



Where the Dark Things Bloom

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: Prequel Novella for All the Things We Buried

Dark psychological gothic romance, taboo, step-siblings trope.

She was never supposed to leave, he was never supposed to stay. When her estranged father dies, Lenore Thorn returns to the one place she swore she'd never set foot in again- a crumbling gothic mansion on the edge of a town that whispers her family's name in fear.

Her only intention is to sell it and leave for good. But someone is already there.

Dorian Thorn, her stepbrother, never left. Raised beside her but never truly her brother, he has always been possessive, cruel, and unreadable.

He tells her the house is still theirs, that she belongs here and to him. She resists his cold touch, his hungry gaze, and the way he speaks of their past in riddles.

But when she discovers the darkest secrets that hide behind the walls; blood rituals, missing children, a locked room her father forbade her to enter- she realizes Dorian isn't the one keeping her here.

The house won't let her leave.

And neither will he.

Total Pages (Source): 64

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Prologue

Lenore

I woke up in a bed covered in white cotton sheets, wearing an old white dress my mom had made for me when I was sixteen. It had lace trim and silk straps that you could tie into bows at the top of your shoulders, a straight cut that reached all the way down to my feet. I looked around. The room I woke up in was not the same room I had fallen asleep in.

I remembered this—alot of it. Like some twisted déjà vu, a memory I knew had happened before. I remembered seeing this—maybe I'd dreamed it.

I pinched the tip of my skin to check if I was still dreaming, but the pain twisted in my stomach like all of this was real.

I wasn't dreaming. I couldn't be.

I sat up, holding the sheet beneath my fingers, looking around for a clock. Even though there wasn't one in the room, I knew it was 3:18 a.m.

I always know when it's 3:18 a.m. When the silence sharpens around rooms like this one, the house is listening, watching my every move.

I turned my head to the corner. The green wallpaper with white roses was peeling slowly from the wall like someone was peeling it—but no one was there. I was all alone.

My heart started pounding in my chest. My eyes widened as I exhaled.

The wallpaper began to bleed. It wasn't just water or mold. It was red. Blood slid slowly from the peeling corner.

It was that slow, pulsating red that didn't stain the wallpaper. It just hummed and whispered toward me as I screamed, but I couldn't look away. I just stared until my screams went silent. And when I blinked, there was a face in the corner, covered in blood. And when I blinked again, that face was mine.

The mirror with the golden frame on the opposite wall didn't reflect the room. It showed the hallway on the second floor. I remembered walking through it. There were still wet footprints on the dark green carpet that lay over the dark wooden floor. I could smell the mud—the same smell of dirt after a storm, just like the first day I came here.

But I didn't come here today. It's been weeks.

I stood up, walking slowly to the door on the left side of the room. As I touched the knob, it was still warm. Someone had just touched it before me.

Behind me, I could feel his whisper calling out, "You left once before. Why did you come back?"

And my mind went black. I had no memory of when I left, or when I first arrived here.

Then came the part that always finds me, always too late—his footsteps, slowly approaching, syncing with the beat of my heart.

My stepbrother was haunting me tonight.

Again.

ONE

Lenore

The city smells like burned pretzels and piss, but what's to expect from another Saturday night in the neighborhood I live.

I walk home from the coffee shop with my apron still in my tote bag and a dry oat milk crusted on my sleeve. It's past eleven, and the streets near 10th Avenue are mostly empty, except for a few people swaying under the streetlights, their faces buried in their phones or lost in whatever world you must live in to still be out this late.

I don't mind the walk. It's quiet, the kind of quiet New York only gets after midnight. My legs are sore and my shoes are damp from the sink leak under the espresso bar, but it's not like there's anything better waiting for me at home. Just a tiny apartment that always smells vaguely like someone else's cooking and a boyfriend I've known for thirty-four days.

Not even a month and a half.

That's all it took for us to live together.

That's all it took for me to start confusing comfort with something else.

But for me, anything was better than living in a tent under the bridge.

I just told myself I was lucky I had a roof under my head, a job, and pasta on my plate. I told myself I was happy even if I wasn't happy. I used to have everything

until I had nothing. And when you lose everything, you get to appreciate the little things you have.

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When I got there, the doorman from apartment 1B was already gone. Only his white plastic chair remained in the old lobby, glowing faintly under the front light like a ghost that hadn't realized it was time to leave.

I headed toward the elevator on the right. The wall beside it flaked with peeling paint in the corners, like it was shedding its skin. Just before the metal doors, a scrap of lined notebook paper caught my eye—ripped, crooked, and scrawled in thick black letters: OUT OF SERVICE.

I let out a breath, turned around, and made for the stairs at the end of the hallway. Four flights. My steps grew heavier with each level, my thighs burning by the third. At the top, I bent forward, palms on my knees, lungs dragging in the air like it owed me something.

“This is fine, Lenore,” I muttered between breaths. “It’ll make your ass tight.” Another sharp inhale. “Tight and hard,” I added, straightening up and fishing my keys from the bottom of my bag.

The hallway lights flickered as I walked. Of course, they did.

The whole building felt worn out—just like me.

At last, I reached the door. I leaned against the frame for a moment, catching another breath, slid the key into the lock, and turned it open.

There was a sound. A whisper coming from inside. I didn't pause. Troy was probably asleep. Probably the radio again—he always left it on. Late-night talk shows, or one

of those slow, moody documentaries with weird soundscapes and sleepy narrators.

The apartment was tight. The kitchen sat to the right—dark wooden cabinets, a fridge, an oven, two cupboards. A narrow wall tried to divide it from the living room, but space didn't allow much. Just two chairs. No sofa—we couldn't swing it. Off to the right, the bedroom led into the bathroom.

Exhausted, I moved to the chair and put my bag on it.

The whisper turned into moans. Short, breathy ones, followed by another moan—a sharp cry, then a low groan.

“Troy?” I called out, stepping toward the bedroom door, already cracked open. I pushed it wider.

My eyes widened.

The radio was off.

But Troy was on.

To be precise—he had his dick buried inside our second-floor neighbor. Her back arched like a cat in heat, ass raised high as he slammed into her with frantic, greedy thrusts. His hands gripped her hips, his head thrown back, moaning like it was the best orgasm of his life. They didn't even notice me.

I should have run. Should've turned and walked right out. But this was my apartment, too. I had nowhere else to go.

“What the fuck?” I shouted.

He froze mid-thrust and turned toward me, face draining of color. She flushed red, giggled, and scrambled to cover herself.

“Lenore?” he stammered. “What... Why are you home early?”

He told me he loved me last week. He kissed me this morning.

And that’s what he has to say?

“I can explain, baby,” he started toward me, hand out like I was something breakable. I backed up.

“Explain?” I snapped. “Explain your dick inside her?”

“Please,” he begged, stepping closer. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“It’s exactly what it looks like!” I threw my arms up, motioning to my hips like I was mimicking his goddamn rhythm. From the corner of my eye, I caught her slipping out of the room and vanishing through the door, not a word spoken.

Troy lunged forward, grabbed my hands, and pulled them against his chest. His chin dropped to my shoulder.

“Baby, it won’t happen again,” he whispered.

But it did happen.

I squirmed in his arms, trying to peel myself away from the smell of her—sweet, cheap floral perfume clinging to his skin. His grip tightened, strong, like I was something to be held down.

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I told him I loved him last night.

But now... now I'm not sure I meant it.

Maybe I said it because I was afraid.

Afraid of being alone. Afraid of being unloved.

Did I ever actually love him?

Or was I just scared of the silence?

I knew I didn't love him.

But when you've got nothing, sometimes you start convincing yourself that something is better than nothing at all.

This time, I shoved him hard.

His back hit the wall with a dull thud. And when his eyes locked onto mine, I knew what was coming.

So I shrugged, murmuring, "I'm sorry. So, so sorry."

"You better be, bitch," he snarled.

He stormed forward, grabbed me, spun me, and slammed me against the wall. His

palm pressed into my throat. Fingers digging into the skin, cutting off breath, my mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Desperate. Silent. Useless.

Just when I braced for the worst—another long night of bruises and pretending—he let go.

Pushed me away as I disgusted him.

“I’m taking a shower. Make us something to eat.”

And just like that, he was gone.

And I’d apologized?Me?

What the hell was I sorry for?

My hands went to my neck, covering the red-hot ache he left behind, steadying my breath like it could make the shame go away.

I hated myself for it. Every inch.

In the kitchen, I stared at the cabinets. They stared back like they knew. Like they’d seen this all before. One tear slipped free.

Before it hit the floor, I wiped it away.

He wasn’t worth the tear. But I was.

I moved toward the sink, grabbed a pot from the upper cupboard, dropped it in with a hollow clang, and turned on the tap. Water rushed out, echoing against metal. I held the pot like it might keep me from falling apart, fingers tightening around it like a

lifeline. And my thoughts—like they always did—drifted to my mother.

She stayed with my father until one day, her heart gave out. Not from love. From fear.

I tilted my head and caught sight of a white envelope near the fridge, half-tucked into the mail basket. On it were bold red letters.

That wasn't there before.

Troy never touched the mail. That was always my job. I knew what came in, and what went out. And I never placed that letter there.

Something twisted in me.

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I walked over, slowly. My hand moved on its own like it already knew. I picked up the envelope.

And I just stood there, holding it. Like it meant something. It might change everything.

Lenore Thorn,

Gloomsbury Manor,

66 Widow's Hollow Road

Ashwick, Massachusetts 01984

Panic started to settle in. My chest raised and fell against my ribs as I gasped for air, my fingers in panic opening the envelope and pulling out the letter. And when my eyes scanned it, reading, my tears blurred in tears.

“Dear Miss Thorn,

It is with sincere regret that I write to inform you of the passing of your father, Ezekiel Thorn, who passed last week.

Your stepmother, Vivienne Thorn, and your stepbrother, Dorian Thorn, were also lost in the same devastating accident that claimed their lives late last week. The circumstances, while still under review, have been described as deeply unfortunate.

As his sole surviving heir, you have inherited Gloomsbury Manor, along with all adjoining lands and holdings. There are a few legal matters that require your attention, and we kindly ask that you contact our office at your earliest convenience to begin the necessary proceedings.

Please accept our deepest condolences during this difficult time.

With respect,

Cameron Ellis

Attorney at Law”

With the envelope came the business card with contents;

Cameron Ellis, Esq.

Ellis & Wren Law Offices

“Discretion. Legacy. Resolution.”

1426 Ashgrove Lane, Salem, MA 01970(617) 555-0172

My eyes closed, and an envelope fell from my hands. My eyes filled with tears, my heart broke apart.

Dorian died? He died.

The tears weren't for me this time. They fell for him. And I couldn't stop them. One

after another, they slid down my cheeks as I stood there, silent, screaming on the inside.

I didn't want Troy to hear. And I didn't want him to know about Gloombsbury Manor.

When we met, he only saw a nineteen-year-old girl with nothing, sleeping in shelters, scraping by. He thought I was an orphan. He didn't know the truth.

He didn't know about Dorian.

I was born into old money. My family was one of the oldest and richest in Massachusetts. The Gloombsbury Manor still meant something in certain circles, told like a ghost story. And now, it was mine.

I exhaled, trying to steady myself, but the quiet sobs kept coming. Troy was still in the shower—I could hear the water pounding the tiles. Could hear the splash of water spilling over the pot I'd left running. But I couldn't move.

I closed my eyes. The black behind my lids lit up with flickers of memory, snapshots I hadn't seen in years. Dorian's face. My father. My stepmother. The heavy corridors of the manor. And just like that, like someone snapped their fingers, I was there again.

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July, 2014.

Massachusetts in July sweats through your skin. Mornings bright and blinding, afternoons a thunderstorm waiting to happen. That day was hot like hell, but the sky stayed gray, like even the sun couldn't bear to look.

My eighteenth birthday.

I sat curled in the corner of my bedroom, dragging a fingernail into the peeling green wallpaper beside my closet—scratching another tally into the wall, marking time like I was serving a sentence. All I wanted was to disappear. To never see any of them again.

