew that now.

“I don't think I should answer you.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he drawled, leaning against the doorframe like he had all the time in the world, like he was perfectly comfortable with me freezing to death on his porch. “You're about three hours from the nearest town. You could start walking—if the bears don't get you first, maybe you'll make it eventually.”

He lifted a brow. “Or... you could come inside and take your chances with the devil. Catch is—you tell me who Marvin is. And why you thought he lived here.” The wind howled behind me. I shivered. But it wasn't the cold that scared me most. It was him. And how, somehow, I already knew I'd never really left the bus alone.

Three hours? There was no way I could walk that far. Not in this cold. Not in these shoes. He hadn't specified if that was by car or on foot, and something about the way

he'd said it made me think he meant the latter. Which meant it wasn't three hours—it was days. Days of snow, wind, and whatever wild things lurked out here with teeth. Why would anyone live so far from town with nothing around? Where the hell had that bus dropped me off?

Clearly, this man wasn't Marvin. Maybe he was lying. But something told me he wasn't. More likely—I'd been left in the wrong place. Or maybe... exactly where someone wanted me. I had two choices. Try to make it to town and freeze to death. Or stay here. And hope he didn't kill me first. I swallowed the knot in my throat and tipped my head toward him, summoning more calm than I felt. "I guess I'll spend the night with the devil."

His face split into a wide grin. Not kind. Not reassuring. Just sharp. "Excellent choice, little girl. You're half-frozen. Come on in. I'll make you a cup of hot chocolate."

The shift in his tone startled me. Like he could snap from cruel to cordial without missing a beat. I stepped inside. Warmth wrapped around me like a blanket, and I exhaled for the first time in what felt like hours. The wind still whistled against the windows, but it was nothing like outside. He closed the door behind me with a hard click, locked it, and didn't look away.

"Take a seat."

I looked around, wary. The cabin was... not what I expected. Rough, yes. But lived in. Cozy, even. A large brown couch in the corner, piled high with buffalo plaid blankets. A TV mounted on the wall—true crime flickering on screen, surrounded by mounted antlers. A fire crackled steadily in the hearth. Electricity. Heat. Running water, probably. Amenities I hadn't expected to find this far off the grid. Still... the place gave me the strangest feeling. Like I'd stepped into something I wouldn't be able to step back out of.

“Something wrong with my couch?”

I startled. “No—I mean, no sir. Not at all. I’ll sit.” I lowered myself stiffly onto the couch. Shivers still rippled through me. My toes were numb. My fingers ached, throbbing like they were on fire. My face burned from the cold, the heat already starting to sting as it returned. I was freezing, but alive. For now. A mug clinked softly against the table in front of me. Steam curled from it. Hot chocolate. My eyes darted to the table—glass-topped, but partly covered with a stretched piece of what looked like... leather? Old. Stained. Maybe some kind of animal skin. There were odd little sculptures scattered across it. One of them caught my eye—dark, jagged, strangely organic. Teeth. It looked like it had been made out of teeth.

Human? No. That was ridiculous. Right? I swallowed, hard. The cabin was warm. Beautiful, even. But there was something wrong here. Something I couldn’t name. It wasn’t just the isolation. Or the cold. It was him. And the way this place felt like a trap, disguised as a home.

“Drink up,” he said, nodding toward the mug. “It’ll warm your fool ass up.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m not a fool. I was looking for... for...”

“For what?” He leaned forward slightly, shadows from the fire licking across his bare chest. “Jesus, woman. I don’t bite.” A beat. “Hard.”

I stared at him, stunned.

His lips curled into a smirk. “Just joking, little girl.”

“I’m not a little girl.”

“Stop deflecting.”

He raised a brow, slow and deliberate, then winked like we were sharing some kind of inside joke. We weren't. He was the type of man who knew he was beautiful. The kind that used it like a weapon. The firelight danced over his skin, tracing the lines of ink that wound across his arms and chest. Every inch of him was muscle—lean, hard, coiled. Dark hair spread across his stomach in a trail that led down to his belt buckle, and I looked away quickly, heat creeping up my neck.

“I don't even know your name,” I muttered.

“Still deflecting.”

“The point stands.”

“I'm the boss here,” he said flatly. That smirk faded into something sharper. “You'd do well to remember that.”

“You're not my boss, however... sir.” I picked up the mug, letting the warmth seep into my frozen fingers. It felt good. Too good. “It's warm in here. Thank you. Really.”

He tilted his head slightly, like he was studying me under a microscope. “You're welcome,” he said, slowly. “But you still haven't answered me. I don't like being ignored, little girl.”

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Something in his voice changed. Steel behind the velvet. I didn't dare test it.

"Marvin is..." My voice wavered. "Was. I don't know. He was supposed to be my... mail-order husband."

Silence. Then a deep, masculine laugh rumbled through the room like thunder. "Mail-order husband?" he repeated, amused. "The fuck is that?" Heat rushed to my face. I felt it blooming across my cheeks, crawling into my scalp. He was enjoying this—my humiliation. Watching me squirm.

"There was this ad," I said, forcing the words out, small and sheepish. "I live alone. My family is... gone. All of them." The ache slipped into my voice before I could stop it. "And I was just—tired. Tired of being alone."

His expression didn't change, but something flickered behind his eyes. His jaw twitched once.

"I found this newspaper ad. There was a post." He grunted. Not a laugh. Just a sound. I risked a glance at him. His eyes were locked on me, unblinking. Green, sharp, cutting. His whole body was still—too still. Only a small twitch near his eye told me he was even breathing.

"And?" he asked, one brow lifting.

I swallowed hard.

"I kind of... answered it."

“So basically,” he said, leaning back with that same predatory calm, “some desperate shithole posted a Hail Mary in some newspaper back east, and your lonely, naïve little self actually responded?” The words hit like a slap. Not loud, not cruel exactly, but precise. Dismissing me like I was stupid. Like I was a child fumbling with adult tools.

“You don’t understand,” I snapped, the heat in my voice surprising even me. “You haveno ideawhat it’s like.”

“I’m not trying to understand,” he said, gaze hard as flint. “I’m telling you—it was reckless. Foolish. No matter how you try to dress it up. What if the man was a killer?”

That word landed like a gunshot. My pulse jumped. I stared at him, searching for something—sarcasm, amusement,anythinghuman—but his expression didn’t change. It was flat. Implacable.

“I...” My throat tightened. “Ididthink of that. But it felt worth the risk.” A beat. “Ithink.”

“Oh, itfeltworth it?” His voice dropped a register—low, dark, deliberate.

My breath caught. The air shifted. Heavy and strange. It pressed in around me, thicker than the warmth from the fire. My heart thudded faster. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Nothing. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’tmove. The walk through the snow, the gnawing cold, the fatigue—it all vanished beneath the sudden weight of fear. He didn’t lunge. Didn’t shout. He didn’t have to. There was something buried just beneath his skin—something sharp and coiled and ancient—that made my body want to run, even as my feet stayed rooted in place.

“Scared, little girl?” he asked, voice softer now. Almost kind. I shouldn’t have responded. IknewI shouldn’t. But my head dipped in the smallest nod. He smiled.

“You should be.” It wasn’t a threat. It was a fact. And somehow, that made it worse.

His lips curled into a smile—teeth white, even, deliberate. His eyes sparkled with a glint that didn’t feel entirely sane.

“I promise,” he said, voice silky, “no matter how badly I might want to, I won’t harm you. You’re far too beautiful. Too delicate. Wasting you on something as superficial as art would be a sin.” He tilted his head slightly, as if admiring her. “Art lasts forever, sure—but a woman like you? You’d last a lifetime.”

My stomach turned. Art? What the hell was he talking about? Last a lifetime? Was this poetic or psychotic? I couldn’t tell. His tone didn’t shift enough to offer clues. Was he high? Delirious? Or just—wrong in that deep, bone-deep way?

“Do you... have a room I can sleep in?” I asked, carefully. Maybe it would have a lock. Maybe I could buy myself a few hours of distance. Something. Anything. A chuckle answered me. It rolled low from his chest—warm, pleasant even. And completely out of place.

“Of course, little girl. Come along.”

He stood, muscles in his back flexing as he moved. Strong. Built like someone who didn’t need to raise his voice to be obeyed. If he decided to hurt me, there wouldn’t be anything I could do. He was bigger, faster, practiced. I could feel it in the way he moved—controlled, confident. Like a predator that never needed to rush the kill. Whatever was wrong here, it wasn’t something I could touch. This wasn’t a situation I could outmuscle or outlogic. He led me down a short hallway. At the far end, three doors stood closed.

“That one on the left’s yours,” he said, gesturing. “Middle’s your bathroom. I’m on the right—my bath’s separate. No outside access.” He turned to go. “Make yourself at

home. I'll grab your suitcases."

Suitcases. I blinked, glancing back toward the front room. In all the chaos, I hadn't even thought to grab them. And now he would be the one touching my things. Don't be stupid, Gennie. Whatever this is, it's not contagious. Right. Of course not.

I grabbed my luggage the second he set it down. Nearly tripping over myself, I rushed into the room and slammed the door shut behind me. My fingers scrambled for the lock. Click. I tested the handle. Locked. Solid. I shoved against the door just to be sure, and it didn't budge. Only then did I breathe—just a little.

Setting my bags in the corner, I looked around. The curtains were open. A single lamp in the corner gave off a soft, amber glow, casting shadows across the wooden walls. Snowflakes smacked against the glass, bright white against the black outside.

Jesus. My chest still heaved, heart punching at my ribs. I tried to calm down, to catch up with my own thoughts. Everything that could've gone wrong... had. How the hell had I ended up here? Alone, in the middle of nowhere, with a man whose name I didn't even know? He'd asked how I knew Marvin wasn't a killer. But how did I know he wasn't?

A house in the middle of nowhere. No neighbors. No barn. No animals. Just silence and shadows. And that smile—too calm. That comment about art still echoed in the back of my head. Too late to take anything back. The bed was made up with a thick, old-fashioned quilt. It reminded me of the Amish communities a few hours from where I'd grown up back east. Worn fabric, muted tones. It looked handmade. For a second, a ghost of a smile pulled at my lips. As much as I hated that place, there were still a few memories I didn't resent. A few soft ones.

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I didn't want to leave this room. Not even for the bathroom. If I had to hold it all night, I would. I stripped off my coat and damp jeans, then slid into the bed, pulling the quilt up to my chin. The pillow was ridiculously fluffy, almost swallowing me whole. Warmth slowly seeped into my limbs, but it didn't ease the knot in my gut.

Exposed wooden beams stretched across the ceiling. A plain dresser stood in the corner. No photos. No personal touches. Just... furniture. The living room had been arranged like someone wanted to impress a guest. But this room? It felt like it existed for one reason—to house someone you didn't plan to keep. My eyelids started to droop. I tried to keep them open, to listen for footsteps, breathing, anything out of place— But I was so damn tired. I'd figure out who he really was—and what happened to Marvin—in the morning. If there was one.

Chapter Nine

The knock shattered something I hadn't realized I'd been holding still. I'd figured the bus wouldn't be able to make it out here today with the blizzard and all. I'd given up my preparations, fully prepared to have to have a word with Harry and find out when he could figure out another plan.

I stood in the center of my living room, half-dressed, heart a little too steady. I'd spent weeks—months—fine-tuning every invisible string. After I'd heard about the blizzard I'd planned for two more days. Forty-six more hours. Enough time to bleach the floor joists in the basement, dispose of the sculpture that wouldn't dry right, clear out the blood shadows on the porch.

But then she knocked. I didn't move. Not at first. Not until the second knock

came—sharper, less polite. That was the moment I knew Harry had followed through. He brought me someone. But I hadn't expected her. Not a name I recognized. Not a face I'd studied. Just... her. Unvetted. Uncurated. Wild. Blue lips, ruined shoes, hair whipped up like a storm cloud had dragged her here by the scalp.

And those eyes. Startled, yes. But not empty. No, there was something moving behind them—like a question trying to form teeth. I opened the door and said the first thing that came to mind, cold and jagged, “Exactly what in the damn hell is a woman doing standing on my goddamn porch in the middle of the night?” The words weren't shock. They were control. I needed the upper hand, needed her to feel disoriented. I was disoriented.

She didn't answer. Not right away. And that silence... it unspooled something in me I hadn't planned for. Curiosity. Hunger. Not the kind I was used to—no, this was different. She wasn't a victim. She wasn't screaming or sobbing or pleading. She was confused. Searching. I slammed the door—not to end it. To reset the tone.

Let her knock again. Let her fight back. When she called me Marvin, I almost smiled. Not because it was funny. But because it meant she had no idea where she was. No idea who I was. She'd been left here by a man she trusted to get her safely to her future. And I was not her future. Not yet.

She gave me a name. Marvin. That told me everything I needed. She thought this place was meant for her. And somehow, some broken part of her wanted this place. This life. This isolation. I gave her the devil's choice. She chose me. Didn't know it—but she did.

And I wasn't ready for that. Not really. But when she stepped inside, and the wind caught her scent—snow and warmth and fear—I knew one thing for certain: Harry had brought me a gift I didn't deserve. And I would never let it go. Not because I was grateful. Because I was starving. And she was mine.

Chapter Ten

I woke up to the sun burning through my eyelids. For a minute—half a second maybe—I forgot where I was. Then it all came rushing back like a freight train slamming into my chest. The cold. The strange man. The knock. The heat of his eyes when he looked at me like I was some kind of puzzle he wanted to pull apart with his teeth.

Shit. I cracked my eyes open against the glare. The curtains were still wide open. Great. Rookie mistake. It had to be past 7 a.m., and the whole room looked like it had been dipped in gold and thrown into a fire. My head ached. My body felt like it had been poured out of a blender and left to congeal. I never woke up this early. I hated waking up this early. Back home, I was a 10 a.m.-with-three-snoozes kind of girl. But this wasn't home.

And this sure as hell wasn't Marvin's ranch. I sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from my face. A knot twisted in my stomach as last night replayed in slow motion—the wrong name, the wrong man, the wrong everything. A stranger had opened that door. Not the man from the ad. Not the man I'd imagined spending time with. No. This one had eyes like a trap and a voice that curled like smoke under my skin.

And now I had to pee. I cracked open the door, praying to any god who might still be paying attention that he was still asleep. He wasn't. The scent hit me first—warm, thick, and sweet. Maple, maybe. Or cinnamon. Something homemade and dangerous. The kind of smell that made your brain forget everything else except the need to follow it.

I crept down the hall like a raccoon raiding a trash can, every creak of the old wood floor an accusation. I made it to the bathroom, took care of business, then—like an idiot—didn't go back to my room. Curiosity was a bitch. His door was wide open. That surprised me. I hesitated in the doorway, peeking in like a thief casing a jewelry

store. Everything inside was dark and masculine—wood tones and leather, brass fixtures that gleamed like they'd been polished recently.

His bed was covered in something that looked like an animal pelt. Real fur. Not decorative. Not subtle. The kind of bedspread that said don't touch anything unless you're ready to bleed. And then I saw the wall. At first, I thought it was some kind of rustic decor—a weird nod to cowboy masculinity or whatever. But the longer I looked, the weirder it got. A paddle. Thick leather straps. Rope. A cane. Handcuffs. Something purple I couldn't quite identify.