I wore an oversized black shirt, its edge brushing my knees. My hair was tied in a loose bun, dark and messy. My cheeks were sticky with tears. My skin, was still raw, still feeling the strokes from the Father's belt.

The door creaked open. Then shut. I didn't look up. I didn't need to.

It was him.

Dorian.

My stepbrother for four years. He was a brat, a rebel, a wild thing in a house that punished anything out of line. But he never let them break him.

“Hey, Trouble,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Loving the makeup.”

“I like yours better,” I mumbled, eyes flicking up to the purple bruise blooming beneath his eye.

His black hair clung to his forehead, damp, and messy in a way that felt intentional without trying. His eyes, so dark they looked black in the shadows, watched me as he crouched down. His jaw was sharp and clean-shaven. Beautiful, in a way that felt misplaced in this house full of cold and ugly people.

But don’t get me wrong, he was dangerous. I knew that. He wore his bad like a scent, a warning.

That stupid black button-up, always with two buttons undone, revealing his silver cross. A middle finger to the whole idea of faith. Tight black jeans. Black All-Stars I wasn’t allowed to wear.

Sneakers are for boys, my stepmother would say. Girls wear heels and dresses.

I never got what I wanted.

Dorian reached for my hand. From behind his back, he pulled out a chocolate muffin with a single pink candle sticking out.

He placed it gently in my palm.

“Happy birthday, Trouble.”

I couldn’t help the smile. “You remembered.”

He lit the candle. His smirk replaced the smile, cocky and soft all at once.

“Make a wish.”

“What’s the point?” I whispered. “I never get my wish.”

“Maybe this time you will,” he said, raising a brow, hand sliding up to scratch the back of his head.

Those hands. Veined and strong, covered in tattoos like messy, beautiful stories. They were too much. Hewas too much. My body always betrayed me when he was near. It was wrong. So fucking wrong. He wasn’t blood, but we shared the same last name—and worse, he held pieces of my heart that no one else even knew existed.

And the heart... the heart doesn’t give a damn about rules. He knew that. Loved it. He liked to tease, to make me beg for things I wasn’t supposed to want.

And tonight, tonight he’d haunt me forever. Because after midnight, he knew there would be no more lines to cross. Nothing holding him back.

I closed my eyes, blew out the candle, and swallowed the breath that trembled in my chest.

He leaned in—too close. His voice brushed across my lips. “What did you wish for, Trouble?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t need to. He saw it in my face.

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“For me to leave,” I muttered.

He didn’t believe me. Of course, he didn’t. He chuckled, low and wicked. “Nah, Trouble. You wished for that kiss you never got.”

“No.” My eyes snapped open, hands pushing against his chest.

But my heart didn’t listen. It sounded like it wanted to leap into his.

He came closer anyway. Fingers skimmed my jaw and lifted my chin.

“Who would’ve thought mysisterwould be the one to make my dick so fucking hard,” he murmured.

“Ew. Gross.” I shoved him again. “Step-sister. Not sister. Huge difference.”

“I’m just teasing.” He leaned in again, eyes dropping to my lips. “But you just confirmed what I already knew.”

I stiffened. “And what’s that?”

He hissed softly, a grin spreading slowly like he had all the time in the world.

“You’re in love.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. My thoughts fractured, like past and present bleeding together. And just like a snap something brought me back to the present.

Tears slipped down my cheeks again, uninvited.

God, I wished I could go back. Back to that night. Back to before everything shattered.

But I wasn't there anymore.

I was here. Two years later.

In a cramped apartment with a man I didn't love, holding a letter I didn't expect, and a heart I wasn't sure ever fully belonged to me.

I opened my eyes, now swollen and red.

The water in the sink had stopped. I moved the pot to the stove and turned on the heat. From the bedroom, I heard the radio click on—Troy's post-shower routine.

Back to reality.

I bent down and picked up the letter from the floor. Folded it carefully and slid it into my pocket.

Then my phone rang.

A sharp sound, snapping me upright like an alarm clock. I walked to the living room and pulled the phone from my bag.

The screen glowed.

Familiar numbers.

Capital letters above:HOME.

I gasped. My fingers loosened, and the phone slipped.

How?

Who was calling me? Fromthere?

TWO

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LENORE

Troy was snoring so loudly that I could see the grains of dust falling from the cracks of the ceiling that were probably made by his loud snores. And I just twisted left and right in the bed.

I couldn't sleep. All I thought was a call from home that wasn't registered on my phone. And when I wanted to call the same number, it was disconnected. It was like house knew and it was calling me.

I got up, looking at myself in the mirror that was on the opposite side of the bed. I always hated how I looked, how pale I was, how dark my hair was, how fragile and thin I got. But most of all, I hated who I became. I was running from one cage to another, and I was so afraid to leave, but I wasn't even comfortable to stay.

I moved from the mirror, sneaking on tiptoes until I reached the closet door. I got the jeans from my closet and pulled them on. I grabbed a few T-shirts, turned around to check if Troy was still asleep, and walked out of the bedroom, holding my breath until the door closed.

I could still hear his loud snores, which were now making this apartment even smaller than it was. The noise just echoed through the silence, and he just continued. I didn't even know how I used to fall asleep to that.

I didn't bother turning on the lights. The streetlamp outside the window lit the living room enough, making the room turn into soft yellow gold that made shadows of furniture look like it was breathing.

I stood still for a second.

My heart wouldn't slow down.

That call. Thatdamn call.

I picked up my phone again. Still, no missed calls were logged, like it hadn't happened. But I know what I saw. I know what I heard.

“Home.” That word hadn't meant anything to me in years. Not until tonight.

I stuffed my charger, wallet, and letter into my tote bag, then turned toward the front door. Paused.

No shoes.

I circled back to the chair in the living room, where my old All-Stars were tossed on the floor, sides collapsed like they'd given up. I slipped them on—still stained with two old coffee spills—and tied the laces with fingers that trembled more than I wanted to admit. Grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair. Back to the door.

I hesitated at the knob.

Then, slowly, I opened it. The hinges gave a long creak. I winced but didn't stop.

The hallway was colder than it was before. The lights above buzzed, one of them blinking like it was about to die. For a moment, I stood there in the middle, staring down the hallway toward the stairs.

Something told me to run.

I didn't.

I walked slowly, one silent step after another.

I reached the stairs, and just went down, walking like it was just another Monday morning, even if I had no idea what day it was, every day was the same for me.

I reached the street, and air brushed my cheeks. It got colder, and it was dumping like the sky was about to cry the tears I wasn't able to cry. I zipped up my jacket and stood on the curb, blinking into the distance.

What the hell was I doing?

I didn't even know. I just knew I couldn't be in that apartment anymore. Couldn't hear Troy breathe. Couldn't feel the walls of that place closing in.

The city had its own heartbeat at night. And mine wasn't syncing with it anymore.

I opened my phone again and scrolled through the contacts. No one to call. I had no one. No choice.

Except... maybe one.

Cameron Ellis.

I dug into my bag and pulled the card from the envelope. I stared at his card, now creased at the edges. That polished serif font. That calm, respectable "Discretion. Legacy. Resolution." tagline.

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I hit “Call.”

The line rang once. Twice. And then—

“Hello.” A deep voice cut through the silence.

His voice was calm, and smooth, like someone who never rushed for anything.

I swallowed. “This is Lenore Thorn.”

Silence.

Then, he said softly, “Miss Thorn... I was hoping you’d call, but not hoping you would call at 3 a.m. on Saturday.”

Fuck. It was Saturday.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, my voice cracking. “I just...” I stopped. “Never mind. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“No, I’m awake now,” he replied. “When would you like to meet?”

“Meet?” I repeated, my breath catching in my throat.

“Yes,” he said. “There are a few documents you’ll need to sign.”

“Oh. Right, of course.” I let out a shaky breath and smacked my palm against my

forehead.”I’ll be there in six hours or so. I’ll catch the next train to Boston, then take the local line into Massachusetts.”

“Call me once you arrive,” he said with a sigh. “I’ll stop by the manor.”

“Thank you. Good night,” I murmured and hung up the phone.

I kept walking, arms wrapped tightly around myself, my steps quickening with every block. Part of me felt like Troy could wake up at any moment, figure out I was gone, and come after me. But I couldn’t keep living like that—flinching, waiting, pretending.

Not anymore.

After two years, I finally had somewhere to go. And maybe, just maybe, Gloomsbury Manor was the answer. A second chance. Or the end of the first act.

The train station was almost empty when I arrived. A few people were slumped on benches, asleep beneath flickering lights. One man had a knit cap at his feet, and a few coins inside.

My chest ached. I used to be one of them.

I dug into my tote, pulled out what little cash I had, and tucked it into the hat. It wasn’t much, but it could buy a warm meal. And sometimes, that was everything.

The train to Boston wasn’t scheduled to arrive until four. I found a spot near the corner, leaned against the wall, and let my eyes close.

Darkness flickered behind my eyelids. But every few seconds, flashes of passing train lights blinked through—interrupting sleep, and pulling me backward. The memories

came like old film reels.

I was back in April 2012.

The house smelled like boiled onions and bitterness. My stepmother's voice came from the kitchen, mid-fight with my father. Again.

And I was sitting on the stairs.

Fourteen years old. Playing with a doll I'd long outgrown. Pretending. Pretending I was her—anyone but myself. Anyone but a girl trapped in Gloombsbury Manor, waiting for someone to rescue her from a family that never cared enough to try.

The doorbell rang. Through the rippled glass at the top of the wooden door, a tall shadow shifted, its outline stretching far above the frame. I froze halfway up the stairs, one foot planted on the next step, breath caught. We weren't expecting anyone.

The bell rang again—sharper this time. The shadow moved, hand rising to brush fingers through its hair. "Can you answer the damn door?" Dad's voice cut from the kitchen.

I flinched.

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My shoulders curled instinctively, and I slowly peeled myself from the step, feet barely making a sound as I crept toward the entrance. Before my hand reached the knob, the bell shrieked for a third time.

I opened it.

He stood there—tall, lean, dressed in black from shirt to tight jeans, a leather jacket clinging to him like it was made just for him. One hand pressed the doorbell still, and the other held a white plastic terrarium. Inside, a snake coiled lazily under a heat lamp.

I gasped. Couldn't help it.

His black hair fell across his face in messy strands, two stubborn locks refusing to stay pushed back, no matter how many times his fingers swiped them aside.

Who was this guy?

Muscles twitched subtly beneath the fabric of his sleeves as he moved forward. I'd never seen anyone like him—certainly not on my doorstep. My stomach twisted into impossible knots, and something unfamiliar flickered in my chest as his eyes met mine.

“Hi,” he said, gaze holding. “Who are you?”

I couldn't find my voice. Just stepped back, breath thick in my throat, and turned toward the stairs.

“Dorian!” my stepmom called from the kitchen, her voice lifting as she came down the hall.

She opened her arms as she approached him, smiling wide. “Welcome.”

But his smile left his lips, fading as soon as she got close.

“Mother,” he said, closing the door behind him. “So nice of you to allow me to stay here.”

He was my stepbrother—Vivian’s son from her first marriage. They sent him away when he was twelve. Now, ten years later, he was back.

I looked at her. At the way she smiled like nothing had ever happened. And at my father too, standing in the kitchen doorway, wrapped in his navy cardigan, cigar resting in the corner of his mouth. He stared at Dorian like he was some lost heir returned from the dead.

We were all so good at pretending.

I smiled, hollow and fake, and moved back up to the middle of the staircase. My fingers curled around the plastic limbs of the doll I’d left behind.

“Lenore, darling,” Vivian called, “would you take my Dorian upstairs and show him the attic? We’ve decorated—it has a bed and all.”

“The attic?” I blinked. “But—“

“Do you want to take his place?” my father said, voice rough behind me.

I turned slowly, catching his eyes. Shook my head.

Vivian smiled and patted Dorian's shoulder as if sealing some silent agreement. Then she turned and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving the hallway colder somehow.

"What's with the doll?" Dorian asked, climbing the steps toward me, eyes moving to the toy in my hands.

"They don't talk," I muttered, standing and rolling my eyes.

He laughed under his breath. "Aren't you a bit old to be playing with dolls?"

"Aren't you a bit old to move back in with your mom?" I shot back, stepping up one more stair.

"I don't have a choice," he said quietly, trailing after me.

At the second-floor landing, I stopped and pointed toward the attic door—barely open, like it was holding its breath.

"Lock it at night," I said. "Father doesn't like anyone awake after dark."

His jaw tensed. "You're no fun," he muttered as he brushed past me. "Sister."

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I watched him head toward the attic steps, that word still echoing behind him.

“I’m not your sister,” I said. Then I slammed the door shut.

The sound cracked like a whip pushing me back.

Back in the present.

Standing at the edge of the train station, the platform was slick with rain. A gust of wind tugged at my coat. The world felt heavier now as if dragging me backward.

I was never supposed to leave, and he was never supposed to stay. But I left for him, and he stayed for me. And even if that meant never to see him again, I wanted to run away more than I wanted to stay, and he had no choice. He chose to stay so I can ran away.

The train finally arrived, and I boarded, sitting at seat number twenty-one, and I was on my way to where it all began.

I never liked trains. Something about the way they rattled over the tracks, the way the world blurred past the window like it was trying to outrun me.

I sat with my back pressed against the cold seat, hands curled around the strap of my tote bag like it was the only thing holding me to reality. The train was almost empty, except for a man snoring two rows behind me and an elderly woman staring blankly out the window, her reflection fractured by streaks of rain.

I didn't remember falling asleep. But at some point, my body must have shut down because I woke up to something pressing against my chest.

At first, I thought it was just the heaviness of exhaustion. But then I felt it again.

A pressure.

Like fingers trailing down my sternum.

I gasped, sitting up so fast that my head smacked against the seat behind me. My breath was shallow, my heart slamming against my ribs.

No one was there.

Of course, no one was there.

The train continued like nothing was happening.

I exhaled shakily, running a hand through my hair. It was just a dream. Or maybe just a creeping dread gnawing at me since I left the apartment.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling.

Like something had reached for me in my sleep.

Like something had followed me onto this train.

I turned to the window, watching the darkness shift outside.

Gloomsbury Manor was waiting.

And whether I was ready or not, I was going home.

THREE

LENORE

The train finally stopped at the station, and I was the first to step out. I couldn't stand being inside for another second. I couldn't stand people, and I couldn't stand myself enough to stay seated. I hadn't packed a thing—like I didn't know whether I was going to stay. But something in me did know. And still, between being stuck with Troy the cheater and a haunted house, I chose the house. Because really, how much worse could it get?

People should be afraid of people—not ghosts. Ghosts can't hurt us. They're just restless things, waiting for answers. But people? People carry that quiet evil, the kind that doesn't show until it does. We don't truly know people. But ghosts—we know them. We know what it feels like to be unseen. I do.

Maybe I was a ghost all along. Maybe that's why no one ever really loved me. Maybe I was the poison in the bloodline. Maybe I've always been haunting Gloomsbury Manor, even before I came back.

I walked to the end of the station, the Massachusetts air hitting my lungs, different from New York. It wasn't dry. It was damp and gray. And something about it felt stuck in time, like if I went back a hundred years, nothing would have changed. Not the weather, not the people.

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Gloomsbury Manor was fifteen minutes away, the same fifteen minutes I used to run from. Now, I walked them back.

I took a deep breath, eyes shut, memories flashing in again. The road, the path, all too familiar.

Two days after my birthday, July 2014.

I had a small backpack I kept hidden under the bed. I even saved some leftovers from lunch, just in case. I packed them along with a bottle of water. The plan was simple: wait until everyone was asleep and leave. But that's hard to do when the windows have bars and the doors are always locked. Still, I knew I had to try.

I waited for midnight, lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling wallpaper. It had started peeling at the corners again. No matter how many times Dad brought someone to fix it, it always came back. They blamed it on isolation. I knew better. Something was wrong with this place.

A soft knock came at the door. I didn't move. Just turned to the side, pretending to sleep. The door creaked open. I heard the footsteps. I knew they were his. I always knew his steps.

He shut the door behind him. Sat down on the bed. Then lay next to me. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me close. My heart was pounding so loud I thought it would give me away.

When you have no one, and someone who is forbidden touches you like you matter,

your body betrays you. Your heart drinks it in. Your mind sins in silence while your lips stay still. And we had each other—because we had no one else.

“You won’t leave me,” he whispered like he already knew. “You’ll never leave me.”

His mind was broken—just as much as my heart was when I lied, “Never.” Tears welled in my eyes as I stared at the wall. I bit my lower lip, nerves twisting inside me, then turned to face him—met his dark eyes.

“Promise me,” he said, wiping my tears with his thumb. “Promise. Me.”

“I promise,” I whispered, another tear sliding down.

He kissed my forehead, pulling me closer. “I have only you, Trouble. I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t,” I said, wrapping my arms around him like it was the last time I ever would.

“Then why does it feel like I already lost you?” he asked, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

I bit my lip again, our eyes locked. I couldn’t lie this time—and he knew it. And instead of begging me to stay again, he asked, “What was your birthday wish?”

“A kiss,” I whispered, eyes closing, the tears still coming.

And just before I opened them, his lips touched mine. His hands pulled me in, his mouth moved against mine, slow and deep, his tongue tasting the words I never said. He kissed me like I belonged to him. Maybe I did. Maybe I wanted to. If I stayed, it would be for him.

It was wrong. All of it. My body betrayed me, but I couldn't stop. I pulled him closer, wrapped my leg around his hip, fingers tangled in his hair—I couldn't stop.

He stole my first kiss. But I wanted him to take it.

Then the door burst open. Dad.

He yelled something. I didn't move. Dorian didn't either. He kept kissing me like time had frozen. And maybe I wanted it to.

“Get off your sister!” Dad roared, already unbuckling his belt.

I heard the snap of leather and the whistle of air. Then it struck Dorian's back.

He gasped against my lips, finally pulling away. He still held my hand.

Dad yanked him off me. Dorian hit the floor hard. The belt came down again. Again. The fabric of his shirt tore, his skin breaking. I screamed, throwing myself at them, trying to protect him. But the belt turned on me too.

“Ezekiel punishes sinners, and you have sinned!” Dad shouted, the belt gripped tighter, lashing across my body.

All I could see were Dorian's eyes. And all he saw were mine. My tears, my screams as the leather bit into me.

He grabbed me, spun me around, and held me tight, shielding my body with his own.

“I got you, Trouble,” he whispered.

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Then she appeared. My stepmother. Standing in the doorway, watching in silence, wearing some deep red cape like she'd dressed for a ritual. And she laughed. Shelaughedas Dad beat Dorian numb.

“Run,” Dorian whispered.

“Run!” he shouted this time, shoving me free.

I stood, shaking. Looked back one last time. Then ran. Brushed past Dad. Past Dorian. Toward the door. Toward her. She didn't even try to stop me.

I rushed down the stairs, my soul calling for him. Tears streamed without permission. I couldn't keep going—I couldn't run. I stopped.

And then I turned. I ran back.

Before I even reached the front door, she grabbed me. Her nails dug into my arm as she pulled me away. Over her shoulder, I saw him. Dorian's body is on the floor. Still. Not moving.

“No!” I screamed, shoving her with everything I had.

But then Father appeared behind me. Without a word, he seized me by the arm and dragged me toward the attic door. I fought. I kicked. I begged. He didn't listen.

He shoved me through and slammed the door behind me, locking it. I pounded my fists against the wood, again and again—hard enough to shake the walls, hard enough

to wake the dead. But no one came.

No one came for me.

No one came for him.

I sank on the stairs, burying my face in my palms, my elbows pressed to my knees.

Minutes passed. Or maybe hours. And when the tears finally dried, I stood and climbed the steps.

The attic. Dorian's room for years. But it was the first time I'd ever been here.

Dust clung to everything. The air was stale. There was no bed, just a single blanket folded neatly on the wooden floor. No pillow. No mattress. Just that blanket.

Boxes were stacked along the walls, old furniture draped in white sheets like ghosts waiting to be remembered. It didn't feel like someone lived here. It felt like someone hid here.

Only one thing wasn't covered: a wooden chest in the corner.

I moved toward it, and knelt, my heart cracking open all over again. I lifted the lid.

Inside were his clothes. Black jeans. Black shirts. Two jackets, all folded carefully. At the bottom, tucked in the corner, was a golden chain.

My golden chain. He kept it.

I reached for it, but as I moved one of his shirts, something slipped out and fell to the floor. A Polaroid photo.

Us.

Sitting on the sofa on my fourteenth birthday. My first time drunk. The night we played Memory Lane. The night he took that photo. He'd kept it.

It was the only picture in the chest. And it was us.

I crumpled to the floor, sobs rising again as the photo trembled in my hands. Somewhere below me, he was hurting—maybe worse. Alone.

I didn't feel the pain anymore—the stinging welts across my back, my arms. I barely noticed them. All I could think about was him.

I leaned against the chest, pressing the photo to my chest. I stared at his eyes, the way they looked at mine in the picture.

Then I closed my eyes, holding onto that look, letting it pull me back in time.

I stood in front of Gloombsbury Manor, a Polaroid picture in my hand. It's crazy how happy we looked—how much it seemed like family. But no one would ever know how miserable we were. How he wasn't even my blood. He was my stepbrother. How behind every smile, something is hiding. And once you do see it, it rips you apart.

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Because the person behind that smile... was the saddest person I've ever known. And he only smiled to makemesmile.

I wiped a tear from my cheek and reached for the iron gate. Overgrown rose roots wrapped around the rusted bars like veins. I pushed it open. The hinges groaned as I stepped onto the dusty path, the grass on either side damp and thick with fog—even though it was nearly noon.

Gloomsbury Manor sat atop Bloomy Hill, the only house for miles, surrounded by a sprawling yard, two side gardens, and a single stone wall enclosing it all. Only one gate. Only one way out.

The manor rose from the center, an old Gothic building with dark brick walls, a steep black rooftop, and oval windows barred with iron. It had three floors. On the first: the kitchen to the right, a long hallway lined with black and white tiles, dark green walls, and faded family portraits. A dark wooden staircase split the space down the middle, leading to the second floor. To the left was the living room, with a large stone fireplace and two cracked leather sofas, still sitting where they always had.

The second floor held the bedrooms—six in total. And out of all of them, they chose the attic for Dorian. Like he didn't deserve a real room. Like he belonged somewhere forgotten.

We weren't the manor's first owners. According to legend, or at least what Father said, it was built in 1894. The original owner hanged himself after discovering his wife had drowned their two children in the upstairs bathtub. People said their ghosts still haunted these walls. Father called them history lessons.

And now the manor belonged to me.

Along with all its ghosts. All its curses.

And the truth? I believed in every single one of them. But I had nowhere else to go. Nowhere else to run. No matter how close I got to anything, I was always too far away. That was my curse—never finding love. Always circling the edge of something almost. Stuck in the endless loop of what if and what could've been.

And that's the worst kind of pain: wondering.

I wondered all the time. What if I'd stayed that night? What if I hadn't let him go? Would I be dead in that same accident? Would I haunt these walls too?

But most of all... I wondered what if he had come with me. If we'd escaped together, just the two of us. In some other universe, would we have been happy?

He told me he'd survive if I left. That he could handle it. But deep down, I think he was waiting for me to say I'd wait for him. That I wouldn't choose anyone else.

And now, I know the truth: we were both chasing a happy ending that never existed.

Maybe in another life, he found his happiness.

His happy ending.

And maybe, in that life, I told him what I couldn't say in this one—that if he had asked me to stay, begged instead of letting me go... I would have.

If he had told me he couldn't live without me, that he would wait, that he would fight—maybe I would've said it too. No matter where I went, no matter where I

was, he was always the last thought before I fell asleep and the first one when I woke up.

And yes, this house was haunted.

But not by ghosts.

It was haunted by him.