I'd read about things like this. Late at night. Kindle brightness turned all the way down. Stories that walked a tightrope between fantasy and fear. But this wasn't fiction. It was real. He was real. Maybe he was a cop, I thought, absurdly. Or a park ranger? Something with authority. Something that might explain the cuffs. But it didn't explain the rope. Or the look in his eyes when he first opened the door last night.

I took another step in before my common sense could strangle me. The bedside table. Just one drawer. I shouldn't have opened it. I did. Notebook. Pen. Wallet. I reached for the wallet with shaking fingers, some part of me desperate to put a name to the danger I'd stumbled into. Then the sound hit me—clear and sharp.

A throat clearing. I jerked back like I'd been slapped, my heart trying to crawl up my throat. My foot caught the edge of the rug, and I went down hard, landing on my ass with a grunt. My gaze crawled upward—floor, socks, denim, torso—until it met his eyes. Green.. Glinting. Amused. Caught. I was so utterly, terrifyingly caught.

He grinned down at me, wolfish and amused. “Up to mischief, were you, little girl?”

My mouth opened but no words came out. “Um... uh... um...”

“Surely, you realize you have no way out of this, yes?” he murmured. “Caught you red-handed, young lady.”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” I snapped, too quickly, too defensively.

His laughter—rich and sharp—bounced around the room like it had teeth. “Oh? That’s what you were doing? Nothing at all?”

“Exactly. Nothing.” I scrambled to my feet, hoping my indignation could hide the tremble in my legs. I tried to shove past him, but his hand closed around my arm. Not painfully. Just enough to stop me. My breath caught.

I glared up at him, heat rushing to my face. “Let me fucking go. Now.”

His smile didn’t falter. “Nah, I don’t think I will,” he said, voice smooth as sin. “I took the time to cook you something real nice for breakfast. Meanwhile, you were up here snooping through my private things like a nosy little brat.”

I swallowed hard. The air between us shifted, thickened.

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“Guess I’ll have to keep that door locked up nice and tight from now on,” he went on. “Since you can’t seem to respect a man’s privacy. Come along. I didn’t cook breakfast for it to sit down there and get cold.”

I froze. “Too bad,” I muttered under my breath. “I didn’t ask you to cook anything for me. And I’m not going anywhere with you.”

His expression darkened. Not angry, just... colder. Controlled.

“You’ll speak loud enough for me to hear you,” he said, his grip still firm on my arm. “And actually, you are going somewhere. You’re in my house. You’re going to my kitchen. You’re going to sit down and eat the breakfast I made for you.”

He leaned in slightly, just enough to let the weight of his voice settle against my spine. “Frankly, it seems to me like you’re going a lot of places with me.”

“That wasn’t a question,” I muttered, jerking my arm back.

“Go eat.” His tone dropped. Steel wrapped in velvet. Not angry. Just final.

And I—God help me—I went. Not because I wanted to. Because I didn’t know what would happen if I didn’t. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice screamed at me to run, to climb out the nearest window, to break something if I had to. But another voice—quieter, more dangerous—reminded me that I had been in his room. I had crossed a line.

Maybe I deserved this. Maybe I should stop acting like such an ungrateful little bitch.

He had taken me in, hadn't he? He hadn't locked me up or tied me down. Yet. And here I was, playing detective like I had any idea what the hell I was doing. So I did what I was taught to do. I smiled. Or something close to it. My lips were dry, cracked from the wind last night, and the stretch hurt. But I did it anyway, just to show him I wasn't afraid. Or maybe to hide that I was.

He gave a small nod. "Go on then. I gotta lock up my bedroom."

The shame burned hotter than the coffee I suddenly craved. He hadn't been kidding about locking the door. Of course he hadn't. He didn't strike me as the joking type. I drifted toward the kitchen, slow and heavy like I was walking through a dream I couldn't wake from. The smell hit me again the closer I got—sweet and warm and stupidly nostalgic. Pancakes. Real ones. Sausage. Eggs. A thick cloud of maple syrup curled in the air, and my stomach growled in betrayal.

My mouth watered the second I stepped into the kitchen. God—it smelled divine. Like real food. Not gas station snacks or boxed noodles. Buthome. When was the last time I'd been this close to a proper meal? Years, probably. Longer, if I was honest with myself. I paused at the table, eyeing the two place settings—one laid out with a proper plate, folded napkin, and a glass of orange juice still beading with condensation. The other was messier. A stainless-steel plate with a folded newspaper beside it, like he hadn't even considered sitting across from me.

So I took the nice one. The guest's spot. It had to be mine. I sat down, slow, still uncertain, then reached for the tongs. The pancakes were thick and golden, the sausage still steaming. I piled a little of everything onto my plate, drizzled syrup over it all, and took the first bite. Sweet. Soft. Almost too much to bear.

I closed my eyes as the flavor hit, and for one surreal second, I could've wept. Something about it cracked through the tension in my chest like sunlight through ice. I didn't hear him come in. But I felt it. That same strange buzz along my skin I'd felt

last night—like my body sensed something my mind hadn't caught up to yet. I didn't turn. I just knew he was there. Watching.

He moved quietly, sat across from me in the other chair like he had every right to, and when I finally looked up, his eyes were already on my plate—half empty.

“Taste okay?” he asked, casual, like we were two normal people having breakfast together and not... whatever the hell this was. My face heated. I'd inhaled it like a starving woman. Not exactly the image of grace. He smiled and winked at me. That damn wink again.

It landed somewhere between charming and unsettling, like everything else about him.

“It's really good,” I said, reaching for another bite. “It's been a while since I had a decent home-cooked meal.”

He nodded slowly. “Don't cook?”

“Not much sense in cooking for just myself.”

“Right,” he said. “What about Marvin? You planning on cooking for him?”

I froze for half a second.

“Um... sure,” I said, carefully. “I would. For my husband, yeah. That's part of it, I guess.”

“Part of the job?” he asked, eyebrows raised as he began loading his own plate.

My stomach tensed. “I didn't mean it like that. I'm just saying—being a wife comes

with expectations. You know?”

“Hm,” he murmured. “See, I know your mail-order husband’s name. But I don’t know yours. That seems a little backwards, doesn’t it—seeing as he’s not here, and you are?”

He poured syrup over his pancakes like this was a perfectly normal conversation.

“Oh. Right. It’s—Genevieve. My friends call me Gennie,” I added, catching myself.

He tilted his head. “Nice to meet you, Gennie.”

“You’re not my friend.”

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That came out sharper than I intended. But I didn't take it back.

He just smiled, slow and knowing. "No? You're in my home. At my discretion. That makes me your friend. At least... temporarily."

My pulse skipped. There was amusement in his voice, but something underneath it too. Something steel-edged.

"I—I guess that makes sense," I said, forcing my tone to soften. "I do appreciate the breakfast. It's... really good. Yummy." I tried to smile, eyes flicking over him like I could make sense of him if I just looked hard enough. But I couldn't. And that was starting to scare me. He wore a dark gray long-sleeved shirt stretched tight across his shoulders, sleeves pushed up just enough to expose the veins in his forearms. There was more stubble on his jaw than yesterday, like a few days' worth. He looked... unbothered. Like I wasn't a stranger sitting at his table. Like this was routine.

"What's your name?" I asked, trying to make it sound casual.

"Atticus." He said it around a mouthful of eggs, like the question was as ordinary as asking for the time.

Atticus. The name sat heavy in my head. Not familiar, not really—but sharp. Like something from a story I couldn't place. I took a sip of my orange juice, buying myself a second. What was I even supposed to say next? Thanks for the pancakes, by the way—why do you have a paddle and rope hanging on your wall?

My throat tightened. Would bringing up Marvin help—or make things worse? I said

nothing. Just sat there watching him chew, waiting for my brain to catch up with my mouth.

“Cat got your tongue?” His eyes flicked up to mine, unreadable. “Or is the name Atticus somehow triggering for you?” He said it too casually. But the way he looked at me made me feel like he wasn’t just guessing. Like he was watching the way I reacted—tracking it.

I forced a small shrug. “Just... not sure what to say next.”

“Well,” he said, pausing for another bite, “what would you like to say next?”

I hesitated, then went with the simplest truth I had: “Where am I?”

“You’re in South Dakota,” he said. “Where were you headed?”

“South Dakota,” I repeated slowly.

He chuckled. “We’ve been over that, haven’t we? You were on your way to meet a husband. Marvin, right?” He leaned back a little. “Well, I don’t know anyone named Marvin around here.”

My stomach turned. “He owns a big ranch,” I offered, unsure why I felt like I had to defend the story. “No wife. No family. He sells horses—lots of them.”

Atticus tilted his head. “Gennie girl, I know every man within 300 miles of me. There’s no Marvin.”

My heart stuttered. “Maybe he goes by something else?” I asked, a whisper of hope in my voice.

He didn't even hesitate. "Doubtful. Did he give you an address?"

"It was on my bus ticket."

That made him pause. "Bus ticket?" One eyebrow lifted.

"Yeah... the driver said the snow made it too dangerous to go further. He dropped me off way back and told me to follow the stakes through the woods." Atticus laughed, loud and sudden. "No shit. My driveway's not built for that kind of crap. What the hell were they thinking, dropping a little thing like you in the snow like that? Lazy, useless bastards."

I blinked, caught off guard by how fast his anger came—directed outward, but hot and sharp. He kept shaking his head, muttering. "I was wondering how you ended up out here, but you looked so damn spooked last night, I figured I'd let you get your bearings before asking."

"They told me the stakes would lead straight to Marvin's ranch," I murmured.

"Well, they were wrong," he said flatly. "Those stupid fucks probably didn't even know where they were. You still have that ticket?"

I nodded slowly.

"Good. Lemme see it. I can at least tell you where youweresupposed to end up."

I nodded, pulse quickening. "It's upstairs. In my bag."

He gestured casually toward the living room. "Run along and grab it. I'll toss the dishes in the sink. We can talk on the couch."

His plate clanged against metal as he stood, moving with a kind of unhurried confidence that made the room feel smaller. I left the kitchen in a rush, adrenaline already churning. Maybe he really could help me get to Marvin. Maybe this was all just a huge misunderstanding. He'd been kind this morning—strangely kind. He'd made breakfast, even smiled at me. His name was Atticus. A beautiful, unexpected name to match a man like him. Severe and magnetic. Dangerous-looking, but civilized.

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I dug through my bag, fingers closing around the folded bus ticket. As I made my way back down the hall, the living room came into view, quiet and sunlit. I sank into the couch, the cushions soft enough to swallow me whole. It felt like the first truly comfortable thing I'd touched in days. Atticus entered with calm, clean efficiency and sat across from me, his frame relaxed but alert. When I handed him the ticket, he took it with a faint smile, his fingers brushing mine.

He glanced over the text and gave a low chuckle.

My spine straightened. "What's so funny?"

He didn't look up. "You're on the wrong end of the state, Gennie girl."

A chill passed through me. "What?"

"You were supposed to be dropped near the Montana border—upstate South Dakota. Instead, you're sitting a few hundred miles east, just shy of Minnesota."

His tone was clinical, indifferent. Like we were discussing groceries.

My stomach dropped. "So I'm not even close to Marvin?"

"No," he said simply.

Tears welled without warning. I was suddenly aware of how silent the world was outside these walls—how vast and blank everything had felt when I trudged through the snow. It wasn't just that I was lost. It was that I was alone, with no one coming to

find me. A sob escaped my throat. I didn't mean for it to. One tear slipped down, then another, hot and fast. Atticus watched me for a second before reaching beneath the coffee table and retrieving a box of tissues. He extended it without ceremony.

"For the mess you're making on your face."

My jaw clenched. I snatched a tissue from the box, glaring through the burn in my eyes. "What kind of mess do you think I'm making?"

He smirked, slow and amused. "Looks like crying to me. Figured I'd be polite."

"Thanks," I muttered, voice thick.

"Well," he said, settling back against the cushions, "you're in quite the predicament, huh?"

I stared at the floor, more tears spilling before I could stop them. What am I going to do now?

"Yeah," I whispered. "I guess I am."

He leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees. "You're not going anywhere today. Or tomorrow. Maybe not even next week."

I looked up sharply. "Excuse me?"

"No need to get hysterical." His voice stayed maddeningly level. "I told you already—you're too delicate to turn into art. So relax."

My heart slammed in my chest.

“The snow’s too deep,” he added, gesturing toward the window. “My truck’s not making it out of here until it melts. Might take a week. Maybe a month. Welcome to South Dakota.”

I couldn’t stop trembling. Every word out of his mouth twisted the situation further, like a knot tightening around my ribs. My voice barely made it past my throat. “What am I supposed to do now?”

Atticus studied me, and—for once—something almost like sympathy crossed his face.

“Hey. You’re warm,” he said quietly. “You’re safe. Ish, anyway.” He smiled like that made it better. “At least you’re not going to freeze to death. And I already told you—I have no intention of turning you into art. So just... try to breathe, Gennie. Make the best of it. When the snow clears, if you still want to leave, I won’t stop you.”

I let out a bitter laugh, sharp and broken. “Of course I’ll want to leave. What in the actual fuck is your problem?”

His eyes lit with something unreadable. “We’ll see.”

“I. Want. To. Go. To. Marvin.” I spit the words slowly, deliberately, as if that would anchor reality. But nothing in this house felt stable. I didn’t think NOT going to Marvin would even be an option, but now I was having to spell it out in black and white for this psychotic guy.

Atticus’s smile didn’t falter. In fact, it softened.

“If—and that’s abigif, Gennie girl—youstillfeel that way when the snow melts, I’ll drive you to Marvin myself.” He tilted his head. “That said... I’d probably turn

Marvin into art if I saw him. So maybe it's best if we wait to revisit that plan next month."

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I froze. “What is this ‘art’ you keep talking about?”

I understood the words. But not the meaning. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to, but I couldn’t stop the words from falling from my lips anyway.

He answered like I’d asked him what day it was. “My art. My special art.”

That clarified nothing. I blinked. “Oh, wow. Thank you. That cleared everything right up.”

His grin spread wider. “If you’d start paying attention, you’d see it. It’s all around you.”

He gestured to a piece on the coffee table—something I’d vaguely noticed the night before but hadn’t really looked at. Now I did. I wished I hadn’t. It was a sculpture, maybe. A crude one. And it looked like it had been made entirely from... teeth. Human teeth. Some yellowed. Some cracked. One of them had a filling. I had dismissed it last night, thought my mind was playing tricks on me, but no - it was there.

My stomach flipped.

Then he nodded toward the far wall, where another piece hung that I hadn’t noticed before. It was round. Bulbous. It looked like a giant, lidless eye—and hair sprouted from it in chaotic patches. Blonde. Brown. Red. Strands twisted together like the clippings of a hundred different people’s scalps, none of them matching.

A sick wave rolled through my chest. “That’s... disturbing.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Most normal girls find it a bit off-putting. If it really bothers you, I can move it to the outbuilding.”

I stared at him, stunned. “Why would I care what you keep in your house?”

He shrugged, slow and smooth. “Maybe it’ll be your house too. That is... if you decide not to leave.”

My mouth went dry. “Why would I ever stay here?” Fear turned my stomach into a rolling pit of bile. What had I walked into?

He tilted his head again, as if I’d asked the wrong question. “You said you were lonely, didn’t you?”

I blinked. “Yes. That’s why I answered Marvin’s ad.”

The moment stretched thin. I could feel him watching me—not just my face, but the invisible parts too. My cracks. My soft spots. He wasn’t looking at me like a man looks at a stranger. He was studying me like I was a canvas. And I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be flattered or afraid.

“Do you love Marvin?” The question came out of nowhere—sharp, unexpected. Atticus grinned as he said it, that crooked smile sparking something wicked behind his eyes, like he already knew my answer.

I blinked at him. “Of course not. I’ve never even met him.”

I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to explain, but I did. “I mean... I guess I feel kind of fondly toward him? I liked the letters. I liked the idea. But love is a strong word.”

I tilted my head. “Why does it matter?”

Atticus leaned back, all relaxed confidence. “Well, if it’s not love, and it’s just loneliness... I might know where you could find a man. Sexy. Serious about commitment.” He paused, eyes gleaming. “And not interested in turning you into art.”

My stomach twisted. “Your obsession with that word—‘art’—is terrifying.”

He smiled wider. “Aww. Thank you, Gennie girl.”

The words made me freeze. “What?”

“Thank you,” he repeated. “That was a very kind compliment.”

I stared at him, stunned. “It wasn’t a compliment.”

He shrugged, unbothered. “Still. I appreciate it.”

I wanted to scream. “I’m not staying here. The second I can get out, I’m going to Marvin.” Heaven above, help me get away from this crazy man.

There was no wobble in my voice. I made sure of that. I wasn’t about to let him think I was a helpless, wandering girl with nowhere else to go. Some part of me thought maybe he might like that a little too much. I should’ve never told him I was lonely, what had I been thinking?

He nodded, all calm, like I’d just told him I didn’t want sugar in my tea. “Fair enough. But if you change your mind...” His voice dipped lower. “You just let me know.”

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His eyes darkened, so much deeper than before—like water just before it swallows you. A jolt of hot panic flared in my chest. How dare he speak to me like I might ever want to stay here?

“I won’t,” I snapped. “I won’t change my mind.”

He clapped his hands together once, casual as anything. “Alrighty then. I’m heading out to the workshop. Feel free to watch TV, do laundry, nap, whatever makes you feel at home.”

Then he stood, pulled on his coat, and was gone—just like that. A gust of cold air followed him in, then the door slammed shut behind him with a final, echoing thud. I sat frozen. What just happened? It wasn’t just a case of being lost. Or snowed in. Or dropped at the wrong ranch. This was the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong man. And I had no idea what to do.

Tears slipped down my cheeks before I could stop them, soaking silently into the front of my shirt. I wiped them away quickly, like someone might be watching. He could be watching. I was alone. Trapped. Powerless. And I knew, with a certainty that settled deep into my bones, that if he wanted to kill me—no one would ever find me. No one would even know I was missing.

My eyes drifted back to the coffee table. There was something draped across the wood—a piece of pale leather, smooth, pinkish. Too smooth. My throat tightened. The more I looked at it, the more it looked like skin. Human skin. Or, God help me, something designed to look exactly like it. My stomach lurched. Acid crept up the back of my throat, hot and bitter. I swallowed hard, forcing it down, shaking so badly

I thought my bones might rattle loose from each other.

Atticus had called it art. I wasn't sure if that made it better or worse. I bolted for the bathroom.

The second the door shut behind me, I braced my hands on the sink, lungs heaving, bile already climbing up my throat. My stomach twisted with so much force it felt like it was trying to claw its way out. Is that what he meant? Too pretty to make into art. Not too human. Not too real. Just... too pretty. Too pretty to become a lampshade? Or a skin-wrapped coffee table?

The thought struck like lightning—violent, absurd, and all too possible. My mind fought it off with denial, the way someone might kick at a door in a fire, desperate to get out. You're spiraling. You've watched too many horror films. Read too many books. Let your imagination win. He could've hurt you. Last night. This morning. But he didn't.

So stop. Breathe. Think. Get. A. Grip. I stared into the mirror. My reflection didn't look like me anymore—too pale, too wide-eyed. My mouth moved like it was trying to say something to me, some mantra to bring me back. Right. When life throws you lemons, make lemonade.

Some ridiculous quote from a poster in a guidance counselor's office. But I clung to it like a lifeline. I splashed water on my face, grounding myself to the moment. Cold, sharp. Real. Then I stepped out of the bathroom, legs shaky but functional, and made my way back to the bedroom. I shut the door behind me. Bolted it. Only then did I really exhale.

The silence in the room felt thick. Like it was watching me. I lowered myself to the edge of the bed and pressed both hands to my knees, steadying myself. You're okay. Just until the snow melts. Just until you can leave. Right. Make lemonade.

I nodded once, more for the act of it than the meaning, and reached for my sweatshirt. The soft fleece brushed against my arms as I pulled it on, and for a brief second, it helped. Not warmth exactly, but weight. Pressure. Like armor for the skin. Maybe if I wrapped myself in comfort, I could buffer the edges of reality a little longer.

Chapter Eleven

The cabin was mine—every inch of it. I didn't stumble across it, didn't kill for it. I built it. Board by board. Beam by beam. From the concrete footers to the last pane of hand-blown glass in the back room window. Not because I had to—but because I needed it to be mine. Pure. Unsullied by any other man's hands or history. No fingerprints here but mine.

It stood three hours from the nearest town, surrounded by miles of indifferent pine and prairie, designed for the kind of privacy no nosy neighbor would ever interrupt. I even engineered the land around it—rearranged small ridgelines, cut trails to confuse satellite detection, repurposed a dry creek into something else entirely. Something useful.

The winters were brutal, yes. But the snow made good insulation for the crawlspace. And preservation was easier when the ground was already cold. I'd left the city years ago. Too many clues. Too many patterns. My art, as they called it, had gotten recognizable. They'd started to see the meaning behind the pieces—the symmetry, the choices. The deeper narrative beneath the flesh and pigment.

It was flattering, really. Even the feds had taken notice. Gave me some asinine alias like "John Freeman." As if I was some drifter, some wandering nobody. They plastered it across their wanted lists with a composite sketch that looked like it was drawn by a blind chimp. But I wasn't hiding. I was evolving.

They didn't know about the eight pieces I left behind in the city. And they'd never

know about the twenty-seven buried in the fields behind my cabin. Twenty-seven studies in form and silence. I built this place with the knowledge that some canvases might one day scream. They never did. I watched the coverage sometimes—late at night, with the fire low and the air still. Thereporters called me a ghost. A phantom. They marveled at how I'd vanished so completely. What they didn't understand was that I hadn't disappeared at all.

I'd transformed. Out here, I could work. Not just create—refine. My medium required patience. There were rules to keep the rot at bay, to prepare the skin, to preserve the integrity of emotion in tissue. You couldn't rush it. There's a rhythm to breaking a human down the right way. A sequence.

Of course, I kept some pieces closer. A leather-bound journal, its cover unnaturally smooth. A chandelier in one room was threaded with braids of human hair—red, black, blonde—looped like garland. It creaked when the wind howled. Sometimes it whispered. Or maybe that was just in my head. Either way, it calmed me. And then there was her.

This new girl... Gennie. She didn't scream, didn't fight like the others. There was steel under the softness, fear laced with curiosity. Like she wanted to understand me, or at least like she wasn't scared of me. It fascinated me. Disturbed me.

She asked questions with her eyes, and every time I didn't answer, it made her ask better ones. I could feel something crawling under my skin when she looked at me that way. Something ancient. Somethingmine.

She didn't know it yet, but this place was already hers too. I'd been changing the interior slowly. Removing sharp edges. Leaving books I thought might provoke her. Arranging the furniture for two instead of one. She hadn't noticed yet, but that was okay. She would. They always did—eventually. I took a slow breath, letting the air freeze my lungs, ground me in the moment. There was time. The storm would keep

her here long enough. Long enough to reshape her. To test her limits. To unravel the morality she clung to like a threadbare quilt.

And when she broke—when, not if—I'd be there to pick up the pieces. And use them.

The round trip to town was a pain in the ass—six hours, easy—but necessary. Inconvenient, sure. But it kept me safe. Isolation was the best security system money—or blood—could buy. I used to have more... options. Back in the city, if I needed to blow off steam, there were clubs. Places where I could take a willing woman into a soundproof room and ruin her in ways she'd crave for weeks. No need for pretense. Just ropes. Control. Sweat. Catharsis.

Out here, there was no such luxury. Just me and the walls I built. L was my temporary fix. A three-hour drive from the next state, she'd come when I called, let me tie her down, bruise her just right, then disappear before sunrise. No strings, no questions. But even at her best, she never ignited that thing in me. That raw, burning thing I couldn't name. And then came Gennie.

She wasn't supposed to be here. Just showed up on my porch like a gift I hadn't earned. Wind tearing at her hair, snow clinging to her lashes, and those impossibly blue eyes looking at me like she was praying I wouldn't eat her alive. I'd never forget it. That image was carved into the back of my skull. I should've just let her go. Everything felt different from the moment I saw her.

Instead, I'm here... thinking about the curve of her mouth when she lies, the flush that creeps up her neck when I get too close. She doesn't know what a Dominant is—hell, she probably blushes during sex ed videos. But there's something about the way she flinches, the way she holds her breath when she's near me. It sets me on fire. She thinks she's running to Marvin. Thinks that stupid cowboy will save her. Cute.

She doesn't see it yet, but I'm already under her skin. She just needs a bit of time, and

then she will feel the aching burn too. I don't know what to do with the way I feel—obsessive, possessive. I usually only feel this way about my art, and the intensity of these feelings sets me on edge.

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I could give her everything—worship her in all the ways that count and break her in all the ways that matter. I've never needed to turn anyone into art unless they made me, unless they fought me when the time came. But even then... I think I'd hesitate with her.

That's the problem. She's different. She's the only girl I've ever wanted to keep whole—well, mostly whole. I sat down at the desk I'd built with my own hands, the same hands I used to bind, brand, and bleed. My fingers itched for action, for her. I needed a plan. The storm wouldn't last forever. When the snow melted, she'd try to run. I couldn't let her.

She was lonely enough to marry a stranger off some ad from a newspaper. That kind of need? That was gold. I could feed that, shape it, turn it toward me. If she needed to be wanted, I'd make sure she never doubted how much I wanted her—how badly, how brutally. I wanted to possess every inch of her, to own her mind, body, and soul.

She wasn't leaving. No, she'd stay because I'd rebuild her. Every word, every glance, every touch—I'd layer meaning into her bones until she couldn't tell where she ended and I began. She'd flinch at my footsteps and still crawl to me. I'd destroy every lie she told herself about love and replace it with my own twisted version of devotion.

I'd make her mine in every fucking sense of the word.

A low groan tore from my throat as the pressure between my legs grew unbearable. I pushed back from the desk, unzipping my jeans with slow, deliberate fingers. My cock throbbed as I wrapped my hand around it, imagining her tied to my headboard, her wrists bound with my leather restraints, red lines kissing her skin where the

leather bit into her flesh. But that wasn't all. I imagined the glint of my blade, the sharp sting of the cut, the slow trickle of blood as I traced patterns on her skin, marking her as mine forever.

Her breath would be shallow, her eyes glassy with a mix of need, terror, and pain. The perfect storm of emotions that I craved.

"Please, Atticus," she'd whimper, her voice a desperate plea. "Please let me go."

But she wouldn't mean it. And I wouldn't listen. I'd lean down, my breath hot on her ear, and whisper, "You want this, Gennie. You want me to take you, to own you, to make you mine forever. You want the pain, the pleasure, the chaos that only I can give you."

I'd trail kisses down her neck, biting and sucking until I marked her, claimed her as mine. My free hand would roam her body, squeezing, pinching, leaving bruises that would bloom like dark flowers on her pale skin. I'd tease her, bring her to the edge of orgasm and then pull back, making her beg for release.

"I'll never let you go, Gennie," I'd growl, my voice a dangerous promise. "You're mine now. Forever. Every scar, every cut, every mark on your body will be a testament to our love, to the darkness that binds us together."

The thought of her struggling, of her trying to fight me even as her body responded to my touch, sent a wave of pure, unadulterated need coursing through me. I wanted to break her, to mold her into the perfect partner for my dark soul. And I would. No matter what it took.

I had a plan now, a purpose. And Gennie, with her trusting eyes and innocent heart, would be the center of it all. I would make her love me, fear me, need me. And in the end, she would be mine completely, a work of art that no one could ever take away,

but I'd need to go about it smart. So, she thought it was her idea.

I smeared pre-cum across my skin with slow, deliberate strokes, my breath catching on the edge of a groan. Her voice echoed in my mind, trembling and soft—please, let me go... please let me go back to Marvin. I pictured her lips quivering, body taut with resistance... until it wasn't.

Until it trembled for me. She wouldn't know which way was up by the time I was done. I'd teach her how to unravel at my touch, how to ache for me even as her lips formed the word no. She'd come for me, again and again, her thighs slick, her cries turning from protest into pleas—please, Master, more. That was the real her. Buried. Dormant. Waiting for someone like me to dig it out.

Thick, hot ribbons spilled across my thighs as I growled through clenched teeth. The aftermath was sharp. Hollow. I grabbed a tissue from the corner of my desk and wiped myself clean, the act more clinical than remorseful.

I had to play the long game, build trust, cloak the predator in warmth. If she didn't have dark desires buried somewhere in that beautiful head, I'd plant them myself. I debated going inside, just to get another look at her, maybe brush her with one of those accidental touches she blushed over. But no—better to stay patient. Better to plot. If I moved too soon, I might startle her.

And I wasn't ready to break the spell yet. The lock on her door? Decorative at best. I'd designed it that way. This house was mine, every inch of it. Built by my hands. Reinforced with precision. I'd stripped the guest room of anything that could be used against me—the windows sealed, the hinges custom. No drawer handles. No scissors. No matches. Bare bones.

Only what I wanted her to have. The rest of the house was my sanctuary. Leather straps, preserved skins, and the stretched hides of those who came before her adorned

the walls—transformed by my blade, my vision, into masterpieces. My kingdom of cruelty. My cathedral. And Gennie... she'd be the crown jewel.

I'd test her tonight. See how close I could get before she squirmed. I'd butter her up over supper, let her feel safe, warm, even seen. Then I'd strike. Not hard. Just enough to shake her cage. The black mamba. Coiled. Patient. Lethal. Until then, there was work to be done. I picked up my blade—its handle worn smooth from years of devotion—and returned to scraping the new hide on my table. Fresh. Soft. Feminine.

I smiled as I imagined Gennie kneeling at my feet, eyes wet, lips parted in confusion and need. I'd make her my naughty little princess. Slowly. Methodically. Completely. And when I broke her? It would beart. My fingers flexed around the blade. My chest rose with anticipation. Soon. She'll be mine. And she'll beg for it.