They say the places where we lose someone never truly let us go. They stay in the walls, in the air, in the quiet. And being here again—back in this town, in this house—only fills me with morewhat-ifs. More wondering. But what it doesn't give me... is a way back. A way to live it all again.

So I stepped into Gloombsbury Manor.

Its shadows reached out to greet me. Its walls whispered in silence, and the darkness closed around me like a secret I had once buried.

The moment I crossed the threshold, a wind brushed past me. A sharp gust hit my face, cold enough to catch my breath in the air like smoke.

And I realized then—I wasn't just someone returning.

I was just another ghost who came home.

FOUR

LENORE

Theysayahousecarries the memories of all the people who lived in it. But what if

those memories are horrors? What if the house remembers? What if it knows? What if it makes you remember?

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They say when you return to the place where you were broken, the cracks inside you open like old wounds.

I walked through the hallway, fingers brushing along the green wallpaper. The texture was rough beneath my touch, brittle in places, like the walls themselves had been holding their breath. I kept moving, footsteps soft on the black-and-white tile, until I reached the staircase.

That's when I heard it, footsteps behind me.

I gasped, turning quickly.

At the front door stood a man in his thirties, wearing a blue suit. He was handsome in that polished, clean-shaven kind of way. But the wedding ring on his finger told me he wasn't here to flirt. He held an envelope in one hand, walking toward me.

"Miss Thorn?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. His smile didn't quite reach his eyes, it tightened his jaw instead.

"Yes," I said, clearing my throat. "That's me."

"My name is Cameron. We spoke on the phone earlier," he said, holding out the envelope.

"Here are the documents to finalize the transfer of ownership for Gloombsbury Manor," he explained, pulling a paper and pen from the envelope. "Sign here."

“Okay,” I replied, taking the sheet from him and beginning to read.

I’m not dumb. I’d walk straight into a toxic relationship, sure—but when it came to paperwork? I read everything.

My eyes skimmed the document. The words blurred slightly, but I kept reading. Line after line of legalese, dry and suffocating: inheritance clauses, estate transfer, property taxes.

And then—Clause 7B:

“The inheritor agrees to remain on the premises for a minimum of thirty consecutive days following the transfer of ownership.”

I tapped the paragraph with my nail. “What’s this?”

Cameron shifted slightly, his smile frozen like a mask. “Oh, that. Just an old stipulation from your father’s original will. Sentimental, really. Think of it as... honoring the estate before it officially changes hands.”

“So I’m locked in here for a month?”

“Not locked in,” he said, too quickly. “Just... contractually encouraged to stay.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Encouraged sounds like a very polite word forced.”

He chuckled. “You can leave, Miss Thorn. Of course. But the ownership won’t be finalized, and if you’re planning to sell, you can’t legally proceed until the condition is met.”

Convenient. Too convenient.

“I mean, it’s not that I have nowhere else to go?!” I waved the paper between us, “So after a month house is mine?”

“House, money, everything with it,” he stretched a wide smile on his lips.

“Money?” I asked, looking at him, “I thought I just got the house?”

“Your father also left behind sixty-five million dollars,” he said, “It’s on the other side...” he came closer turning around the paper, “paper,” he said, clearing his throat.

I exhaled, looking down.

As a person who reads these documents before rushing into something, I suck.

“Okay,” I said, “I guess I have to stay.”

He nodded, handing me a pen. “Sign here,” he said, and just like that, I took the pen and leaned it on the small table in the hallway, and I signed the document.

Just like that, I will be trapped here for a month.

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He took the documents, slipping them back into the yellow envelope. “Very well,” he said, turning toward the front door.

But he paused. Something held him there. And then, he turned back to me.

“Don’t you want to know what happened to them?”

“I do,” I said quietly, my gaze falling to the floor, landing on my worn-out All-Star sneakers.

But the truth was, I didn’t want to know what happened to him. Not really. Because the moment I knew, the moment it became real, my heart would break all over again. And now, I had to be here. In this house. With the ghosts. With his ghost.

“Their bodies were never found,” Cameron started.

But I cut him off. “Then how do you know they died?”

He met my eyes. “Blood. So much blood,” he said, shaking his head. He stepped onto the porch like the memory clung to his shoes. “The detective said there were signs of twenty-three people. The walls were painted in blood. The floorboards were soaked. But no bodies. None.”

“Twenty-three?” I whispered, glancing around the hall, the staircase, the silence.

“Who cleaned the place up?”

His face went pale. “That’s the thing,” he exhaled, like it cost him something to say it. “No one did.”

A cold chill crept along my spine, curling over my skin in slow, crawling waves. Goosebumps bloomed down my arms. The air felt suddenly thinner. Heavier.

“Oh,” was all I could manage.

“If you need anything else,” he said, voice quieter now, “anything at all... call me.”

“I will,” I replied, stepping toward the front door. “Have a nice day.”

He raised one hand, a slow wave, then turned and walked away. And just like that, he was gone.

I reached for the door. But before my fingers could touch the handle, it slammed shut with a bang. The wind howled through the cracks. I stood frozen, watching the fog press against the windows, watching my breath rise in the air like a ghost of its own. I rubbed my arms, trying to warm myself.

The house had already begun to remember me.

I walked into the living room. The old brown leather sofa still sat in front of the fireplace, unchanged by time. I brushed my fingers across the leather—faded, cracked, but familiar.

And then I was back.

Back in 2012.

A month after Dorian moved in.

One of those nights when sleep was impossible, when your body refused to stay still, and your soul needed to move anywhere except the direction of your bed. That night, I found myself walking toward the living room.

The light was still on. I heard the soft crackle of firewood burning, and the pop of embers. I stepped silently down the stairs, creeping in slowly. And then I saw him.

Dorian was lying in front of the fireplace on a dark blue blanket, his back to me.

And his back—His back was covered in scars. Burns. Cuts. Words carved into flesh: bastard, brat.

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop the sob that tried to rise.

They had treated him like he was an animal. Like he didn't deserve kindness. Like he belonged in pain.

I moved closer, my hand brushing against the sofa, breath caught in my throat.

I heard him growl, "It's not polite to stare."

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“Do I have a choice?” I said, kneeling in front of him.

He turned toward me, his eyes shadowed, his skin smudged with ash. Even then, covered in pain and soot, he was still beautiful.

He was drinking. The glass was still half full. The firelight shimmered in the whiskey like it was alive.

He sat up, looking at me. “See anything you like, sister?”

I scanned him, from top to bottom. His arms were tattooed with meaningless tattoos, but somehow, they told a story. A full sleeve, reaching up to a snake that coiled around his neck, its tongue flicking at his collarbone like it was alive.

I swallowed hard, dragging my eyes back up to meet his.

“No,” I said, clearing my throat. “And I’m not your sister.”

He rolled his eyes, a low chuckle rumbling from his throat. “Step-sister,” he said, lifting a brow, his smirk turning cold. It crawled over my skin like frost.

His gaze dropped to the edge of my nightdress; white, vintage, too big for me by two sizes. It drowned my shape. Compared to him, in his sharp clothes and sharper presence, I felt like a ghostwearing someone else’s past. But that dress was all I had left of my Mom, and sometimes, I needed to feel close to something that wasn’t already gone.

I turned to leave, not trusting myself to speak. But I barely shifted when his voice snapped behind me.

“Sit down.”

I tilted my head, smiling without warmth. “Why would I?”

I stepped closer, turning fully to face him.

“We can play a game,” he said.

“What game would that be, huh?” I crossed my arms, already bracing.

“Memory Lane,” he replied, sipping slowly from his glass. “You know, so I can really get to know my little step-sister.”

I hesitated, then lowered myself onto the couch. “Alright. How do you play?”

He leaned forward. “Simple. I name a memory—say, first kiss—and you tell the story. Or maybe your first time...” His eyes narrowed, watching me too closely.

I bit down on my lip, a lump rising in my throat. “I haven’t... I never kissed anyone.”

His laugh was loud, disbelieving. “You’re joking, right?”

“No.” I stood abruptly. “I don’t.”

“Sit down,” he said, gripping my wrist and tugging me back.

I shook him off. “What’s the point of your game if I’ve never done the things you want to hear about?”

“Fine,” he said, voice dropping. “Then let’s just talk.”

I sighed, eyeing his drink. “Can I have a glass?”

He moved it out of reach, meeting my eyes. “You’re sixteen.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

“So,” he began, slow now, “what are you most afraid of?”

I blinked. That wasn’t a casual question. Not a get-to-know-you question. The way he asked it... it was like he already knew the answer.

“I don’t know,” I muttered.

I lied.

He leaned in, his voice a murmur. “I think you do. You just don’t want to say it. Saying it makes it real.”

His stare pinned me, too long, too intense.

“I’m not scared of anything,” I said again, but softer. Less sure.

His smile was slow, almost pitying. “Not even me?”

Silence dropped. The fire popped. Outside, the wind stirred. Inside, the air tightened.

“I’m afraid of my dad,” I blurted.

He didn’t flinch.

“Did he...” Dorian’s voice faltered, then steadied. “Did he do something to you?”

I pulled back my sleeve. Showed him the burn scar on my wrist. I’d been twelve.

His jaw clenched as his eyes scanned me, searching for more. But he didn’t say a word. Instead, he reached out, fingers brushing against mine, holding onto me.

“You don’t have to be scared anymore,” he said. His hand stayed on mine, grounding me. He leaned closer and pushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear. And then—

Creak.

A door opened somewhere down the hall. A gust of cold air slid from the basement, brushing over us like a cold breath.

“Did you hear that?” I whispered, backing away.

We moved together, quiet. At the wall, we leaned in, listening.

Whispers. Steps.

Then they appeared.

Four men in black robes, hoods tall and triangular, gliding out from the basement like they had always been there.

I gasped. Dorian’s palm clamped over my mouth, his body pressing mine into the wall. “Quiet,” he whispered against my ear.

Voices drifted from them:

“...the offering must be made after she turns eighteen. She must not leave the house.”

My heart hammered against my ribs. Dorian’s breath was warm on my cheek, but his body was stiff like he’d known this was coming.

As they disappeared into the west wing, he slowly removed his hand from my mouth.

“Go to your room,” he whispered, “and lock the door.”

I didn’t say a word, I just nodded and ran. He stayed below, watching. When I

reached my door, I turned the lock and stood still, pressing my back against the wood.

What is happening?

I stared down at my hands—nails dug so deep into my palms, they left bruises. This wasn't a dream.

I used to hear whispers in the hallways at night, but I told myself it was just my imagination. That maybe the house was old. That maybe it was haunted.

But houses don't haunt. People do.

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I opened my eyes.

The same old couch sat there. The cold fireplace. The family portrait still hanging above it, untouched by time.

Green wallpaper with white roses curled around a golden frame. The oil painting inside showed my father, my stepmother, and me—ten years old, smiling like I didn't know better.

No Dorian.

Like he never existed.

But he did.

He was part of this family.

FIVE

LENORE

The kitchen window overlooked the garden—what used to be a garden, anyway. Roses still clung to life out there, the last stubborn bloom in a yard slowly giving in to rot. Mom had planted them herself. Roses don't live forever, she'd said, but the memory of them does. And she was right.

Even after I left, I held on to those roses like they were the only thing this place had

ever given me. Wherever I went, I remembered them—red against the green, her hands buried in soil, the way her hair caught the sunlight. I remembered that time with her. And everything that came after.

Two different worlds.

I missed her.

I set the glass in the sink and walked to the door on the right—the one that led out to the garden. My hand wrapped around the doorknob, and I pushed it open.

The air outside hit differently. Heavier.

Every flower in the yard had wilted, browned, and collapsed into itself, all except the roses. They stood proud, untouched by weather, and time as well... like the house still remembered what she loved. What I loved.

To the right, the ground looked disturbed—patches of grass dug up and piled like someone had started digging and stopped halfway through. To the left stood the old wooden pavilion. Once my favorite spot to read. Now it looked like something left behind by the years.

Funny how some things stay the same, even when we don't.

I turned back toward the house. As I stepped inside, something moved in the corner of my eye—a shadow moving too fast, too quietly.

I froze.

My heartbeat crashed in my chest. My breath locked up. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even move.

Then footsteps faded.

No. No, this can't be real.

My thoughts scrambled. Was someone here? Was I being watched? Was I even alone?

I stayed frozen to the floor, fear holding me still. But somewhere deep down, my body knew it had to move.

Move. Just move.

One foot forward. Then the other. I kept going, one step at a time until the living room came into view.

That's when the phone rang.

The sound split the silence like glass. Echoes ran down the hallway, into the walls, under my skin. Cold sweat slid down my temple. My hands trembled.

The phone sat on the wall, the long white cord twisted like a snake coiled too tight. I picked up the receiver, my voice barely there.

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“Hello?”

Nothing.

Just breathing—slow, too close.

My grip tightened. “Who is this?”

The breath shifted into a melody.

A lullaby.

The same one I used to sing to myself when I couldn’t sleep.

My stomach dropped. My knees buckled. Everything inside me sank.

It wasn’t possible.

The voice on the line was warped like it had been pulled from underwater—muffled, twisted. But it was him.

“Missed me, little sister?”

Click.

Silence.

It was his voice. Itwashim.

But the line had gone dead. The silence that followed felt louder than the ring.

The phone slipped from my hand. My heart thundered in my chest. I pressed my hands to my face, trying to wake myself up. Trying to figure out if this was a nightmare or if I was still somehow awake.

Then I heard footsteps above me. Running. Then... crawling.

I turned, breath catching, and ran for the stairs. Every step was a betrayal—my legs stumbling, my balance tipping. Fear made my body disobey. I didn't know if it was him. Or if something else had come in his shape to haunt me.

A sudden gust of air brushed my back like it was pointing.

Toward the bathroom.

I didn't want to go. But something pulled me.

The door was ajar.

I stepped slowly to the right, peeking through the narrow crack. And there, lying on the floor tiles, was a doll. One of those old ones—thread hair, porcelain face, cracked where one eye used to be.

Then a voice said softly. Playful.

“Come and find me...”

A giggle.

“Come and find me.”

I reached to close the door.

But the doll’s head twisted. Snapped toward me.

Itlookedat me.

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I gasped, slammed the door shut, and ran.

Down the stairs, fast, panic bursting through my chest like fire. But as I hit the bottom step, hands clamped down on my shoulders.

I screamed and spun around, but no one was there.

My body shook. Pulse screaming in my ears, breath ragged. But I kept running. Two steps at a time. I threw the front door open and sprinted out—

But the world spun.

And I was back inside the house.

“What the fuck?” I shouted, turning, trying the door again—grabbing the handle, pulling—running again.

But every time I crossed the threshold, the world twisted.

And I was back inside.

This house wasn’t just haunted—it was haunting me.

I was shaking, uncontrollably. I tried again, sprinting toward the door, but it was useless. And then, I saw it.

At the top of the stairs.

The doll.

It tilted its head.

“I can see you,” it whispered. “I can see you.”

Giggling followed, high-pitched and wrong.

I scrambled for my phone, hands shaking, nearly dropping it. My trembling finger found Troy in my contacts.

He answered almost instantly.

“T-Troy,” I whispered, voice barely there. “I...”

A sob ripped out of me.

“Can you come get me?”

“What the fuck?” he barked. “I had to open the coffee shop by myself today—where the hell are you?”

“Please,” I begged, voice cracking. “Someone’s here. I—I think they’re trying to get me.”

“Get you?” he sounded more confused now than angry. “Where are you?”

“I’ll send you the address.” My hands barely worked. I dropped a pin and sent it through the trembling fog of panic.

“...Massachusetts?” he asked, voice softening into concern. Then a sigh. “Okay. I’m

coming.”

The call ended.

The battery icon blinked red.

I shoved the phone back into my pocket and pressed my spine to the wall, trying to stay upright. My lip quivered.

I drifted back into the kitchen like a ghost of myself, trying to piece it together.

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How did I even get here?

The kitchen was colder than before.

I didn't remember leaving the back door open, but there it was—ajar, just barely, like someone had slipped through quietly.

I sat at the edge of the wooden chair, arms wrapped around myself. The table in front of me still had that old lace cloth Mom used to be obsessed with. It was stained now, dark at the corners, maybe wine, maybe time. I let my fingers trace it, grounding myself in texture, in memory.

I kept hearing the voice in my head.

“Missed me, little sister?”

It had been two years.

Two years since I left.

Two years since the house stopped being a home and became something else.

I should have never come back.

I stared out at the garden. The roses still looked so beautiful. And just beyond them, beneath the twisted branches, there was something. A shape. Small. Watching.

I blinked.

Gone.

My phone buzzed once in my pocket—battery low:2%.No messages. No signal.

I stood up and walked to the sink. My hands trembled as I turned the faucet, letting water pour over them like it could somehow wash off the past. The pipes groaned behind the walls like something alive was dragging itself through them.

And then I saw it.

In the fogged-up window above the sink—a reflection. A man, standing behind me. His head tilted slightly like he was curious. His skin was pale, almost grey. Lips chapped. Eyes dark and wide.

But when I spun around, he wasn't there.

I backed away slowly, the breath in my chest tight, my limbs stiff.

The silence in the house shifted. It was no longer empty. It was watching.

And then there was music, the same lullaby started to play.

Soft at first. Then louder.

Coming from upstairs.

That damn melody.

I moved toward the stairs without realizing it. Halfway up, I paused. The hallway at

the top was washed in that same yellow light.

The music led me to the end of the hall.

My old bedroom.

The door was wide open.

I couldn't move.

But something—something—was pulling me in. Like it wanted me inside. Needed me.

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The room was silent except for the soft song of a music box. It sat neatly on the bed, its lid open.

But the figure from it was gone.

In her place was a thumb. Pale. Severed. Twisting in slow, jerky turns to the rhythm of the tune.

I slapped my palms to my mouth, nausea rising fast and sharp. I staggered back a step, eyes locked on the thing—on it. And just beside it, a folded piece of paper rested on the edge of the bed.

A note.

I reached out with trembling fingers, brushing it lightly before picking it up.

My name.

Written in his handwriting.

My breath caught. I unfolded it slowly, hands shaking.

One line.

“You buried me, but I’m still here.”

My knees buckled.

Buried him?

No. That wasn't true. I didn't. I wasn't even here. I didn't go to the—

His body was never found.

“Dorian,” I whispered.

The room started to shift around me.

Everything looked the same but felt wrong. The rocking chair in the corner moved slightly, creaking, though there was no breeze. Just like it used to when he sat in it, taunting me in silence, staring out the window with that faraway look. But he wasn't here. Not anymore.

And yet I felt eyes on me.

A pull, like a thread winding tighter around my throat.

I backed out of the room slowly, keeping my gaze locked on the chair like it might leap at me if I turned. The hallway seemed darker now, narrower. The wallpaper was peeling at the seams like something had been scratching at it from the inside. I passed a mirror—my reflection wasn't quite right. My face looked... older. Tired. Like someone who'd been here much longer than I had.

Then—

A whisper. Right in my ear.

“You were never supposed to leave.”

My eyes closed, and I was back in June 2013.

It was a summer night.

I was sitting on the back steps, barefoot, legs curled to my chest. The moon was high, bathing the yard in that silvery glow that made everything look like it was waiting to be remembered.

He lit a cigarette beside me, the flame briefly lighting his face—those sharp cheekbones, the haunted eyes, always too old for his age. He didn't look at me at first, just exhaled smoke into the night like it was something he'd been trying to get rid of for years.

"You're up late," he said.

"I could say the same about you," I replied.

He smiled, almost bitter. “I’m always up late.”

We sat in silence for a while. Just the two of us. That kind of silence that wasn’t awkward—it was heavy. Like there were a hundred things unsaid hanging in the air, and neither of us dared break them.

“I hate this house,” I said, finally.

He turned to me, eyes catching mine. “No, you don’t.”

And I didn’t.

I hated everything before he came. Not after.

He reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered there, warm. Familiar.

“I won’t always be here, you know.”

“I know.”

“You’ll forget me.”

“No, I won’t.”

His hand dropped back to his lap, and he laughed—quiet, sharp. “You think you won’t, but you will. You’ll grow up. Move on. Find someone else to talk to at 2 a.m.”

“I don’t want to find someone else.”

He looked at me then.

Looked at me.

He was twenty-five. I was seventeen. Too old to be innocent, too young to understand the world in his eyes.

“I’m not a good person,” he said, like it was a confession. “If you ever really knew me, you’d run.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You say that now.”

I don’t know who moved first, or if either of us did. But suddenly the space between us was gone. His knee brushed mine. His eyes dropped to my lips.

And then—

He stood.

Fast. Like something inside him snapped.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer.

He just walked away, back into the house, the door closing behind him louder than it should've been.

And I sat there.

Seventeen.

Barefoot.

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Waiting for answers I never got, yet asking myself so many questions, questions that no one had answers for.

SIX

LENORE

People leave.

The ones you want to stay never do. And somehow, you survive. You're supposed to survive. But I didn't. Not after I left.

Some people drown their sadness in alcohol. I drowned mine in loneliness. I ran from everyone and locked every door inside myself. The few I let in? They all reminded me of him. But none of them were him.

I missed his laugh. That wild, sharp edge in his eyes screamed red flags. I saw them all. Ignored everyone.

Young and stupid.

But also young and in love.

Once you meet someone who makes you smile like you never knew you could—someone who keeps you awake at night, who you crave just to see or hear, even when they're talking nonsense—it's over. You're caught. You wonder how someone so reckless, so wrong, can feel so right. And the whole time, there's this little

voice whispering:

He's your stepbrother.

You shouldn't feel the way he felt.

But I did.

The heart wants what it wants, even if what it wants is the very thing that destroys it. That tears you apart until all that's left is glass—shards held together, but never whole. Even pieced back together, it's still broken. And the reflection... is never the same.

Somehow, I woke up in bed. I didn't know how I got there. I didn't remember coming inside. I didn't remember changing. But I was wearing the white nightdress again—the one I used to sleep in. Still smelled like cotton and lavender oil, just like it used to.

I stood up slowly, head foggy. The sunlight pouring through the window didn't make sense.

It was raining before... wasn't it?

What is happening?

Am I dreaming?

I took a careful step forward, glancing around the room. On the old chair by the window, my jacket swung lazily, rocking back and forth. My jeans and top were folded over the armrest.

Did I change?

When?

I pressed my fingers to my temple, trying to focus, to remember. But nothing came. Just static in my brain.

I left the bedroom and stepped into the hallway. As I made my way down the stairs I could hear the loud bang at the door.

Three knocks. Loud. Sharp. Violent.

Fists were slamming against the wood, and each slam stuttered in my chest.

Another knock.

Then his voice. “Open the door, Lenore.”

Troy.

No.

Now I remembered. I was the one who called him.

I thought a haunted house was more terrifying than the man I shared a bed with. That's what loneliness does—it whispers that anyone is better than no one. So you reach out, not for love, but for the illusion of it. Just to feel someone's arms around you. Even if those arms never held anything but control.

When I left Gloombsbury Manor at eighteen, I slept in a tent under a Boston bridge. A full year like that; thin, hungry, digging through trash for something to eat, holding out my hand for change just to buy something cheap, and burning to keep warm. The drink came next. A sip here and there until it turned into mornings that started and ended with poison. I drank to forget, to stop the shaking, to blur the edges of cold sidewalks and colder stares. I drank because being numb was easier than being present.

By nineteen, people knew my face. Not because they cared. Because they saw something they could use. They asked me to sell myself until asking stopped and taking began. I didn't want to survive after that. But I did. Somehow. I left. I tried. And somewhere in that trying, something inside me cracked open. I stood up because no one else was going to lift me.

And just when I'd gathered my broken pieces, stacked them into something like a person again—he came back. He didn't just knock me down; he took what was left and kept it like a trophy. That's what people like him do. They collect. If they see beauty, they want to own it. If they see damage, they want to fix it. But there's beauty in the broken, too.

That's how it began from the first moment, from a day when everything was turned to worse. And when the red flags waved, I walked straight through them, arms wide open, whispering, How much worse could it get?