Chapter Twelve

I woke with my sweatshirt tangled around my arms like restraints. It twisted up under my chest, clinging to my skin with the subtle aggression of something that was supposed to comfort me—but mostly just felt suffocating. I tugged it back into place and stared at the ceiling, blinking against the dim, unfamiliar light. Great. Not even fully awake and I already felt like I was losing my mind. Again. My entire life had become a contradiction.

Safe, but not. Sheltered, but entirely exposed. And that man downstairs? That strange, magnetic, terrifying man? He wasn't helping. There was crazy. Then there was crazy psychotic. And I was starting to worry I'd landed in the second category—eyes wide open, heart racing, pretending I wasn't slowly unraveling at the edges.

Everything about Atticus felt like a trap designed by someone too smart for me to outthink. Not outright violent. Not overtly cruel. But something was... wrong. Off. Wrong in a way that felt intelligent. Curated. Like walking into a beautifully

decorated room and slowly realizing everything in it was made of bone. Which I had actually done. That tension had started the moment I stepped through the front door. It hadn't left me since.

Still, I was here, wasn't I? Breathing. Free to move around—mostly. Not locked in a basement. Not tied to a chair. So why did my gut continue to scream that something wasn't right?

I crossed to the window and peeked outside. It was darker than I expected. The kind of thick, wintry dark that didn't just sit over the land but pressed into it. There was no sun to find. No warmth. No glow. Just shadowed outlines of skeletal trees and a quiet that didn't feel peaceful—it felt watchful. I really wished I had a phone that worked out here. My bars had been missing since I got on the bus.

I didn't really want to call anyone. There was no one to call but Maddie, and hell she'd go even more crazy than I felt. Nah, there was just something about the glow of a screen, the way it ticked time forward in neat, manageable numbers. It would've been nice to know if it was five or six or maybe even later. My stomach gave a low growl, and I realized with a bit of shock that I was starving.

I glanced at the door, then back toward the stairs. Would he care if I made myself something to eat? Would it piss him off? Or maybe—just maybe—it would make me seem more useful. Like a guest. Not... whatever I actually was. If I cooked for him too, maybe it would soften something in him. Maybe it would keep me safe from whatever kind of notions he cooked up while he was out in his workshop, unease skittered across my spine. It had been dark, and true – there was a blizzard but I hadn't seen any other buildings when I came in..

I padded down to the kitchen, quietly opening drawers and cabinets like I was searching through someone else's memories. I tried not to look too long at anything—afraid of what I'd find. The pantry surprised me. It was full. Not just

stocked, but curated. Rows of jars, tins, and bulk goods. Flour. Sugar. Dried beans. More than enough for one person. Enough for two. Enough for ten. That should've made me feel comforted. It didn't. It felt... calculated. Like he'd planned for this. For someone. For me? For someone he kidnapped?

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I pushed the thought away, focusing on pulling together something edible. Soup. Maybe grilled cheese. Something easy. Familiar. Normal. That's what I needed. Normal. I was allowing myself to get all hyped up over some unease, and anxiety. That's all it was and I needed to get a grip.

But as I set the pot on the stove and reached for the butter, my thoughts drifted—uninvited and insistent—back to his bedroom. That door had been locked tight earlier. I hadn't meant to open it, but I had. And what I saw on the walls had made my stomach drop and my thighs clench at the same time. Straps. Hooks. Implements I couldn't name but recognized from dark romance books I'd never dared admit to reading. Books that had filled nights with quiet heat and impossible men who looked like monsters but touched like gods.

Was that what he was? A monster who knew how to touch? I swallowed thickly, my mouth suddenly dry. I'd always wondered what it would feel like to live inside one of those stories. I didn't expect it to feel like this. Not quite fear. Not quite arousal. Something in-between. Something dangerous. Carnal, explosive, terrifying.

I flipped the batter too quickly, the bread tearing. I muttered a curse and started another batch. The last thing I wanted was to mess up his dinner. Something told me Atticus wouldn't be the kind of man who tolerated even small failures easily. And yet... part of me was trying. Still. To impress him. To please him. Like a rabbit pressing into the hand of the wolf that hadn't bitten it yet. What was wrong with me? I couldn't wait for him to take me back to the bus depot. What if he refuses?

I kept cooking, but I couldn't shake the thought. He didn't have to take me anywhere. There were no neighbors. No one to report a missing girl. And judging by the

supplies he'd stockpiled in the pantry, the man could live off-grid for months. No trips to town. No witnesses. No chances. If he decided I wasn't leaving—then I wasn't leaving. Period. The thought coiled low in my stomach, sour and sharp. Maybe I could steal his truck.

The idea came half-joking, half-desperate. Even if I tried, I'd have to wait for the snow to melt—unless I wanted to die in a ditch before I ever hit the highway. I was trapped, and I knew it. I certainly didn't know how to drive in the snow. So I did the only thing I could think to do: I played nice.

Heap coals of fire on his head, my grandma would've said. "Be so kind it kills him." Fine. I could do that. I pulled down a can of stewed beef, grabbed a couple potatoes, some carrots, an onion. That would be perfect to go with the handmade biscuits.

Stew. Hot, heavy, familiar. Something warm I could control. That would be great, just what I needed. I peeled and chopped and stirred and mixed, setting myself to the rhythm of survival. Something about cooking steadied me. Made me feel like a person again instead of just a girl lost in a house full of secrets.

By the time I slid the biscuits into the oven, I was already washing up. I needed the distraction. My mind kept drifting back to the things hanging on his walls. The sound of the locked bedroom door clicking shut behind me. The way my hands had trembled even when nothing was touching me. Then I heard it. Heavy boots stomping on the porch. The quick whoosh of the door swinging open. The cold rushed in first, like the wind itself was warning me.

Atticus stepped inside, dusted in snow like he'd just returned from somewhere mythic and dangerous. His coat was stiff, his cheeks red from the bite of wind, and those eyes—green and sharp—landed on me like I was exactly where he'd left me. Exactly where I belonged. I gave him a nervous smile, trying not to look like I'd been imagining stealing his truck fifteen minutes ago.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my voice light. “I hope you don’t mind, but I made us something to eat.”

He chuckled, deep and warm. “Mind? Why would I mind? Smells like heaven in here, little girl.”

Little girl. The words hit low in my gut and stuck. I didn’t know if it was a compliment or a warning. Maybe both. I turned off the stove and grabbed the pot of stew, my fingers careful not to tremble. “I hope you brought your appetite. It’s just stew and biscuits, but... I thought it might hit the spot.”

He took a seat, stretching out like a king returning from war. “Sounds great. Been a long time since anyone cooked for me. Feels real nice, comin’ in from the cold to find something hot waitin’ on me.” His gaze flicked up to meet mine.

I swallowed.

“I thought you said you didn’t cook much,” he added, teasing.

“Well...” I shrugged, ladling the stew into bowls. “There are two of us now. It made sense. You cooked this morning, so I figured it was my turn.”

“Fair enough,” he said, reaching for a biscuit. “I like how you think. If we take turns with the chores, it frees up time for other projects.”

I hesitated. “What kind of projects?”

He paused mid-bite. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the crackle of the wood stove.

“Oh, my art. Got a workshop out back. That’s where I keep it all. Steer clear of that

building, alright?”

My stomach dipped.

“Got it,” I said quietly. “Private property.”

He grinned—but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “All this is private property, little girl. But you’re welcome everywhere...exceptthe workshop.”

“And your bedroom,” I added before I could stop myself, trying to sound bold instead of terrified.

His eyes darkened, that grin deepening like a wolf who’d just heard his prey laugh. “You’re welcome in my bedroom too,” he said smoothly, “just not as a spy.” The look he gave me wasmolten—heated, focused, and far too knowing. And worse? My body responded to it.

No.Not like that. I could feel the pulse low in my stomach, the uncomfortable ache starting to hum. A slow slickness, embarrassing and involuntary, bloomed between my thighs—and I hated it. Hated that I could feelanythingaround him other than fear or suspicion. He was a stranger. A dangerous one. But my body didn’t seem to get the message.

It wasn’t like this had happened to me before, either. The few times I’d been turned on around real people, it had been because of some well-timed line in a good smutty book—not a man sitting across from me in flannel and menace.

Sex in real life had never felt like this. It had neversparked.Just awkward moments, fumbled touches, and disappointment. My first time was a quiet, silent letdown. No fireworks. No angels singing. Just a guy who lasted less than three minutes and never once asked me if I’d finished. I hadn’t. Ineverhad. And yet... this stranger with snow

in his hair and something dark in his voice made me feel things I couldn't explain—things I didn't want to feel. I forced myself to snap out of it, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Like I said,” I replied coolly, “welcome everywhere except your bedroom and your precious little workshop. That’s fine by me. Since those seem like the two places I’m most likely to run into you, I’ll just make an effort to avoid you entirely.” His expression didn’t change, but something shifted behind his smile.

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“I don’t know how well that’s gonna work, little girl,” he said, voice velvet-wrapped and dangerous. “You’re in my house. If I want to find you—” his gaze dragged over me like a slow burn, “—I’ll find you.”

I swallowed hard.

“Like I said,” he went on, “you’re welcome in my room. Just not to go snooping. You’ve got a question? Ask me. Don’t go digging through my things looking for answers. That’s not how you build trust.”

“I’m not trying to build trust,” I snapped. “I’m trying to survive a few weeks in a strange house with a strange man so I can get back to the man I’m actually going to marry.”

The words stung more than I meant them to. I shoved a chunk of potato into my mouth like it would soften the bite of my own voice. It didn’t. I almost choked from chewing too hard.

Atticus leaned back in his chair, completely unaffected. “You can yell at me all you want,” he drawled. “But I don’t intend to stay a stranger. And you’re not leaving here to marry anyone.”

He gestured lazily in my direction. “In fact, a piece of free advice for you: I fully intend for you not to leave at all.”

My fork clattered against the edge of my bowl. I could feel my jaw tightening again.

“You’re liable to chew straight through your lip if you keep grinding like that,” he added casually.

“I didn’t task you,” I spat.

“Nope. That’s why it was free advice.”

“I didn’t task for free advice either.”

“Exactly,” he said with a grin. “That’s why it was free.”

God, he was infuriating.

“You can say I’m staying all you want. Doesn’t make it true. In a few weeks, when the snow melts, I’m leaving. And I’m going back to Marvin. There’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

And if you refuse? I’ll take your damn truck and go without you. The thought curled behind my teeth like a secret victory. But the moment I finished speaking, his expression changed. That grin—the one that always looked a little too wolfish—spread wider, like I’d just said something very amusing to him.

“There’s nothing I can do to stop you?” he repeated slowly, savoring every syllable. “How sure are you of that, little girl?” His tone darkened. Smooth as honey. Thick with implication. And I realized too late: I’d just walked right into his game. Much like a fly responds to honey. I was trapped.

“Positive,” I said, injecting more confidence into my voice than I actually had. But the truth twisted low in my gut. If he didn’t want to take me, there was nothing I could do. Not really. I didn’t have a car. I didn’t have a phone. And the roads weren’t drivable yet. He was the only way out.

And somehow... that made something flutter beneath my skin. It was wrong. All of this was wrong. But the hint of danger, the sharp edge of the unknown—it tugged at something buried so deep inside me I hadn't even known it was there. This man was pure sin. All muscle and shadows and carefully measured menace. And the thought of touching him—of running my fingers along those thick, powerful thighs—sent a rush of heat straight through me.

No.

My thoughts were spiraling again, too fast and far too dark. I didn't even know this man. I'd spent the last twenty-four hours questioning whether he was a serial killer—and now here I was, picturing things I shouldn't be picturing. Imagining myself kneeling at his feet like some broken little puppet, mouth open, waiting for—Stop it.

I clenched my jaw, furious with myself. Get it together, Gennie. He's probably an axe murderer. He lives alone, in the middle of nowhere, with no livestock, no real reason to be this far off-grid. He makes "art," whatever that means. And you're sitting here making googly eyes like a fool with a death wish. No. This wasn't attraction. This was Stockholm-adjacent survival confusion.

I finished my dinner with as much dignity as I could muster, even though I could feel his eyes on me the entire time—those piercing, too-green eyes that made my skin feel tight. Once I'd set down my spoon, he stood, casually collecting the dishes and taking them to the sink.

Then he looked over his shoulder. "Come on."

I blinked. "Come on for what?"

I didn't know what I thought he meant—just that whatever it was, I wasn't about to

follow him blindly into anything.

He smirked. “To talk. If we’re going to be here together, might be smart to have a conversation or two.”

He dropped into a huge leather chair like it was the throne he ruled from, and I... hesitated.

But I followed. Because I had to. Because I needed more information. More context. More control. I sat on the edge of the couch, careful not to relax too much.

“So?” I asked. “What’s the topic of conversation?”

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He turned his head slowly, that same easy smile spreading across his face. It was infuriatingly self-assured. “Dangerous thing,” he said, “letting a man like me pick the topic.”

I gave a huff of disbelief. “Great. Well, let’s start there. Why do you keep calling me ‘girl’? Gennie girl. Little girl. I’m not a child. I’m a grown woman.”

He chuckled, voice low and unhurried. “It has nothing to do with your age. Or your status.”

“Then what, exactly?”

His gaze ran over me—slow, pointed, and completely unapologetic.

“It’s the innocence,” he said simply.

I nearly choked. “Innocence?” I definitely shrieked a little. It was insulting. Maddening. Wrong. But the worst part? A small, secret piece of me wanted to ask what exactly he thought made me innocent.

“You met a man through an ad. Talked to him for a bit via paper. Then hopped on a bus to marry him.” His voice dropped, eyes narrowing. “And instead of a proposal, you ended up stranded in grandmother’s cabin, deep in the woods... with the big bad wolf.” The way he said it—low and smooth, with just a trace of mockery—made my skin prickle.

I blinked at him. “Did you really just hit me with a Little Red Riding Hood reference?”

He gave a single nod, slow and deliberate.

“So, you’re the wolf,” I said. “Big teeth and all?”

The look he gave me wasn’t playful. Not really. It was... hungry. Eyes too green. Too bright. Like the kind of ocean you don’t swim in unless you’re ready to drown.

“All the better to eat you with, Gennie girl,” he murmured.

The words weren’t subtle. The way he looked at me wasn’t subtle either.

My breath snagged.

“Charming,” I said, trying to sound dry, unimpressed. Like I hadn’t just felt something coil low in my stomach. It was the lamp’s fault, I told myself. The way the light caught his hair—warm copper catching fire in the shadows. The way the lines of his arms and shoulders flexed under his shirt, tattoos winding like stories I didn’t know how to read. I shouldn’t be noticing things like that. And yet...

I dragged my eyes back up to his face.

His grin curved slow. Knowing. “You like what you see?”

I shook my head quickly, too quickly. “Just looking at your ink. Do they mean something?”

“Not really.” He leaned back, tossing his boots up on the table like he not only owned the place, but like he owned the world. “Some were done at important moments. But the designs themselves don’t mean anything.”

“Will you tell me about them?” I asked before I could stop myself.

He looked over at me, expression unreadable. “Maybe. Not tonight.”