Worse. It always gets worse.

When you start to feel like a ghost, you become one. And then people stop seeing you, except when they need someone to walk through.

He wasn't supposed to be here. I bit myself I called him. I thought maybe the house would swallow me whole before he could reach me.

"I know you're in there," he barked through the door, and then softer, dripping with that fake concern I used to fall for, "You sounded scared on the phone, baby. I came to help."

My stomach turned.

I stood frozen in the hallway, bare feet on cold wood, that white cotton nightgown clinging to my legs like fog. The house was silent, but not calm. It was watching. It didn't want him here either—I could feel it in the walls.

The door handle jiggled.

"Don't make me break this door down," he snapped, patience slipping.

I walked, slowly, and carefully, down the steps.

One. By. One.

Each creak of the stairs felt like a countdown.

When I reached the bottom, I paused in the hallway. His shadow was visible through the glass of the door. Tall. I opened it just a crack, but he shoved his arm the rest of the way, stepping inside like he had a right to.

Troy looked the same; muscles too tight, jaw clenched like it hurt to speak gently. His dark hair was full of cheap gel, sticking to his forehead. And his eyes, those eyes that used to charm, now only made my blood run cold.

He looked around, sneering.

“This place is a dump,” he muttered. “Why the hell would you come here?”

I didn’t answer.

His eyes fell on me, on a white nightgown.

His smirk pulled crooked. “Cute. Did you dress up just for me?”

“Don’t,” I said. Voice quiet. It’s firmer than it used to be.

He laughed. “Relax, baby. I came all this way for you. You sounded like you were losing your mind on the phone.”

“I was.”

“You always were a little off,” he muttered. “It’s part of your charm.”

He stepped closer.

Too close.

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That familiar tension buzzed under my skin like static.

“I missed you,” he whispered, reaching out to brush a hair from my face.

I flinched.

I could hear the footsteps from upstairs.

He froze.

“What the hell was that?”

I didn’t answer.

Because I already knew. Just didn’t know someone else heard it too.

“You brought someone with you?” he asked, scanning the ceiling.

“No.”

And then, faintly, from upstairs, that lullaby again.

His head snapped toward the sound. “What the fuck is that?”

I looked at him. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

He turned back to me, jaw tight, suddenly trying to mask the flicker of unease behind

his eyes. “Don’t start with your creepy shit again.”

But the air changed.

Colder.

Heavier.

The lights flickered once.

Twice.

Then went out.

Pitch black.

Troy swore under his breath.

I could feel his hand close around my neck.

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

I couldn’t see his face. Just the sharp sting of his cheap, suffocating cologne, everywhere. I shoved at his chest, but he came back.

This time, his fist connected with my right eye. Blinding me. Pain bloomed, in hot and red. And I let it happen. I saw it coming. Could’ve moved. Should’ve screamed. Fought. But I didn’t.

I just... let it happen.

It's wild, the way we sometimes let ourselves break. A man handing out bruises like gifts, stealing pieces of me I didn't realize was up for grabs. And I still asked myself: What did I do to deserve this?

I kept asking.

Why?

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But monsters don't always have claws. Sometimes, they wear the face of someone you used to sleep beside. Sometimes, they whisper lies while pulling off your clothes. Sometimes, they leave bruises instead of kisses.

It wasn't a weakness. It was helplessness.

He turned me around and yanked down my pants. My body shook. Every part of me trembling.

And in that moment, I knew—I'd reached the edge. The final moment. The one I wouldn't come back from. The one that would scar me in places no one could ever see.

I shut my eyes tight. Let the tears fall. Let the pain in.

And then darkness took me.

Something pulled me down—past the floor, past my body, into something cold and endless. I collapsed, disappearing into it.

And in that void, I tried to dream. Dream that Dorian would show up, find me, and drag me out of hell. Dream that he'd protect me like he used to, even from death.

But this wasn't a dream.

This was the nightmare I'd been living for months. This was hell, and I knew it.

And if I'm honest, sometimes, I wish I hadn't survived.

Sometimes, I wish I had been the one who died.

Nothin. Not Dorian.

I woke up in bed.

The clock buzzed—6:00 a.m.

My eyes wandered down to my arms, my hands. I wasn't wearing the white night dress anymore. Jeans. White top. The clothes I'd worn when I arrived.

Rain tapped against the window.

Of course, it was raining. Of course.

That's what my life was. A loop of storms. A cycle of waking nightmares.

But was it all a dream?

God, I thought, what is happening to me?

I stood up slowly, legs shaky, and walked toward the wall covered in that old green wallpaper. And when I got close, I saw my reflection in the cracked mirror across from it.

My face was bruised.

I reached up with a trembling hand, fingers brushing the swelling around my eye, the sharp sting of it lighting up my nerves.

This was real. All of it.

Troy did again, and I let it happen again.

My body was numb. Skin painted with bruises, hair knotted and tangled. I was walking chaos, and somewhere deep inside, something screamed.

The little girl I used to be cried in there. She was dying in there.

I used to see light in people. I used to believe in it. Now all I saw were passing shadows, flickering shapes, like ghosts brushing past. Behind my eyes, just white static, and I was the loudest noise of them all.

Tears slipped without permission. My chest rose and fell in uneven stutters, my heart pounding like it was trying to escape. My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

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I curled behind the doorframe, peering outside, as quietly as I could. Checking. Is he still here? Was Troy waiting to jump out again? Or had he left after forcing what he wanted, again?

No one was there. Not even wind.

I crept out, step by step, moving down the staircase like a ghost afraid of waking the dead. And halfway down, I caught it—movement by the front door. A shadow passing.

The doorbell rang, and just as I blinked, the shadow disappeared.

I held my breath, unsure whose it even was anymore, and inched forward. When I reached the door, I froze. My wholebody was stiff. I told myself to stop, but my hand moved on its own. It wrapped around the knob. Turned it.

The door opened.

A cardboard box sat on the doorstep, light brown, soaked red at the bottom. Is this a joke?

I knelt. Lifted the lid.

And then everything in me revolted. My heart thrashed against my ribs. Cold sweat trickled down my temples.

Blood. So much of it.

Inside, two blue eyes stared back at me. I knew them. I knew those eyes. Troy's. Placed in his own severed hands, staring up at me. And beside them, a note:

“He can't touch you or look at you the wrong way ever again, little stepsister.”

I gasped. My heartbeat thundered, legs gave out. I hit the floor hard and scrambled back, palms slipping on the wood, lungs begging for air. My vision narrowed, blurring at the edges. Then—darkness.

I was passing out.

SEVEN

DORIAN

For a very long time, I was losing myself in the wrong direction. And for even longer, I was trying to find my way back to her. Look at her now—once my favorite person, now just my favorite stranger.

For two years, I waited. Not just for her—but for the moment I could make her feel what it's like to be left behind with nothing but your demons. For two years, she was the first thing on my mind when I woke up and the last thing I saw when I closed my eyes. She was my poison, and I was drinking her in every second, letting her rot me from the inside.

They say if you love someone, you should let them go. But those people have never loved like this. Not the kind that claws into your chest and refuses to leave. Not the kind that, when you try to let it go, cuts through you like glass—leaving you bleeding and broken, your mind reduced to fragments of her.

I was tired. Exhausted.

Because fuck, I still wanted her. But more than that I wanted her to feel every single thing I felt since the day she walked into my life.

I want her to know what it's like to be untouchable—craving lips you can't taste, hands you can't hold, eyes so blue and perfect they burn into your memory.

I want her to know what it's like to taste someone for the first time... and never stop craving them.

I want her to feel the pain I felt when she left. To know what it's like to be haunted by memories—by us.

There have always been two kinds of love. The first is soft—the kind that fills your heart, and wipes your mind clean. The kind that makes you want sweet kisses and shared mornings, a world built together. But then there's the other kind—my kind. The one where she consumes you. She becomes your food, your air, your wound. She's the only thing you want. The only thing you crave. And nothing else can satisfy the thirst she leaves behind. No one else can replace her. No one.

Many tried. They wanted to fix me, to shape me, to build a life on a version of me that no longer existed. But none of them were her.

She was the one. The one who broke me. The one who made me question if I was ever enough. She was beautiful—God, she was everything. My person. My dream. But she was also my beautiful monster. The one I knew would be my end.

And even knowing that—I was ready. I would've gone to hell and back for her. She was my beginning, my end, and my always. My ever and forever.

And now... look at her.

Lying there. So innocent. So scared.

My little stepsister.

She's afraid.

But little does she know, this is just the beginning.

I knelt beside her, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. How could someone be so beautiful... and so dangerous?

Sliding my arms under her, I lifted her gently, her body light against mine. I carried her down the hallway, leaving silent footsteps behind us, up to the bedroom on the top floor.

"Oh, Trouble," I whispered, my lips close to her ear. "I'm going to break that pretty little mind of yours. You'll never leave me again."

I pushed the door open and laid her down on the bed, her limbs soft and still. Then I crossed to the far corner of the room, settling into the old ricochet chair that creaked as it rocked beneath me.

I watched her. Just watched. Wondering where it all went so wrong. She was never supposed to leave.

"You promised," I muttered, rubbing my temples with trembling fingers. "You promised you'd never leave me. Not here. Not like this."

She didn't flinch. Didn't stir. Just lay there, eyes shut, as if sleep had claimed her as if

the world we built wasn't crumbling in front of us.

I looked down at my hand—at the faint scars etched across my skin. Little reminders of the nights I wanted it all to end. They called me crazy for that—for just wanting to be seen, to be loved, to be understood.

I grew up with a father who was there, but never really present. He loved his whiskey more than his own son. And my mother? She made me her project. Told the world I was sick, and fed me pills and syrups until I actually started believing it myself. That's how she kept me close—how she made herself feel needed. I was the sick boy. The weak one.

Then one day, she found someone else. A man who looked at her like she was sacred. Like she was salvation.

She left my father and me and moved here.

And when my father died, she locked me away. Threw me into an asylum and called it protection. Called me insane. I stayed there for ten years. Ten fucking years.

I was already fragile before. But what they did do to me there? That broke whatever was left. Crushed it until there was nothing but a shell—a cold, hollow body without feeling, without purpose.

And then Lenore happened.

She showed up at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and still, something in me shifted. She looked at me, really looked. And something inside cracked open. For the first time in forever... I felt alive.

But she fucking left me.

Looked me straight in the eyes, promised she'd stay—and then walked away as if none of it mattered. Call me stupid for falling for a bitch like her, but I wanted her. I didn't care how crazy she was. I didn't care how twisted her mind worked. I wanted her. All of her.

I was already mad. I just wanted to be kind of mad.

But she had to pay the price for making me fall in love.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

She turned my brain to oatmeal. Nothing but chaos and heat and her name stitched into every thought.

The second she started to move upstairs, I got up. Quiet. Controlled. I walked toward the door—not because I was leaving, but because I wanted her to miss me. To search for me the way I had begged for her to stay.

I moved down the stairs, step by step until I reached the front door. I picked up the box that sat waiting on the porch, brought it inside, and placed it gently on the small table in the hallway—right beneath those golden-framed lies. All those perfect portraits of a family that never was. We were good at pretending.

I heard her.

Footsteps above. Slow. Hesitant. Dragging.

She was coming.

Just as I opened the box, she reached the top of the stairs.

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I lifted the severed hand from inside, turned toward her, and when her breath caught in her throat, I grinned.

“Hi, Trouble,” I said, waving the severed hand in the air. “Missed me?”

Her lips parted. Eyes wide. She looked at me like I was a ghost, but no words came out of that pretty mouth.

“Cat got your tongue, little stepsister?” I asked, clapping the hand against my own, the sound of it became sharp and wrong.

She stared. Couldn’t look away. Her chest rose and fell like she didn’t know how to breathe. I took a step forward. Then another.

She pinched her arm, like she thought this might be a dream or a nightmare. I saw it in her eyes: she couldn’t tell which.

I came closer.

“Uhhh, little stepsister,” I whispered, dragging the cold fingers of the severed hand down her arm, while my other hand gently moved hair from her face. “No man will touch you ever again.”