A polite no. Or a challenge. Hard to tell with him. I let it go. For now.

“So...” I said, desperate to shift the air between us before it grew too thick to breathe. “What made you move all the way out here? South Dakota’s not exactly the center of the universe.”

He didn’t answer right away. Just sat there, tapping his thumb against the side of his chair like he was debating how much to say. “The snow,” he said finally.

I blinked. “Seriously?”

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. “Yeah. I grew up in it. Real winters. Cold that gets inside your bones and makes you feel something. Then moved south for a bit, and winter just stopped meaning anything. I missed it.”

I let out a soft exhale. “I get that,” I murmured. “I always loved how it looked in the mornings, when the sun hits it just right. It sparkles, like everything’s been dusted in glitter.”

As soon as the word *glitter* left my mouth, I cringed. But he didn’t laugh. Didn’t tease. Instead, his eyes narrowed on me—less like he was amused and more like he was cataloging something.

“That’s a beautiful way of putting it,” he said. “You notice the little things. That’s a rare quality, Bluebell.”

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I looked down, unsure what to do with the sudden warmth in his voice. He didn't let the silence linger.

"So tell me," he asked, tone quieter now, almost thoughtful. "Why'd you get on that bus?"

I glanced up, startled.

"You don't seem like the type to just... run off to some frozen corner of nowhere," he added.

"I didn't run," I said too quickly. "I had a plan."

He arched a brow, clearly unconvinced. My fingers tightened around the edge of my sleeve. "I thought I did," I admitted. "But it's hard to keep track of the map when someone else grabs the wheel."

Atticus didn't smile this time. But he did look like he knew exactly what that felt like. I wondered what parts of his life had gone so wrong that he ended up out here alone in the middle of nowhere. And felt a pang of sympathy for the man I didn't know. I leaned back into the couch, trying to put some space between us—not just physically, but mentally too. This man had a way of pulling thoughts out of me I didn't want to examine.

"I've always found nature kind of... grounding," I said. "Especially the strange parts. The quietness of snow. Spring blossoms after a brutal winter. It makes you feel like something's always coming next."

Atticus nodded, eyes on me but far away too, like he was painting something in his mind. “Mother Nature makes her own kind of art. Autumn’s the masterpiece, I think. When everything starts dying, but it still manages to be beautiful.” There was a strange kind of calm in the way he said that. Then, with no warning, he pivoted.

“So... what would Marvin expect from a wife besides cooking?” His voice dropped an octave—curious, but unmistakably suggestive. There it was again. That subtle shift. The way he seemed to always steer the conversation toward the edge of something darker. Something I wasn’t sure I wanted to admit I noticed. Or liked. Enough!

I cleared my throat. “I’m guessing a lot. The ranch isn’t small—there’s cleaning, laundry, work to be done. All kinds of things.”

He hummed. “Mm. And in the bedroom?”

I felt it then. That heavy pull in the air. Heat gathered low in my body like it had a mind of its own.

“Bedroom expectations, too,” he added, watching me too closely.

“I... yeah. Probably.”

His eyes gleamed, and something in his expression sharpened. “What do you think a man like Marvin expects in bed?”

My breath caught. A part of me wanted to laugh it off. Another part—the reckless, burning one—wanted to answer him. Stop. Don’t go there. He’s baiting you. Testing your reactions. Just like he has been since the moment you got off that bus.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, forcing my tone to stay even. “We never talked about sex.”

That seemed to catch him off guard. His eyebrow quirked up, and he looked almost like he didn't believe me.

"You didn't?"

I shook my head. "No. We talked about books. Our ideas for the future. Boring things, I guess."

A smile curled slowly across his lips. "Sounds dreamy."

"It was supposed to be," I said quietly, my voice tighter than I meant it to be. "Guess reality had other plans."

His head tilted, mouth twitching. "So now you're here instead. A pretty little lamb delivered straight to the wolf's den."

I rolled my eyes. "You and the wolf thing again."

He leaned forward slightly. "What, you don't like the imagery? Huffs. Puffs. Blows the whole thing down."

"Please," I scoffed. "I'm more poisoned apple than helpless lamb."

His grin turned devilish. "Then I guess I'll have to be the poor cursed prince. Kiss the apple. Break the spell."

Don't think about his mouth. Don't— I glanced away before he could read my face. The way he looked at me when he said things like that... it wasn't fair. It wasn't safe.

"Yeah, well," I muttered, "true love's kiss only works if you believe in love. Plus the poisoned apple puts you to sleep before you get a kiss."

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He didn't answer right away. Just smiled again—quiet, knowing. And I didn't like how unsure that silence made me feel. Or how uneasy his questioning made me.

I shook my head. "I'm no one's true love."

That should've shut the moment down, but it didn't.

Instead, his smile softened into something unreadable. "Why are you so hard on yourself?"

"I'm not." I kept my tone flat, even. "I'm just being honest. Marvin... he wanted me. That's more than most can say. With him, I'd finally belong to someone."

Atticus didn't look away. If anything, he leaned in closer. The air thickened between us.

"Does belonging matter to you, little girl?" His voice was a gravel rasp—low, intimate, a blade pressing just shy of skin.

I hesitated. Then nodded. "Yes."

That single word felt too vulnerable.

He seemed to consider it, eyes flicking over me like he was committing something to memory. Then, just as suddenly as he'd leaned in, he pulled back.

"Well," he said, straightening to stand. "I'm hitting the shower, then calling it a night."

You're welcome to hang around out here if you want."

The switch in topic landed like a slap. Cold. Abrupt. Jarring.

"Oh." I blinked, trying to catch up. "Okay."

He gave a thumbs-up like we hadn't just cracked something raw open. "Dinner was solid. Thanks for that. I'll cook breakfast tomorrow—hope you're hungry."

I gave a quiet laugh. "I think I will be."

His back was already half-turned when he said it. "Night, little girl."

And then he was gone, disappearing down the hall, leaving only the soft click of the bedroom door. I sat there, pulse pounding in my ears. Skin hot. Breath shallow. Whatever this was between us—it was dangerous. Wrong. But the big bad wolf wasn't chasing me. I was walking straight into his woods.

Chapter Thirteen

I shut the door behind me, turned the bolt with a slow, satisfying click, then leaned my weight against the frame, a sickening sense of dominance coursing through my veins. Control. Always fucking control.

I breathed in through my nose and exhaled long through my mouth, the way the stupid city shrink taught me. The room was dark, shadows stretching over the bed and the walls like a shroud, hiding the sins I was about to commit. I didn't turn the light on. The dark helped me hide the monster within.

She didn't even realize what she was doing to me. The way she looked at me tonight—hope simmering just beneath fear, like she wanted to be devoured and just

didn't know it yet. God, I wanted to ruin that softness, to tear her apart and feast on her innocence.

She didn't run. Not when I leaned in, my breath hot on her neck. Not when I called her little girl, my voice a low, dangerous growl. And she liked it. I saw it in her eyes, felt it in her quickening pulse. She was made for this. For me. For the dark, twisted things I wanted to do to her. I walked toward the dresser and peeled my shirt over my head, letting it fall to the floor. My skin burned with a twisted energy that I had never felt before. Her scent still clung to me—soap and nerves and something warm, feminine, sweet like honeysuckle.

No. Not honeysuckle. Bluebell. I froze, my jaw tightening until it ached. Goddammit. I had said it earlier—let it slip when she wasn't even looking at me. Bluebell. I hadn't called anyone that in years. No one since—

No. No. That name belonged to someone else. To something buried in a shallow grave, along with my humanity. Gennie was not her. Gennie was... something new. Something alive. The past was dead, and I was the one who fucking buried it.

But it scared me, how easily the name had fallen from my mouth. Like my subconscious already knew the truth. Those bright blue eyes. The way they stared into my soul like she was going to own me, instead of the other way around would be my undoing. That mouth—smart, but never cruel. She still believes in good things. In glittering snow. A fantasy. A pretty one. The kind that made men like me want to possess, to break, to make our own.

I turned to the mirror. My eyes caught the low gleam of my reflection. Bright green, black at the edges, like a fucking demon staring back at me. I looked hollowed out. Hungry. Wrong. My hand twitched, wanting to reach out and touch the glass, to feel the coolness against my fevered skin. I needed a shower. Ice cold. To wash away the memories, the guilt, the desire. I didn't want to hurt her. I truly didn't. That thought

disturbed me more than anything.

Because it meant I'd already started making exceptions. For her. And that was a weakness I couldn't afford. She might be a natural submissive. Maybe even a little, if the way her eyes lit up when I teased her meant anything. She was too quick to blush. Too eager to please. Too good.

She needed someone to own her. To guide her. To control her every breath, every thought, every fucking orgasm. Not Marvin. Me.

I stepped out of my jeans, kicking them aside with the heel of my foot. The zipper had been biting into my throbbing cock since she smiled at me across the table, her eyes wide and innocent, begging to be fucked, begging to be used, begging to be filled with my hot, thick cum. The need in her eyes was raw, primal, and I wanted to give her every fucking inch of me, to ruin her for any other man, to make her my little fuck slave.

I reached for the shower handle and twisted it to cold. The water roared to life, steam curling around the edges of the glass even before the temperature dropped. I craved the shock of it, needed the fucking ice to cool the inferno raging in my veins, to calm the beast within.

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But I stood there, frozen, my cock throbbing and leaking precum, begging for release, begging to be buried deep inside her tight, wet cunt. My hands gripped the counter, knuckles white, as I stared at the sink, breathing like a fucking bull, my skin slick and flushed with lust. My heart pounded in my chest, my muscles tensed, and my cock ached with a need that was almost painful. I wanted to fuck her until she screamed, until she bled, until she was so full of my cum she couldn't take anymore.

My cock was a steel rod, throbbing with the effort it took not to storm back out there, grab her by the hair, bend her over, and fuck her into next week. She'd do it, too. She'd tremble and moan, but she wouldn't say no. She loves being told what to do. She craves being possessed, used, and thrown away like a dirty little fuck toy.

God, the way she looked tonight. Curled up on that damn couch like she didn't know she was already in the wolf's den. Like she thought the danger was behind her—left on that fucking bus. She was wrong. The danger was me. I was the monster in the dark, and she was my prey. I wanted to pounce on her, to pin her down and make her scream my name as I took what was mine, as I claimed her, as I fucking ruined her.

I stepped under the cold spray, and it hit me like a fucking tsunami. My breath caught, muscles tensing, my cock aching and begging for her touch. But it wasn't enough to douse the flames. Not even close. The water was like liquid ice on my burning skin, but it did little to quell the wildfire raging in my veins.

I wrapped one hand around my throbbing cock and squeezed, eyes closed, jaw clenched so tight I thought my teeth would shatter. I imagined the sound of her voice, breathy and desperate, when she said she wanted to belong to someone. The way her thighs pressed together subtly, like she thought I wouldn't notice – when I got close,

her nipples hardening and begging for my mouth. She was so fucking wet. I knew it. My fingers twitched, imagining sliding them down her belly, parting her legs, and sinking into her tight, wet heat. Not to hurt her—fuck no. To claim her, to make her mine, to ruin her for anyone else.

I leaned my head back, water cascading over my face, and I whispered, "Bluebell." Fuck, I wanted to taste her, to feel her wrap around me, to hear her scream my name. I wanted to own her, to control her, to make her my little cum dumpster.

She didn't know what she was made for yet. But I did. I knew she was made for me. Made to be my little fuck doll, my plaything, my obsession. My personal little slut, my Bluebell.

And when she realized it—when she came apart for me the first time, trembling and screaming and begging for more—I'd make sure she never wanted to leave this place. Never want to leave me. I'd ruin her for any other man. I'd make her addicted to my cock, my touch, my control. She'd be my little cum dumpster, and she'd love every fucking second of it. She'd be so full of my seed she'd leak it for days.

I stroked myself harder, my palm slick from the water, hips jerking and rolling as I bit down on my own moan, imagining her lips wrapped around my cock, her eyes watering as she took me deep. Gennie. She was mine. My girl. My angel. My fucking obsession. My little whore, begging for my cum. My Bluebell.

I thought of her mouth, those plump, innocent lips parted in a soft gasp when I winked at her. The way her pupils dilated, her breath hitching when I teased her about Marvin and the bedroom. She wanted a man who could take care of her. Not some pussy, safe little bitch. She wanted someone capable of keeping her, of controlling her, of ruining her. Of making her beg for more. Of impregnating her and keeping her forever.

A deep, guttural growl tore out of my throat as I came, my hand clenching tighter, hot cum spilling out of me as the water hit my back in sheets. My other hand slammed into the wall with a dull thud, leaving a mark from the force. It wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough. Not until I had her. Not until I'd claimed her. Not until I'd made her mine in every fucking way possible.

Not until she broke for me. Not until she said please. Not until she begged for my cock, begged for me to knock her up and keep her forever, begged for me to never let her go.

I leaned forward, both palms now pressed to the tile, the spray drumming over my spine like a thousand tiny needles. I let the cold bite into me, let it seep deep into my bones. I stayed like that, panting and growling, the monster inside me fed—but not satisfied. Never satisfied.

Because now that I'd tasted her, even in passing—her laughter, her scent, her soft, aching silences—I wasn't going to stop. I'd already decided. She'd never leave this place. Not unless it was in my arms. Or in a body bag. With my cum leaking out of her used, abused little cunt.

Chapter Fourteen

I crept down the hall, my heart hammering, each beat echoing the throb between my thighs. The house was too quiet, too still, and I could feel his presence lurking somewhere within these walls, a dark, menacing shadow that sent my nerves into overdrive. I had seen the way he looked at me, the raw, primal hunger in his eyes, and it left me feeling both terrified and oddly exhilarated.

Atticus. Just thinking his name sent a shiver down my spine, a mix of fear and unwanted anticipation that left me lightheaded. When he looked at me earlier with his gaze intense, predatory. It was as if he could see right through me, down to the

darkest, most hidden parts of my soul. That absolutely nobody had ever seen. Despite knowing he was the bad guy, despite knowing I should be running far, far away, my body responded to him in ways that horrified me.

I gathered my clothes, my hands shaking as I clutched the fabric to my chest like a shield. I checked the hallway once more, ensuring the coast was clear before slipping into the bathroom. The lock clicked into place, sealing me inside, and I let out a shaky breath, leaning against the door as if that could keep him out.

The bathroom was already steamy, the air thick and heavy with the scent of him—a musky, masculine smell that made my mouth water wafting in from his room. I turned the water on, cranking the dial to the hottest setting. The pipes groaned in protest, and I could feel the heat radiating from the showerhead, promising a scalding embrace. I stepped out of my clothes, letting them fall to the floor, and entered the shower, the water cascading over my body like a torrent of liquid fire.

My skin turned pink, then red, the heat searing me, awakening every nerve ending. My nipples beaded, hardening into tight, aching buds, and I couldn't help but touch them, rolling them between my fingers, imagining it was Atticus's mouth on me, his teeth nipping, his tongue swirling. I bit my lip to suppress a moan, my body already throbbing with a need I both craved and despised. Stop. Don't do this. I tried to stop my thoughts, to no avail.

The steam billowed around me, cloaking me in a thick, hot fog, and I could feel the tension coiling in my belly, the need building like a storm. I leaned my forehead against the cool tiles, taking deep, ragged breaths, trying to calm the inferno raging within me. But the images that flashed through my mind unbidden were far from calming.

Atticus, his eyes dark and intense, storming through the door, his gaze locking onto mine. Crossing the room in two strides, his hands gripping my hips, lifting me

effortlessly, and slamming me against the wall. His cock, hard and insistent, pressing against my entrance, and I whimpered, my body aching for him to fill me, to claim me, to make me his despite the voice in my head screaming that I shouldn't want this, that I should be running to Marvin, to safety.

"Atticus," I whispered, my voice barely audible over the roar of the water. "Please."

In my fantasy, he didn't make me wait. He drove into me, his cock stretching me wide, filling me so completely that I could feel him in every fiber of my being. I could hear his breath, ragged and desperate, his teeth grazing my neck as he marked me, claimed me as his own. His hands would be rough, demanding, owning every inch of my body, and I hated that I loved the thought of it, my stomach rolling while my body betrayed me.

My hand wandered down my stomach, hovering over my mound, and I could feel the heat radiating from my core, the wetness coating my thighs. I dipped my fingers lower, parting my folds, and I was soaking, my clit throbbing, begging for attention. I circled it slowly, imagining it was Atticus's tongue on me, his fingers inside me, pumping in and out, building me higher and higher.

I bit my lip, stifling a cry as I slid two fingers inside, my palm pressing against my clit, mimicking the movements of my fantasy. I was so tight, so wet, and imagined I could feel every ridge, every vein of his cock as he pounded into me, his hips slapping against mine, his balls hitting my ass with each thrust. I could feel the sting of his hand on my flesh, the sharp bite of pain that only served to heighten my pleasure, to make me crave more.

"Little girl," I heard him growl in my mind, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "You're mine. Every fucking inch of you is mine. You belong to me, and I'm going to ruin you for any other man. I'm going to take you against your will, make you scream, make you beg for more. Don't bother saying no, I'm not going to listen."

I moaned, the sound echoing off the tiles, my body shaking as I fucked myself harder, faster, chasing the release that was just out of reach. I could feel his hands on me, his mouth on me, his cock inside me, and I was lost, utterly consumed by the fantasy, by the need, by him. I hated that my body responded this way, that I craved the dark, twisted things he made me feel. I should be thinking of Marvin, of his kind eyes and gentle touch, of the safe, quiet life he offered me. But all I could think about was Atticus, about the way he made me feel alive, about the way he made me want to sin.

I slid a third finger inside, stretching myself, imagining it was his thick cock forcing its way into me, taking what he wanted, what he needed. I could feel the nasty, depraved side of me emerging, the part that wanted him to use me, to abuse me, to make me his dirty little secret. I wanted him to bend me over, to pull my hair, to slap my ass, to mark me as his property. I wanted him to take me against my will, to make me scream and beg for mercy, and then beg for more.

"I'm close, Atticus," I panted, my body trembling, my muscles coiling tight. "So close. Make me come. Please, make me come. Take me, use me, make me your dirty little whore."

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And then I was there, teetering on the edge, my body balanced on a knife's blade, and I let go, falling into the abyss, my orgasm ripping through me like a tsunami. I cried out, my voice raw, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me, leaving me breathless, spent, and utterly ruined.

As I came down from my high, I slid to the floor, my body weak and boneless, the water cascading over me, cooling my flushed skin. I had given in to the fantasy, and it had been worth it. But I knew, as I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, that the real thing would be so much more intense.

I knew I shouldn't want him, that I should be running far, far away. But the hateful truth was, I didn't know what I wanted. I only knew the stories I had read on my kindle, the dark, twisted fantasies that left me aching for more every time I read them. And Atticus, with his dark eyes and dangerous smile, was the embodiment of every one of those fantasies.

The force of the desires that had consumed me was startling to me, as I hadn't thought myself kinky at all prior to meeting him. I enjoyed a lot of really naughty, smut-filled books, but that didn't mean I wanted those things to actually happen to me. I was a good girl, or so I thought. I had always imagined that I would end up with someone like Marvin, someone safe and predictable, not someone who would turn my world upside down and make me question everything I thought I knew about myself.

Yet, when faced with a situation where it was a possibility, my mind could not steer away from the subject, I could not tear my thoughts away from the dark, scary object of my fascination.. I grabbed a towel, quickly drying off, my skin flushed and sensitive from the shower.

I could still feel the phantom touch of Atticus's hands on my body, his mouth on my neck, his cock pressing against me. Despite the fact that I had already come, heat spiraled through me. I squeezed my thighs together, trying to ease the ache that throbbed between them, but it was no use. I was wet, soaking wet, and I knew it was because of him, because of the dark, twisted things he somehow made me want without even trying.

I snuck back into my room, locking the door behind me as if that could keep him out, keep his influence away. I put on a pair of pajamas, something soft and comfortable, and climbed into bed, drawing the quilt up over me and tucking it under my chin.

I had my kindle in hand, a barrier between me and the real world, a way to escape the turmoil that was raging inside me. All I needed was a good book, something to immerse myself into and get my mind away from the muscled-up, inky, green-eyed wolf of a man in the next room. I needed to forget the way he looked at me, the way he made me feel, the way he made me want things I shouldn't.

I lost myself in a recent release from one of my favorite authors, a dark romance with an anti-hero who was as twisted and broken as Atticus. The need from before began to fade into the recesses of my mind as I got lost in another universe, a place where I was in control, where I could explore my darkest desires safely. As page after page was flipped through and read, my eyes grew heavy, and I drifted off to sleep, the kindle still clutched in my hand.

But even as I slept, I couldn't escape him. He invaded my dreams, his dark eyes haunting me, his voice whispering in my ear, his hands roaming over my body. I dreamt of waking up to find myself tied to the bed, my wrists and ankles bound with thick, rough rope that bit into my skin. I was naked, exposed, vulnerable, and at his mercy.

I dreamt of Atticus standing over me, a dangerous smile playing on his lips, his eyes

dark with desire and something else—something primal and possessive. “Good morning, Bluebell,” he said, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. “I’ve been waiting for you to wake up.”

I dreamt of him running his hands over my body, tracing the curves of my breasts, the dip of my waist, the flare of my hips. I dreamt of him pinching my nipples, hard, making me gasp and arch my back, the pleasure mixing with the pain, heightening my senses, making me crave more. But it wasn’t enough.

I woke with a start, body flushed, skin sensitive, core throbbing with need. I was so wet, so ready. I looked at the kindle, still clutched in my hand, the battery almost dead. I had been so engrossed in the book, so lost in the story, that I hadn’t noticed the time passing, hadn’t noticed the kindle was dying, or that I was drifting off to sleep.

I put it on the nightstand, heart racing overtime, my body still aching with need. I knew I should be thinking of Marvin, of his kind eyes and gentle touch, of the safe, quiet life he offered me. But all I could think about was Atticus, about the way he made me feel alive, about the way he made me want to sin.

I was drawn to him, pulled in by his dark charm, his dangerous smile, his intense gaze. I slid my hand under the covers, my fingers finding my clit, rubbing in slow circles, imagining it was Atticus’s tongue on me, his fingers inside me, pumping in and out, building me higher and higher. I bit my lip, stifling a cry as I slid two fingers inside, my palm pressing against my clit, mimicking the movements of my fantasy.

I tried to pinch my clit, hard, the way I had imagined he would when I was asleep, but my fingers weren’t rough enough, didn’t provide the sting I craved. So, I slapped myself, as hard as I could, the sound of my hand connecting with my pussy echoing in the quiet room, a sharp, obscene smack that sent a jolt of pleasure-pain through my core.

The sensation was electric, a harsh, stinging reminder of the pleasure that lay just out of reach. But still, it wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed him. I slapped myself again, trying harder this time, the sound more pronounced, the wet slapping noise echoing around the room.

The sting radiated through my core, making me cry out, making me arch my back, making me beg for more. "Atticus," I whispered, my voice barely audible, my body trembling with need. "Please. Make me come. Take me, use me, make me your dirty little whore. I want it. I need it. I need you to ruin me. I need you to be rough, to hurt me, to fulfill these dark fantasies."

The sound of my hand against my flesh was a harsh, brutal rhythm, a counterpoint to the pounding of my heart, the aching of my core. I could feel the heat building, the tension coiling tighter and tighter, the need growing more urgent, more desperate. But it still wasn't enough.

A sinking feeling that only Atticus could satisfy the dark, twisted needs that were consuming me. And then I was there, teetering on the edge, my body balanced on a tightly coiled tension unlike anything I'd ever experienced, and I let go, falling into the abyss, my orgasm ripping through me, rushing over me. I cried out, my voice raw, my body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me, leaving me breathless, spent, and utterly ruined.

My toes curled, my back arched, and my body shook as I rode out the storm, fingers still moving, drawing out the pleasure, imagining Atticus's cock pulsing inside me, his hot seed spilling into my womb, marking me as his. The sensation was overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and pain, of satisfaction and longing, of completion and an emptiness I did not know what to do with.

As I came down from my high, I lay there, my body weak and boneless, the quilt tossed aside, my skin flushed and sweaty. My breathing slowed, shallow and shaky,

the air in the room thick with the scent of heat and shame. My body sank deeper into the mattress, limbs loose, useless. I stared up at the ceiling, watching the shadows crawl along the plaster like ghosts—silent witnesses to what I'd just done.

I shouldn't have. But God, I needed it. I turned onto my side and pulled the pillow tight to my chest, burying my face into the worn fabric like it might hold his scent. It didn't. Of course it didn't. It just smelled like detergent and dust and desperation. But I imagined it anyway—pretended it was his shirt, his skin, his breath on my neck as he growled that name again in my ear. Little girl. Bluebell. Gennie girl.

My stomach clenched, shame curdling with something far more dangerous. Longing. Raw and stupid and starved. I hated this. Hated the emptiness of the bed, the cold feel of my own fingers, the hollow echo of his absence after imagining him inside me—controlling me, ruining me. There was a hole inside me only he could fill, and I didn't even know him. Not really. But it didn't matter.

Because something inside me already belonged to him. And I didn't know how to take it back. I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose, willing the trembling in my legs to stop. The silence of the house pressed in around me, thick and heavy. It should have soothed me, but it didn't. It made me feel exposed. Unseen and still too visible, like I was glowing in the dark, still marked by the thoughts I'd let myself have. Still wet with the memory of what I imagined he'd do to me.

Sleep didn't come easy, not with the way my mind clung to him like a fever. But eventually, the dark pulled me under, and even in my dreams, I felt him there. Behind me. Inside me. Watching.

Chapter Fifteen

The first thing I noticed as I stirred from my sleep was the rough, calloused hand clamped over my mouth, the weight of a body pressing me into the mattress. Panic

surged through me, my heart pounding like a drum. I struggled, but it was no use; he was too strong.

A spicy, masculine scent invaded my nostrils, and I blinked away the sleep to see Atticus's green eyes staring down at me. His gaze was intense, almost predatory. I tried to speak, but my words were muffled against his hand.

"Ah, the little girl decided to wake up and join me. Hello there, beautiful," he said, his voice a low, dangerous purr. I felt a knot of dread form in my stomach, tightening with each passing second. I pushed against his hand, trying to free myself, but he was immovable.

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"I will move my hand, but only if you promise not to scream. Nobody can hear you, so scream if you must, but if you do, be aware that I will punish you, and you will not enjoy it. I do not like screeching, and I will not have it in my house," he warned, his eyes never leaving mine.

I nodded, fear coursing through my veins. He slowly removed his hand, and I took a deep, shaky breath. "There now, that's better," he said, a sickeningly sweet smile spreading across his face.

I shoved against his chest, panicking. "Go away! How did you even get in here? Get out of here!" I balled up my fist and hit him as hard as I could, landing a punch on his rock-hard abs. He barely flinched, grabbing both of my wrists in one hand and pinning them above my head.

"That's no way to treat the man who came in here to show you how sexy you are," Atticus stated calmly, his otherhand drawing the quilt away from my body. The morning sun streamed in through the window, casting a golden glow over his face, highlighting the cruel twist of his lips. "You know, Bluebell, I've been thinking about you all night. About how you tasted, how you felt. It was a shame you weren't thinking about me when you were touching yourself."

His words sent a shiver down my spine, a mix of horror and unwanted arousal. I could feel the heat of his body against mine, the hardness of his muscles, and the undeniable proof of his desire pressing against my thigh. He leaned down, his breath hot on my ear. "I want to keep you, Gennie. You're mine now."

I struggled against his grip, but it was futile. He was a predator, and I was his prey.

The room was filled with the scent of him, a heady mix of pine and something darker, more primal. I could feel the dampness between my legs, a betraying response to his proximity and the memories of my earlier fantasies.

Freed from his grasp, I kicked out with all my might, aiming for his groin. He chuckled, a low, mocking sound that sent a wave of anger and humiliation crashing over me. A tear escaped the corner of my eye, betraying my emotions.

"I need to be free," I whispered, my voice hoarse with desperation. "Let me go."

But my body betrayed me, arching into his touch as if craving more. His thick, muscular thigh slid between my legs, pinning me down, and I could feel the rough fabric of his pants against my sensitive skin. I tried to move, to kick him again, but his grip was like a vice, holding me in place. He knew exactly how to restrain me, how to control me without risking injury. The realization sent a spike of fear through me.

"How did you get in here?" I demanded, my voice shaking. "The door was locked, the window was shut tight. Let me go, you fucking asshole!" I shove against his hand with all my strength. "Let me up!"

"Just calm down," he said, his voice deceptively soft.

I fought harder, refusing to give him the satisfaction of thinking I would comply. I could feel the panic rising, the terror of being at his mercy. I wasn't sure what he planned to do with me, but I knew it would lead to my destruction. A sob escaped my throat, and I fought with renewed vigor, trying to break free from his iron grip.

Suddenly, I heard a ripping sound, and a gust of cold air hit my legs as my pajama pants were torn from my body. He had ripped them off with one hand, the fabric tearing like tissue paper. I shuddered, the cold air hitting my exposed skin, mingling

with the fear coursing through my veins. I could feel the dampness between my legs, a betraying response to the adrenaline and the sheer primal power he exerted over me. His touch was rough, demanding, and I could feel the callouses on his hands as he gripped my wrists, holding me in place. I could feel every hard plane of his body against mine, the sheer strength and power he possessed.

“Leave me the fuck alone! Get off of me!” I screamed, my voice hoarse with desperation and fear.

“Go ahead, yell at me if you must, pretty Bluebell, but I assure you, I will not leave you alone, and I will not get off of you,” he replied, his voice firm and unyielding. I looked at him in horror, tears streaming down my face as I struggled futilely against his grip. He pushed his hand between my thighs, his fingers rough and demanding as they ran over my seam over my panties. Despite myself, an unwanted wave of need pulsed through my clit, betraying me.

“I hate you, I fucking hate you. Let me up. Stop touching me. Leave me alone,” I begged, my voice breaking as I shoved at his chest. He chuckled, a low, mocking sound that sent a shiver down my spine.