She flinched when those dead fingers met her skin. Her breath caught—sharp, shaky. And just for a second, I saw it.

She saw me.

Not the boy she once knew. Not the one who loved her.

She saw what she turned me into.

What she made me.

“Still think you can run from me?” I whispered, tilting my head. “Still think the world out there is safer than being loved by a monster who’d burn it all down just to hear you laugh again?”

She stumbled back a step, her spine pressed against the stair rail as if it could protect her. As if anything could protect her now.

“You don’t get it,” I said, walking toward her, leaving a faint trail of blood behind from the hand I still held. “You were my cure and my curse. And you left me.”

“Do you know what that does to a man already broken?”

Her lips trembled. Finally, she found her voice. Barely a whisper. “What... what do you want from me?”

I leaned in, close enough to smell the fear on her breath. Close enough to see my madness reflected in those eyes I once worshipped. “Everything,” I said. “I want everything you took when you walked away.”

I took her wrist gently like it still mattered, and placed her hand against my chest. “You feel that?” My heart, still beating. Still aching. “It beats for you. Always did. Even when I wanted it to stop.”

She tried to pull away, but I held her there. Not tight. Just enough.

“You don’t have to love me, little stepsister,” I said, voice low, almost soft, “But you will never forget me. Not in this life. Not in the next.”

She shook her head. “You’re sick.”

A twisted smile pulled at my lips. “No, Trouble. I was sick. You made me feel better. But then you became the disease.”

I let go. Watched her stumble backward up the stairs. She was scared.

“You left me in hell,” I called out as she turned around and ran, “so don’t be surprised when I bring it back with me.”

And just like that, the house fell into silence again. Just the ticking of that old hallway clock and the drip-drip-drip of blood from fingers that no longer belonged to anyone.

I looked up at the portraits above me—fake smiles, golden frames.

Perfect lies.

We were a family once.

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Now, we were just...unfinished business.

EIGHT

DORIAN

I drifted down the hallway, fingertips dragging along the wallpaper, leaving smudges where the blood hadn't dried. The severed hand swung loosely in my grip, its fingers still curled as I pressed it against the wallpaper. My laughter bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me, flowing off the narrow walls.

She ran ahead, barefoot, breath hitching. Her eyes were wide when she looked back. The attic door yawned open at the end, her final chance to escape.

"I'm getting closer," I crooned, my voice lilting like a lullaby. "Closer than ever, little stepsister."

Her fingers caught the edge of the attic door, pulling it toward her with everything she had left, but my hand slammed against it just before she did. The hard hit against the door scared her even more. I leaned in, grinning. "Boo."

"Leave me alone!" Her scream cracked, tangled in sobs.

She wasn't running from me. She was running from the thing she thought she had left behind.

I tilted my head, watching her. "Where exactly do you think you're going?" My voice

dropped, amused. “Out there? In here?” I tapped my temple with a bloodstained finger, chuckling. “No, no... you’re not going anywhere.”

She spun, trying to run for the stairs, but I caught her ankle. The sound she made when she hit the steps was strong like something had broken on the inside. She didn’t even try to fight.

“Please,” she whispered, again and again. “Please.”

I knelt over her. “You’ll forget where you end and I begin. That’s the beautiful part,” I murmured, brushing hair from her face with trembling fingers that weren’t mine. “I’ll haunt every corner of your mind until even your nightmares look like mercy.”

Beside her, I placed the severed hand. Her eyes locked on it, pupils shrinking. I took her chin, gently. Her tears made tiny rivers down her skin that turned pale with fear. I made her look at me, and I smiled.

I laughed, “Cry baby,” I chuckled, pressing my tongue against her cheeks and licking her tears away.

“Please, stop,” She sobbed under me, shaking. I moved my hand to her neck, and I could feel her pulse in her neck when I pressed my fingers there. I could feel my fingers tightening against her.

“Do you feel it?” I whispered, dragging my mouth close to her ear. “That pounding in your throat? That’s not fear, stepsis. That’s need.”

She screamed again, and I moaned at the sound of it. “I could wear your skin like a coat and still not feel close enough,” I whispered.

She kicked, uselessly. I let her. She can’t hurt me. “I’m going to carve myself into

you until you forget where you end and I begin.”

“Stop,” she begged, “Please.”

“You are mine,” I growled in her mouth, “MINE.” I tightened my fist against her neck even harder.

“Why are you like this?” she cried out. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Hate?” I laughed, the sound sharp. “I don’t hate you,” I said, voice low. “I never hated you.”

“Then why?” she begged, desperation cracking her voice. “Please... what did I do to make you treat me like this? Like I’m nothing?”

“You fucking left me.” My eyes widened, the words hissing through my teeth. “Chained by your father, beaten by my mother—and you just chose not to give a fuck.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, tears spilling as her hand reached toward my face. I pulled away.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” I let out a bitter laugh. “You’re not fucking sorry.”

She didn’t respond.

“You don’t even know what that means,” I said, stepping closer. “If you did, you would’ve stayed. Called. Checked in. Anything.” My voice cracked, and then I screamed, “BUT NO.” My hands stayed tight around her throat as I leaned in. “You had to ruin it. Ruinus.”

“I didn’t,” she choked out, her voice breaking under my grip. “I thought... I don’t know... I can’t remember.”

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“You don’t remember?” My brow furrowed. “Let me help you with that.”

I stood, stripping off my black shirt. “When your dear father beat the shit out of me,” I pointed to the old scars. “When he burned me,” I held up my wrists. “When he carved his sick prayers into my chest and back—“ I turned, exposing the twisted words carved into my skin. “Ezekiel’s gift.”

I dropped down on her again. “And when I came here, broken and barely breathing. This attic. This place.” I glanced up at therafters, Nagi hissing softly from her perch above. “I told you how I felt.”

My hands slid to her thighs, then traced the curve of her hips. I moved lower, fingers slipping beneath the waistband of her jeans, pushing past denim and her thongs until I felt her warmth. She bit her lip, tears still clinging to her lashes.

She wanted this.

I wanted this.

“Remember now?” I whispered against her throat, sinking my teeth into her skin. My fingers moved down, dragging along her soft, trembling pussy. Her body twisted beneath mine, caught between fear and lust.

But she didn’t deserve it. Not anymore.

I pulled my hand back, then pressed hard against her clit, drawing a sharp moan from her lips just before I pulled my hand out.

“I hope you remember,” I said coldly. “And I hope it fucking destroys you.”

I stepped back. She stood frozen on the stairs, legs slowly drawing together like she was trying to hold herself in. One hand hovered at her lips. Her head tilted just enough to avoid looking at the severed hand resting beside her.

She didn't know fucker was still alive downstairs.

I just took from him what he never deserved in the first place—his sight, so he'd never lay eyes on her again. No one will. She's mine. His hands, so he'd never touch her again. Never hit her again. She's mine. Only mine. And she will know it.

I turned my back to her. “You destroyed me when you left. Hope you survive my destruction.”

Then I walked away, her sobs trailing behind me, bleeding through the staircase.

I'm going to break her so beautifully, that she won't even realize it's happening. I'll be the only thought she lets inside that pretty little head.

As I headed back downstairs, my fingers brushed the wall, peeling away strips of old wallpaper. Now that this rotted family is finally gone—now that I've torn down everything they built—I can let the ghosts out. Every last one of them. Even mine.

I closed my eyes and slipped back in time. The day after her birthday.

I'd kept my distance for so long, trying to stay away, because thinking about her twisted something in me. Turned me into a bad man.

I wanted to cut my stepfather's throat. I wanted him to pay for every slap, every bruise he left on her. But every time he raised his hand, my brain short-circuited,

flung back to when I was twelve—the voices, the static, the screams tearing through my skull.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

And I did. I froze. No control over my body. Like something else had taken hold of me. Possessed.

But when she looked at me, I felt human again. Like she was curing me. So if I had to take the pain—beatings, burnings, cuts, even death—I'd take it. All of it.

For her.

She was my Trouble. And trouble always had a way of finding me. But my Trouble? She had angel wings... until she didn't. 99% of the time, she glowed like light, but that other 1%? God help anyone who woke the monster sleeping inside her.

People called me heartless. Wait till they meet my beautiful monster.

“Dorian!” my stepfather shouted. “Your mother and I need to talk to you.”

I was one step from her bedroom. One step from handing her the necklace I'd picked out for her with gold chain, and heart pendant. I wanted to tell her she held my heart.

But of course, they needed me. They always needed me at the wrong time.

I slipped the necklace into my back pocket and headed for the kitchen, where they were waiting.

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They weren't alone. Two men in suits sat beside them. For a second, I thought they were here to drag me back to the psych ward. But then I saw Lenore's photo on the table, clipped to a pile of papers.

"Sit down," he barked.

I dragged the chair back slowly and dropped into it, arms crossed, eyes locked on them.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Your sister's been seeing things," my mom said. "Things that aren't real."

I frowned, confused.

"She's sleepwalking. Talking to walls, to dolls. For her good, we're going to keep her downstairs. We're having a party soon and we'll need you to bring her down in the basement."

Her smile didn't reach her eyes. It never did. She was fake. Always had been. Lies were her native tongue, and I'd stopped believing her years ago.

Lenore wasn't crazy. Not like they said. Hell, she was more sane than I was. And even if she spoke to things that weren't there—so what? She was lonely. She needed someone.

Well, don't worry, little stepsis. You've got me now. And they can all burn for what

they did. Because I swear—I'll never let them lock you up the way they did me.

So I smiled. Played along. "Alright."

"I'm glad you understand," she said, looking down at me like she owned me.

Since I arrived, I've questioned everything, every glance, every word, every smile that didn't quite fit.

I stood up. "If that's all?"

"No," the stepfather said. "You both will attend the party."

"Fun," I said, flashing him the same fake smile they gave to me. If they can pretend, so can I.

He nodded. Dismissed me.

I turned and walked out, all I could think about was her. I needed to see her. To tell her maybe we could run away. Together.

Her bedroom door was already cracked open. She sat on the floor in that black dress with a white bow tied at the back. Her long black hair spilled in loose curls down her spine. Even from here, I could smell her—lime and basil. Burned into my brain. My favorite scent in the world.

She was whispering to her doll. Too old for dolls, sure. Too crazy? Maybe. But I loved her kind of crazy. It made mine feel...normal. With her, nothing felt wrong—not with me, not with her. Just us, broken in the same way.

She gasped when she noticed me.

“Trouble?” I grinned. “Talking to dolls now?”

“I’m talking to myself,” she said, rolling her eyes and setting the doll aside. “Because I’m the only one who understands me.”

“You’ve got me,” I said, stepping closer. I offered her my hand. She placed her palm in mine, and I pulled her to her feet. Her body brushed against mine. Her hand rested on my chest like she belonged there.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she murmured, pushing against me gently.

“What wouldn’t I understand?”

“Feelings,” she smirked. Her fingers traced a slow line down my chin. “You don’t have those.”

“Ouch,” I said. “You’re colder than Nagi.”

“Nagi?” she blinked. “You named your snake Nagi?”

Her eyebrows furrowed. That pale skin begging to be touched. And those eyes, those ocean blue eyes—I could lose myself in them.

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“Lenore was taken,” I said with a shrug, laughing softly, my face just inches from hers.

“Asshole.” She pushed me away.

I laughed.

I pressed two fingers to my lips, then moved them to hers. “Shhh. You’ll get yourself in trouble.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

I pulled her closer. Her small body pressed against mine just as my back touched the closet door. She was so light, I could lift her with one arm. So fragile, you’d want to cradle her and never let go. But her mind? That was another story. Heavy. Dark. Beautiful and terrifying.

Sometimes I wondered what she really thought of me—but her body always told me more than her words ever did.

“I want to teach you all the things I was too afraid to ask that night,” I whispered. “Back when we played Memory Lane. I’ll make you tell stories you’re too embarrassed to admit.” I leaned in closer, voice lower. “Tell them you fucked your stepbrother.”

She shoved me hard. “Dream on, lover boy.”

I laughed, grabbing her wrist and pulling her back. “Nah, Trouble. I can only promise you one thing...”