“You scream ‘no’ a lot for someone who’s so fucking horny,” he taunted, his fingers dancing skillfully across my sensitive flesh, applying just the right amount of pressure before sliding down. I could feel the dampness between my legs, the traitorous evidence of my arousal seeping through my panties. His touch was electric, sparking a symphony of sensations that left me breathless and confused. I hated him, but my body craved more.

“Please stop, please I’m begging you, Atticus, please don’t do this to me,” I sobbed, my voice filled with agony and fear. His green eyes filled with heat, his pupils dilating as he watched me squirm and plead. He was enjoying this, enjoying the power he held over me.

“God, Bluebell, you are so beautiful when you beg,” he murmured, his voice a low, dangerous purr. I screamed again, a mix of fear and unwanted desire coursing through my veins. He grabbed the side of my panties, and I screamed again, “NO, stop.”

Ignoring my pleas, he stood up, forcing me to struggle to free my wrists from his grasp. I shot straight up and made a run for the door, but he was too quick. With a short laugh, he grabbed me and pushed me back down on the bed, his strength overpowering me. Using one hand, he took his belt off and wrapped it around my wrists, securing me tightly to the headboard. I tried to wriggle free, but it was no use; the leather dug into my skin, holding me in place.

Struggling only seemed to ignite an inferno within me. My body was on fire, every nerve ending sparking to life. I could feel the slickness between my legs, the evidence of my arousal coating my thighs. I was horrified by my body's response, by the way it betrayed me. I didn't understand it, didn't understand why I was so turned on by his dominance, by the way he held me captive.

With my wrists secured, I watched through tear-framed lashes as he climbed back onto the bed, his movements predatory and sure. He loomed over me, his eyes never leaving mine as he leaned down, his breath hot on my ear.

“You’re mine, Gennie. Every fucking inch of you,” he whispered, his voice a low, dangerous growl.

“There now, I have both of my hands free to show you what a sexy woman you are,” he murmured, his voice a husky growl that sent a shiver down my spine. I moaned despite myself, and he grinned, a knowing, predatory smile that sent a mix of fear and anticipation coursing through me. He didn't comment on my moan, and for that, I was grateful. He didn't know how much this was turning me on... right? He couldn't possibly know that I was a twisted mess of desire and fear.

Of course, he does, you idiot. Why else is he grinning at you like that? He knows you want him to force you. He's fulfilling all those naughty fantasies you won't even admit you have. The ones where a man takes what he wants, where he dominates and controls. Where he ignores your protests and takes you anyway.

Shoving my knees to the side, Atticus leaned over me, his face inches from mine. I stared into his green eyes, drowning in the heat and passion that burned there. An answering need filled me, and I arched my back, silently begging him to touch me, to take me, to make me his.

"Do you want me to touch you, pretty Bluebell?" he whispered, his voice a low, dangerous purr that sent waves of desire crashing through me. His tone was deep, dark, and full of every naughty promise imaginable. It was a tone that said he knew exactly what he was doing to me, that he knew the effect he was having on my body and my mind.

Did I want him to touch me?

Yes. But I couldn't say that. To say that would be admitting that I liked a strange man breaking into my room and forcing me. Taking what he wanted and ignoring my screams to stop. Begging, pleading, crying for him to let me go. To admit his touches were okay aloud, was to admit I was broken. That my fantasies were fucked ten ways to hell and back, and I had no prayer of ever being normal. If I admitted that, I would betray myself. So, I shook my head no.

"No, no I don't," I lied, my voice barely a whisper.

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“Okay, little girl. I hear you,” he said, his breath hot on my cheek. And then, without warning, his lips were on mine, warm and demanding. Excitement shot through me, and I arched my back, pushing my wet center against his hips. My body was begging for what I could not ask for, what I could not admit I wanted.

The heat of his kiss, the passionate way he stroked the flames inside of me to life with his probing tongue, was beyond anything I had ever imagined. This was the fireworks I had been expecting with my first kiss, the first time I had sex, when I had expected the angels to sing. But this was so much more than that. This was raw, primal, and utterly consuming.

There were fucking angels singing somewhere now, their hymns a distant echo compared to the symphony of sensation that was taking place in my room. The man above me was a vision of sin, his dark hair falling in disheveled strands.. His kisses were hard, demanding, and utterly consuming. He wasn't asking for permission; he was taking what he wanted, what he needed. He had asked, but my answer didn't matter to him. He took and took, kissing me like I was his lifeline, like he was a drowning man and I was his only source of air.

My heart pounded in my chest, panic clawing at me as he stole my breath away with the force of his passion. He thrust against me, the length of him encased in his jeans pressing against my most sensitive spot. The zipper teased me, providing a delicious friction that sent sparks of pleasure coursing through my veins. Moans escaped my throat despite my best efforts to hold them back. His touch was intoxicating, overwhelming, and I was drowning in it.

He smiled against my mouth, his lips a breath away from mine. "Someone lied to me.

I don't like being lied to, little Bluebell," he murmured, his husky voice sending a spasm of desire through my core. I arched my bare pussy up against his hard length, seeking the pressure, the friction that I craved.

"Ah, ah, no," he said, pulling away from me. With a quick, fluid movement, he tore my shirt off, the fabric ripping as easily as tissue paper. He tossed it to the floor, his eyes roaming over my exposed body. My breasts heaved with each ragged breath, my nipples hard and begging for his attention. Traitorous bastards, betraying me just like the rest of my body.

He immediately bent his head, his hot mouth latching onto one of my nipples, his tongue lapping and teasing. I gasped, pulling against my restraints, the leather digging into my wrists as I arched into him, desperate for more. "Please," I whispered, the word a plea, a begging for release from the agonizing ache that consumed me.

Atticus, ever the tormentor, ignored my plea and moved his mouth to my other breast, his teeth nibbling and biting, his tongue tracing the sensitive peak. He engulfed my nipple in the hot cavern of his mouth, sucking and licking, driving me to the point of no return. A familiar pulsing began between my legs, my body coiling tight as a spring, ready to snap.

I shook my head, the restraints taut against my wrists, my body aching for release. "Atticus, please," I begged, my voice a desperate whimper. But he continued his torment, his mouth and hands working in tandem to drive me wild, to push me over the edge.

"No, no, no, stop. Oh god, please. Stop. God. Fuck. I'm coming," I screamed as a wave of pure ecstasy ripped through my body, leaving me trembling and convulsing beneath him. My legs twitched and spasmed, the pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Every nerve ending was on fire, my body pulsing with a need that refused to

be denied.

Atticus moved his mouth away from my breast and leaned over me, his breath hot against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "For someone who doesn't want to be touched, you sure cum easily. You want to know what I think?" he whispered, his voice a low, dangerous growl that sent a fresh wave of desire crashing through me.

I shook my head, but he ignored me, his lips curling into a smirk. "Too bad, my little Bluebell, I'm going to tell you anyway. I think it makes you hot to tell me no. To push me away, to reject me. It makes that little pussy feel hot and needy. I think deep inside you want me to force you, take you against your will. Some part of you enjoys having no control, not knowing what I'll do next. The danger of being close to me does something to you that you don't know how to respond to. I think, my beautiful Gennie, I think mother nature made you just for me. My own art, my own special treasure to fuck, to force, to control. Yep, that's what I think. So, go ahead, precious girl. Go ahead and scream, go ahead and buck, go ahead and try to get away. Deny it. Say no, push against me. Refuse to let me touch you. I will restrain you, and I will fuck you anyway."

A moan escaped my lips as his words washed over me, my body shaking with a mix of fear and anticipation. He knew me, knew my body better than I did. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once.

"Mmmm, there's my good girl. You are mine. I will do with you what I choose. I will stop, immediately and never touch you again, if you say the words 'Marvin.' That is your safe word, my sweet. I think you can't admit you need me as badly as I need you, and that is okay. I will take you; I will force you against your will. If you say 'Marvin,' while I am fucking you, I will stop, so be prepared. I will not make you cum, I will not put my throbbing dick in your pretty, tight pussy, and I will not kiss those luscious lips of yours. Push against me, scream, say no all you want, little girl. I've got you. I've got both of us," he murmured, his breaths ragged and hot against

my skin as he pulled away from my ear.

I shook all over, the safe word 'Marvin' on the tip of my tongue, the hidden meaning not lost on me, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. I didn't want him to stop. I wanted him to push me, to make me submit. I wanted him to take what he wanted, to own me. But not if I had to consent. Not if I had to verbally agree to this twisted dance we were engaged in. Why was I so fucked up that being forced into submission turned me on more than anything else ever had? It was a question that tore at me, even as my body betrayed me, arching into his touch, craving more.

I pulled against my restraints, screaming, "No!!!!" as he roughly toyed with my clit, his fingers expertly finding that sensitive nub and applying just the right amount of pressure. I writhed, trying to twist away, but his touch was unrelenting, firm, and sure. The pleasure was intense, overwhelming, and I could feel another orgasm building, despite my struggles.

"There's my girl, such a pretty, little Bluebell," he murmured, his voice a low, dangerous purr that sent shivers down my spine. "The way you scream 'no' makes my dick so goddamn hard, Gennie. Such a beautiful specimen of a woman, gifted to me on my porch."

His words sent a shudder through me, and I could feel my orgasm crashing over me, wave after wave of pleasure leaving me breathless and shaking. He leaned down, capturing my lips in a rapturous kiss, his tongue invading my mouth, claiming me as his own. I fell back against the bed, limp and spent, my body convulsing around nothing, aching for him to fill me.

Atticus stood, his movements fluid and confident as he unzipped his pants, his eyes never leaving mine. I crossed my legs, a futile attempt to regain some semblance of control, and he grinned, amused by my defiance. "That's okay, I know how to open them again. Don't worry," he said, his voice a low, mocking purr.

He pushed his pants to the ground, and I felt all the breath leave my body in a shuddery whoosh as his cock came into view. It was bigger than any I had ever seen, thick and hard, standing proud against his skin. The purple tip was coated with pre-cum, a clear drop beading at the top, glistening in the morning light. I felt my mouth go dry, my heart pounding in my chest as I took in the sight of him, my body aching with need.

"Don't forget to take a breath in, Gennie girl," he reminded me, his voice a low, dangerous growl as he climbed back onto the bed, shoving my legs roughly apart. The action sent another spasm of pleasure between my legs, moisture leaking onto the mattress below me. I took in a long, shaky breath as his fingers found my neck, his touch firm and possessive.

"All you gotta say to stop it is, Marvin," he reminded me, his voice a low, dangerous purr that sent a fresh wave of desire crashing through me. I was his, completely and utterly at his mercy, and I couldn't wait to see what he would do next.

That was all he said as he applied pressure, sliding into place, and in one hard, relentless thrust, he buried himself deep inside me. The air left my lungs in a rush, and all I could feel was the sensation of his hand around my throat, cutting off my airway, holding me in place as he invaded my most intimate space. The room spun, and I felt lightheaded, my vision blurring at the edges. I should have been terrified, should have been screaming for him to stop, but instead, I ached with a need that consumed me.

I wanted more. I burned for him, my body betraying me as it responded to his dominant touch. Each thrust of his hard cock sent me spiraling into a frenzy, sensations overwhelming my body, leaving me breathless and desperate for air. He slammed his hand over my mouth, clutching my nose between his fingers. Pushing his arm against my neck. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the pleasure, but the lack of oxygen made the room spin faster, everything going black around the edges.

I tried to open my lips, to gasp for air, but nothing came out. Panic clawed at my chest, my lungs burning for oxygen, but the sensation of his cock filling me, stretching me, was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I could feel every vein, every ridge of him as he moved in and out of me, the pleasure building with each thrust. My body convulsed around him, milking him, urging him deeper.

Every throb of his cock sent me higher, the world fading to black as I lost control, my orgasm ripping through me like a force of nature. The pressure on my neck released, and I took a ragged, desperate breath, my lungs burning as they filled with air. I heard him moaning, his thrusts becoming erratic and slow, his body tensing as he reached his own climax. Heat flooded my insides, his release triggering another wave of pleasure that left me shaking and spent.

I crashed into nothingness, my body limp and sated, my mind a blur of pleasure and pain, of domination and submission. I was his in that moment, completely and utterly.

Chapter Sixteen

I loosened the belt from around Gennie's wrists, slow and deliberate, watching as the red impressions in her skin came into focus. Angry, tender lines marked where she'd struggled—like her body had fought what her mind hadn't quite dared to reject. She was unconscious now, her breaths soft and even. Vulnerable. Exposed. Perfect.

The welts would fade, but the image of her pulling against those restraints—fighting me and needing me in the same breath—would stay seared in my mind forever. I traced the inside of her wrist with my thumb, careful, reverent. She'd earned something gentler now.

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There was salve in the bathroom. I'd use it later. Maybe. Or maybe I wouldn't. Maybe she needed to feel it tomorrow—needed the ache to remind her she belonged to someone now. Tome.

I climbed over her carefully, the mattress dipping with my weight as I pulled the blanket up over her bare, marked body. She looked so small like this. Fragile. I didn't like that. Not because it made me pity her—but because it made me want to keep her. Like some wild thing I'd finally caught and caged. I wrapped my arms around her and let my chest press into her back, needing her closer than was rational. She didn't stir. She trusted me enough to sleep in my arms. Or maybe she was just too exhausted to fight anymore. Either way, I won.

And it should have thrilled me more than it did.

I buried my nose in her hair and inhaled—vanilla and sweat and something feminine and quiet that had started to drown the noise in my head. It disturbed me. Not because I didn't like it. But because I did. Because the craving for violence that usually pulsed through me like clockwork was suddenly tangled up in the need to soothe. I should be in the basement. Creating. Hunting. Carving meaning into bone. But instead, I was here. Wrapped around her like a shield I didn't even know I had. This wasn't aftercare. This was obsession.

And I had no fucking clue how far I'd go to keep her. Sometimes the urge to create clawed at the inside of my skull like a beast locked in a cage. It wasn't just a compulsion. It was need. The kind that vibrated in my bones, whispered behind my teeth, haunted my hands until they were slick with something warm and red. That act of transformation—of turning destruction into beauty—had always been the only

thing that made me feel real.

Until now. She shifted in her sleep, a soft, trusting sigh leaving her lips as her body instinctively curled into mine. My little Bluebell. So soft, so small, she fit against me like she'd been made for this—made to be held by a monster. Her breath fanned over my chest, each exhale a quiet permission. As if she didn't know what kind of man she was surrendering to. Or worse... maybe she did.

I watched the rise and fall of her ribs, measured it like I would the lines of a sculpture, the weight of bone beneath skin. She was still breathing. Still warm. Still mine.

And oh, the exquisite chaos I would make of her. I'd break her carefully, precisely—like you'd crack glass to make a mosaic. I'd pull her apart until she was trembling and obedient, desperate for the very hand that undid her. She'd beg for mercy while secretly craving the next wave of pain. I'd teach her to need it. Need me. The artist. The destroyer. Her god.

While I spilled blood elsewhere, she would wait. Kept. Owned. She'd ache for my return while I carved beauty from rot and decay. I'd bring her tokens. Trophies. Proof of what I was capable of. She wouldn't understand it—not fully—but she'd feel it. Feel what it meant to be chosen. To be the one I didn't kill. The one I kept sacred.

She wasn't a means to an end. She was the shrine itself. And it terrified me. No one had ever impacted me beyond the need to use them—fuck them, kill them, display them. But Gennie... Gennie made me hesitate. She made me wonder what it might be like to come home to something warm instead of cold concrete and silence. She made me consider not using the tools in the basement tonight. That kind of weakness could undo everything I'd built.

I should've just drugged her. Taken what I wanted, left her pliant, blank. But the

moment I saw how her eyes darkened under my voice—how her thighs pressed together when I called her little Bluebell—I knew I wouldn't need force. She wanted this.

And I'd spend the rest of her life teaching her how deep that want could go. I hadn't expected her to want me. Not really. Not like that—arching against me, soaking my cock, unraveling like her body was built for mine. I didn't know what fucked me harder: the way her lips trembled when she said no, or the way her cunt tightened like it was begging me to ignore it. She was a contradiction wrapped in silk and sin, and I couldn't get enough.

Her screams rang in my ears like music—raw, unscripted, broken. A symphony of surrender. It didn't matter how many times she told me to stop. Her body spoke the truth. It craved the violation. It savored the force. And I reveled in it, dragging every last ounce of pleasure from her until she was limp in my hands, trembling like a caught thing.

What kind of girl comes like that? What kind of girl looks her monster in the eyes and melts? Maybe I was luckier than I thought. Maybe she wasn't just a stray that wandered into the wolf's den—maybe she was meant for it. Meant for me. A submissive soul wrapped in innocence, aching for someone to claim her. And I would. I had. Even if she didn't know it yet.

She didn't say the safe word. Not when her voice cracked. Not when I shoved my cock in to the hilt. Not even when she clawed at the sheets, her body wracked with the kind of orgasm that bordered on pain. She gasped, she whimpered, she cried—but not once did she say Marvin.

She could've stopped me. She didn't. And that—fuck—that made me harder than anything I've ever known. She might not be a slave. Not yet. But she had the bones for it. The instinct. That deep, twitching need to be owned. To be ruled. And I'd be

the one to mold her—bend her mind, reshape her will, carve my name into her obedience until she was the perfect, shivering version of submission I’d always fantasized about but never thought I’d earn.

Not someone like me. Not a killer. A liar. A collector. But now? Now I could have that fantasy. I could have her. Waiting for me. Wet for me. Worshipping me like the sick god I’d become. She didn’t know what I was—not really—but she had to suspect. And still, she let me in. Let me touch her. Ruin her. Fill her. Maybe she saw the beast and wanted it anyway.

I pulled her closer, my arms locking tight around her soft frame. Mine. She was mine. She’d learn that in full soon enough. My cock throbbed against the back of her thigh, still twitching with the need to take her again—but I wouldn’t. Not tonight. She’d be sore. Torn. Bruised. I needed her intact. For now. Later, I’d wreck her all over again.

I brushed her damp hair from her face, lips barely touching the shell of her ear as I whispered, low and reverent, “You’re the most precious thing I’ve ever touched, my little Bluebell.” I didn’t mean to say it.

But the truth leaked out anyway. I kissed her temple—soft, gentle, reverent. Like she was holy. Like she hadn’t just let the devil inside her. I tucked my head against her shoulder and closed my eyes, breathing her in. For the first time in years, I drifted into sleep without the taste of blood in my mouth. Just her. Justus.

Chapter Seventeen

I woke with a jolt, my body stiff and aching. The pounding in my skull came first—dull and insistent, like something heavy had settled behind my eyes and refused to budge. I tried to move, to shift my arm beneath me and ease the cramping tension there, but... I couldn’t. Panic flickered in my chest. Why couldn’t I move?

I blinked against the blur of sleep, heart already galloping as I tried to orient myself. That's when I saw it: an arm. Thick, inked. Draped across my stomach like a lock. Atticus. The memories rushed back in staggered fragments—sounds, sensations, the metallic taste of fear. His weight above me. His voice, low and coaxing. His cock, unforgiving. My body betraying me at every turn.

Oh god. I had never experienced anything like last night. Not just the physicality of it—the brutal force, the absence of mercy—but the fact that something inside me had responded to it. Had wanted it. My thighs clenched instinctively under the weight of the covers, but the ache that answered was more shame than soreness.

Why hadn't I said the safe word? Why couldn't I? The question hit hard. My mouth had known the words. My mind had screamed them. But something in me—something deeper—had locked them behind my teeth. As if some part of me had wanted to see what he would do if I didn't stop him.

And even worse... some part of me already knew he wouldn't have stopped either way. He must have had a key. Of course he did. The door had been locked. I know I locked it. And yet he'd slipped into my room like it belonged to him. Like I belonged to him. That thought made my stomach twist. And not in the way it should.

He had planned it. Maybe not the timing, but the intention. The control. The refusal. The calculated way he tested my limits until I didn't know whether I was begging him to stop... or to keep going. Marvin. The word meant nothing to him. He'd chosen it—placed Marvin's ghost between us like a weapon. Did he get off on that? On imagining another man's name in my mouth while he tore me apart?

The profile of him forming in my mind was fractured and dangerous. Calculated. Intimate in all the worst ways. His arm was still across me, warm and heavy, holding me like nothing violent had happened. Like we were lovers. Like I'd asked him to ruin me. I hated the way that made me feel... protected. Wanted. Like I was his.

No. I couldn't admit I liked any of it—not to him, not even to myself. That would make me weak. That would make me less. Less of the woman I wanted to be. Less human. I wanted him to see strength when he looked at me. I wanted to be a challenge, not an offering. But last night, I hadn't been strong. I'd been... something else. Something pliable. Something hungry.

And what terrified me most? That hunger hadn't gone away. I closed my eyes, trying to shove the images from my mind. His breath in my ear. The bruising grip of his hands. The way my body had opened for him, helpless and wet. The way I'dachedeven while he ignored my words. Was there a version of me that wanted to be helpless? I didn't know. But I couldn't pretend the question wasn't there now.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 9:13 am

Before Atticus had broken into my room, I'd already been thinking about the novels. The ones where things like that happened—where women were taken, claimed, pushed past the brink and remade into something new. I'd read those stories in secret, convinced myself they were fantasy, nothing more. But now I wasn't so sure.

Was that why it felt so... hot? Had I primed myself for him? Set the stage with my own lust in the shower and again in the middle of the night, then left the door wide open in my mind for a man like him to walk through? The thought made my stomach churn—half with shame, half with something darker. Something needier.

My brain wouldn't stop spinning, dragging me in loops I couldn't make sense of. Every time I landed on an answer, it unraveled into more questions. Why didn't I stop him? What does that say about me? Do I want more? The worst part wasn't that I didn't have the answers. It was that I wasn't even sure I wanted them.

But one question rose to the top, louder than the rest: Do I want his help? Because he'd offered it—clearly, unequivocally. Not in words, but in presence. In pressure. In possession. His body around mine was a promise: I'm not letting go. And if the way he was curled against me now meant anything, there was no point pretending he'd let me walk out of here without a fight. That door had closed the moment I didn't say the man's name while he was fucking me.

And still... there was a piece of him missing. A part he was hiding behind those emerald eyes and that sickeningly calm voice. I could feel it—just beneath the surface, just out of reach. Something broken. Something dangerous.

I pushed at his arm, gently, trying to ease the tension in my legs. They ached with the

dull throb of overuse. My body was sore, not just from sex, but from him. From the violence of his need and the silence of my own.

Even the place between my thighs pulsed with awareness, the kind of ache that bordered on pain. I hadn't had sex—real sex—in so long that I wasn't sure how much of the soreness was from force and how much was from sheer unused sensitivity. But it wasn't as bad as it could've been. That thought alone disturbed me. Shouldn't it have hurt more? I pushed at him again.

He stirred behind me, but instead of letting go, his arm tightened like a chain. And for reasons I didn't want to unpack yet, the part of me that had panicked only moments ago... went still again. "Why're you shoving me, Bluebell?" His voice was rough with sleep, gravel and warmth all at once—and I hated the way it made something flutter low in my stomach. "I'll tie you back up if I need to."

I should've been afraid. Maybe I was. But my lips betrayed me, curving slightly as I answered, "I just need to move my legs. They're aching."

In an instant, the weight lifted from my stomach. His hands slid down to my hips, steady and sure, pulling me back against him like he'd missed me during the few inches we'd spent apart. I shifted onto my back, the tension in my thighs easing. For a moment, it almost felt... normal.

But then his nose brushed just behind my ear, and he inhaled like he needed to memorize me from the inside out. A sharp tingle danced across my skin in response. God. Why did my body react like this to him? After everything?

"Better?" he murmured, arm locking tight around my waist like a promise I hadn't asked for.

"Yeah," I said, voice small, hesitant. "That's... much better."

I didn't know where to look. Shame twisted inside me. Not for what he'd done—but for the fact that I didn't immediately push him away. That I didn't demand space or scream for Marvin or run barefoot out the front door. I wanted to tell him to leave. But the fear was still there, tucked behind my ribs like a bruise: if I asked the wrong thing, would he tie me up again? Would he drag me back into that place where yes and no blurred into something else entirely?

And worse—would a part of me let him?

I needed space. Desperately. Space to think. To breathe. To figure out who the hell I even was after last night. But I couldn't find the words. Everything I wanted to say sat frozen in my chest, unspoken and heavy.

It all felt surreal, like I was hovering somewhere above my body, watching it all from a distance. What happened last night didn't feel like something I did. It felt like something that had been done to me... or maybe through me. I didn't know. All I knew was the memories wouldn't stop coming—unwelcome, vivid, and tangled in the heat of my own betrayal.

And he was still holding me. As if nothing had changed at all.

Chapter Eighteen

The smell of coffee hit first—warm, bitter, familiar. It drifted through the hall like nothing had happened. Like it was any other morning. Like I hadn't just spent the morning pinned under a man who broke in, broke me, and then curled around me like a goddamn safety blanket. The bed was empty. The weight of him—gone.

I blinked at the ceiling, waiting for the rush of panic or shame to hit again. But all I felt was numb. I sat up slowly, pressing a palm to my forehead. My thighs ached. My mouth tasted sour. And my skin prickled with the ghost of hands that had no business

feeling as gentle as they had after being anything but.

For a second, I wondered if I'd imagined it. If maybe the lines between fantasy and memory had blurred so completely that I'd conjured the entire night in some kind of fever dream. But when I stood, the dull, throbbing soreness between my legs told the truth. And the faint outline of a bruise around my wrist sealed it. I pulled on the robe that hung behind the door—thick, too-large, probably his—and followed the smell of coffee like I was following a lifeline. Or a noose.

He was in the kitchen, barefoot and humming something low and tuneless. He moved like a man who'd never held anyone down. Like he'd never heard someone gasp beneath him, or beg with their eyes when their mouth couldn't form words. He cracked eggs with one hand, flipped bacon with the other, and when he looked up at me? He smiled.

“Morning, Bluebell.” He said it like it was some lazy Sunday. Like we'd slept in and made love and now he was making me breakfast because he couldn't wait to feed me. “You sleep okay?”

I didn't answer. My voice hadn't followed me from the bedroom. He took another mug from the cupboard, poured steaming black coffee into it, and slid it across the counter like we did this every day. Like this was routine.

“I made breakfast,” he added, nodding toward the stove. “Bacon's crispy, just how I like it. You hungry?”

Hungry. The word hit like a slap. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I wasn't ready to speak—not to him, not to this version of him that was acting like he hadn't spent the night rewiring my body without my permission. The casual ease in his face made my stomach twist.

Was this it? Was he just going to pretend? Did he think I wanted this now? That I'd been broken in like a new horse and now I'd trot along behind him, grateful for his attention and his breakfast?

"Hey," he said, rounding the counter. "You okay? You look a little pale."

He touched my cheek with the back of his fingers—soft, almost reverent. It made me flinch. Just barely. But his eyes caught it. Something flickered there. Brief. A crack in the smooth performance. But it vanished before I could make sense of it.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 9:13 am

“I’m fine,” I said, finally finding my voice.

He smiled again. Too easily.

“Good,” he said. “Then sit down. Eat something. We’ve got a big day.”

I sat down because I didn’t know what else to do.

The chair creaked beneath me. It felt too loud, like it had opinions about the night before. I tucked the robe tighter around myself and stared at the steam curling from the coffee cup. The smell alone made me nauseous. Or maybe that was just me.

Atticus moved around the kitchen like he belonged there. Like I belonged there. Whistling softly under his breath. Scooping eggs onto a chipped ceramic plate. Pouring orange juice like he was in a commercial for Midwestern serenity. His jeans rode low on his hips, his shirt clinging in the back from where it hadn’t fully dried. His hair was still wet, curling at the ends.

He caught me looking. Grinned.

“Lucky me. You like to watch.”

I dropped my eyes to the table. “I wasn’t—”

“You were,” he said, amusement curling around the words. “But I don’t mind. I like being looked at. Especially by someone who knows how to appreciate what she’s seeing.”

I didn't know what to say to that. My hands curled around the mug like it was the only thing anchoring me.

A plate landed in front of me. Eggs. Bacon. Toast. Perfectly ordinary. Too ordinary. He sat across from me and dug in like we were husband and wife and this was a cabin honeymoon and not... whatever the hell this actually was.

The silence stretched as I forced down a bite of toast I couldn't taste.

"After breakfast," he said between mouthfuls, "I'll take you out to see the dogs. Maybe the horses, too. If you're up for it."

"Why are you acting like nothing happened?" My voice came out small. Brittle.

He didn't even flinch.

"Because, Bluebell, nothing bad happened." He tilted his head, eyes steady. "You're here. You're safe. I made you breakfast. That's a good morning where I come from."

I stared at him. "You broke into my room."

"You left the light on." A shrug. "Felt like an invitation."

"You had a key."

"I have a key to every room. It's my house."

The words sat between us like poison. My stomach flipped. He reached out and brushed a crumb from my cheek. "You don't have to be scared of me."

But I was. Not in the way I had been at first—sharp and immediate—but in a quieter, deeper way now. The way you fear something that's already under your skin.

Something you might miss if it left. I looked at him then—really looked—and I don't know what came over me. Maybe it was the helplessness, or the calm way he was dismantling my sense of reality. Maybe it was the way my thighs still ached, and the way his voice made something in me clench even when I didn't want it to. But the word slipped out before I could catch it. Soft. Automatic.

“...Yes, Master.”

He froze.

The scrape of his fork against the plate stilled. His eyes met mine—green, unreadable.

A beat passed. Then another.

“Say that again,” he said, voice low.

Shame burned through me. I looked down at my lap, unable to answer.

He stood slowly, came around the table, and crouched beside me. His hand brushed mine. Gentle. Patient.

“You can say anything to me, my pretty little Bluebell.” His voice was velvet. “But if you call me that again, just know—” he leaned in, lips brushing the shell of my ear, “—you'll never get to take it back.”

I shivered.

THE END (for now!)