She stared at me, breath caught in her throat.

“...I’ll make you live in a nightmare.”

NINE

DORIAN

TWO YEARS BEFORE

If someone had told me I’d end up in a black suit, I would’ve laughed in their face. Yet here I was, staring at my reflection in the dusty attic mirror. The glass was cloudy, the air colder than it should be. Nagi hissed from her perch up in the rafters.

I turned to her. “You like it?” I asked.

As if a snake would answer.

“No words?” I smirked. “Fine. I like leaving women speechless.”

On top of the box lay the black mask Mother had given me. It was clear they wanted every face hidden. Just as clear, they didn’t want me there. But I was too damn useful to leave out.

I scooped up Nagi in my hand, she tightened around my hand, and I grabbed the mask, and headed down the creaking stairs, straight to Lenore’s room. I didn’t bother knocking.

She stood in front of her mirror in a red dress—that red dress. It clung to her like it had been sewn onto her skin. My mother's dress. Her bare shoulders caught the light, and the dress cinched her waist so tight she looked thinner than she was. On her feet were red heels. Bare arms. No necklace. No shame.

I'd never seen her breasts look full before.

Her hair was curled, her lips red like blood, and a black lace mask wrapped around her eyes. Through the cutouts, those blue eyes stared at her in the mirror.

"You look like a whore," I said, leaning against the doorframe.

"And you look like an idiot," she snapped, not even turning.

"They're not gonna let you go down like that," I said, stepping in. I laid Nagi on Lenore's bed and yanked the blanket off it, draping it over her shoulders.

"Better," I muttered.

She peeled it off and dropped it to the floor. "Don't be ridiculous, Dorian."

"I'd rather die than let you walk around like that," I said, picking it up again and wrapping it around her. "You have boobs," I whispered, dead serious.

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“No shit, Sherlock,” she snapped. “I’m a woman.” She shoved me, then cupped her chest with both hands. “Fucking deal with it.”

I rolled my eyes, head tilting back. “Why are you so fucking difficult?” I muttered, then looked at her again. “Sometimes, I swear, I wish I could twist your pretty neck.” I mimed it in the air, hands tightening. “Just like that.” I bared my teeth in a grin.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” she said, turning away. “I hate people anyway.”

I was just about to move closer when Mother stepped into the room. “You two ready?” she asked.

I could hear music already starting to play from downstairs.

“Yeah,” Lenore answered, brushing past me like I wasn’t there.

They both disappeared into the hallway. I didn’t follow. My fingers curled into my scalp, nails biting my skin. Rage burned under my ribs. She really left the room like that.

I growled under my breath, shoved the mask onto my face, and left Nagi curled on the bed. She’d be more comfortable there, anyway.

Downstairs, it was a sea of the same masks. Every man dressed in black suits and black masks, sipping champagne like they belonged to the same shadow. The women wore red, gold, or black. And in the center of the living room hung a massive portrait of Ezekiel. His cold eyes smiling, a soft smirk on his lips showing. Below the portrait

at the table were two golden chalices and vases with red roses.

It looked like a funeral pretending to be a party. And it felt wrong. So fucking wrong.

Then I saw her.

Lenore stood in a corner, glass in hand, isolated in the crowd. People passed by, nodding, smiling, saying things she didn't hear. She didn't look at anyone. Didn't move.

I walked toward her, each step heavier. When I reached her side, her eyes didn't meet mine. She stared at the green wallpaper, where a patch had peeled back, revealing words carved into the wood underneath.

Only half of one was visible—Faith.

“You okay?” I asked quietly.

She didn't answer me. Just said, “Did you know all these people are from my father's church?” Her voice was detached, floating somewhere else. “I never met half of them, but that woman over there—” she nodded toward the right, “—that's my mom's sister. She didn't even recognize me.”

“Her loss,” I said. My hand twitched at my side, then slowly drifted closer, brushing her fingers. Barely a touch. Just enough to feel she was still warm. Still here. I wanted to hold her. I couldn't. Not here.

“I used to think my dad killed my mom,” she said. “Like... sacrificed her for this house. And now look.” She exhaled sharply. “They worship him. Like he's a fucking God. Maybe they all did it. Helped him.”

I turned, following her eyes.

There he was. The only one without a mask. The only one in white. People kissed his hand and leaned in to speak with him, eyes lit like they were looking at salvation.

Lenore was wrong.

This wasn't a church.

It was a cult.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Everything slammed into place. My mother. My stepfather.

How we ended up here. How I couldn't leave. How I had to obey, no questions asked.

Just as I was about to pull Lenore away and leave, Ezekiel clapped his hands. The sound snapped through the air, making everyone move towards him.

They gathered around, forming a circle. Eyes fixed. Silent. Ezekiel stood in the center.

"Brothers and sisters," he began, his voice soft but steady, "we've walked together for sixteen years." A low chuckle slipped from his lips. "You know me, and I know you. But let me tell you how it all began."

He started to pace within the circle, his bare feet brushing softly against the wooden floor.

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“I used to be a businessman,” he said. “Wandering. Hollow. No faith. No anchor. When I moved here with my late wife—God rest her soul—everything changed.”

A hush fell over the room. Even the air felt still. Lenore’s fingers found mine and clutched tight, trembling.

Ezekiel’s eyes gleamed. “I found a journal. Left behind by the former owner of Gloomsbury Manor. A worn, leather-bound Bible, full of strange symbols and text. It spoke to me. It told me truths I didn’t know I needed.”

He paused, letting the silence breathe.

“That man had a vision. A prophecy,” Ezekiel said, his voice growing fervent. “He saw me. He saw me coming to this house. And in a dream, Mary the Holy appeared to him. She spoke of redemption. Of the chance to return what was taken.”

He raised one hand to the ceiling, his voice lifting with a fervor that bordered on madness.

“She gave him six commands. She promised eternal life to those who followed.”

“The Six Commands,” he said, “were spoken to the Prophet in his dreams, burned into his skin by divine fire. And now, they are ours.”

Everyone dropped to their knees.

Lenore’s grip tightened around my hand. I could feel her nails pressing into my palm,

desperate.

He began reciting the commands, his voice echoing, words carving deep in my mind.

1. The House Must Never Sleep Empty.
2. The Red Shall Be Worn When the Moon Weeps.
3. The Faithless Must Be Named Before They Are Judged.
4. Blood Must Be Shared, Never Spilled.
5. The Flesh Remembers What the Spirit Forgets.
6. The Chosen Will Return, Wearing the Mask of Death.

A cold sweat crawled down my back.

I leaned toward Lenore. “We need to get out of here.”

She shook her head, her eyes wide. “We can’t—not yet. Not until we know who else is in this.”

Ezekiel pulled something from under his white coat: a small black book. The room hushed again.

He opened it slowly like he was revealing his own Bible.

“Tonight,” he said, “we complete the Circle of Command. Tonight, She returns.”

I didn’t want to hear more. I didn’t want to see more. But I was frozen in place,

caught between Lenore's shaking hand and the feverish eyes of everyone around us.

And then—he said my name.

“Dorian.”

The heads turned like puppets on strings. Every mask stared in my direction.

“Come forward.”

Lenore let go. “Don't,” she whispered.

But I had to.

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I stepped into the center of the circle. The wooden floor creaked under me. My breath fogged the inside of my mask. Ezekiel handed me the book.

“You’re ready now,” he said.

“For what?” I asked, my voice dry.

“To wear the mask not as a stranger... but as the Chosen.”

My hands shook as I opened the black book.

Inside werenames.

Some I recognized.

Some werecrossed out.

And at the bottom of the list:

Lenore.

Mother.

Me.

I was chosen? For what? I didn’t need faith or religion, all I wanted Lenore. And even if I had to play to be chosen one, I was ready to do anything to protect her.

TEN

LENORE

PRESENT DAY

I wish I could tell you it was innocent at first.

That it started with late-night talks through the wall, quiet enough that the house couldn't hear, soft enough that we could pretend it didn't mean anything.

But that would be a lie.

Because from the very first glance, we knew.

We knew what it was, what it wasn't allowed to be. That no matter how carefully we avoided touching, something had already started burning the moment our lives were forced under the same roof.

You were the boy who sat across from me at dinner, calling our mother "Mom" like it didn't shatter something inside me everytime. You wore the role like a mask—so convincing, so cold—while your eyes said things that never made it into words.

We weren't raised together. We weren't related. But that didn't matter. Not when you looked at me like I was yours in a world that forbid it. Not when every hallway conversation felt like a sin, and every accidental brush of skin left me breathless with guilt I couldn't drown.

You ruined me slowly.

You made me want things I wasn't supposed to want. And I let you—God, I let you. I

carved out a place for you in the parts of me that should have stayed untouched.

But you warned me, didn't you?

"I'm not your happy ending. I'm your reason to break."

And I broke. Over and over again, for a love that could never be real and a boy who wore my heart like a loaded gun.

Now, we are in silence at the family house, pretending there wasn't once a night you begged me to run away with you. Pretending you don't still haunt the spaces between my ribs.

They call us family.

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But they don't know I loved you like a secret, and you loved me like a dare.

You haunt the house like I never existed.

You walk past me like my ribs weren't once the place you pressed your head when sleep wouldn't come. Like I didn't carry your secrets like bruises I chose to keep.

You looked at me like I was the villain in the story we used to write in secret, and maybe I was. I left you bleeding with no goodbye, no closure.

But at least you are alive, even if you are broken more than you were before. At least you are alive. I died a long time ago, Dorian.

Now you're all ice where fire used to live. You barely meet my eyes. You say nothing when I say I am sorry like a prayer I still believe in.

And it kills me. Because I came back. I came back hoping there was something left worth saving for me. But all I find is wreckage. Haunted house.

And a boy who used to love me... who now only knows how to make me feel like I never mattered at all.

I stared at my reflection, trembling. The girl in the mirror looked fragile like she'd crack if someone raised their voice. Looking at me, thinking how there were things I did I wish I hadn't, and worse, things I never dared to do.

If I could go back, I'd stay with him. I'd never leave his side. I'd trade every mistake

for a second chance. But instead of open arms, he welcomed me with a severed hand of my ex.

He killed him. I don't even flinch saying it now. He probably killed our parents too. Maybe I'm next.

And here's the worst part. I'm okay with that.

Six years. Six goddamn years and some part of me still clings to this fantasy that we could have had a happy ending. That maybe everything I lost—everything torn from me—was leading to this one impossible thing. That he'd be there, waiting, arms open, saying I missed you.

God, how I wanted him.

God, how he made me feel.

Since I came back, reality's been slipping. Dreams bleed into memories, and I don't know what's real anymore. Everything's hazy—except him. He's the one clear thing in all the chaos.

Dorian Thorn. My stepbrother. My obsession. My only love.

Yeah, I know how that sounds. And no, I don't care.

Judge me if you want. Save your breath. The brain doesn't get a say when the heart's already decided. You can be the smartest person alive and still crumble under the weight of love. I already have.

I was his. Ready to be ruined.

My body betrayed me the second he touched me—fingers slipping over my skin like he owned it. The shame didn't stop the want. I wanted him. I wanted him to break me, reshape me, and show me what it meant to be worshiped by a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

And it's fucked up, it is. What scared me the most wasn't losing him—it was that I never mattered in the first place.

My jeans slid down my legs, exposing scars I'd kept hidden from the world. Faint lines. Some fresh. Some faded. All mine. I did this to myself—on the nights I felt weak, when pain was the only thing that anchored me to reality.

I opened the mirror cabinet. On the white shelf sat a razor blade. It stared back at me. Whispered. Dared. It was calling me. I grabbed it fast, like someone might see.

The tub filled with hot water, steam curling into the air like ghost breath. I sat on the edge, metal pressed against my skin. I didn't hesitate.

A sharp hiss escaped my lips. My eyes slammed shut. And then came the cuts—quick, clean, and real. This time, I carved the word: REAL.

I had to.

I needed proof. Proof that I wasn't dreaming. That I was still here. That any of this still mattered.

There were other words, carved from other nights. Fake. Slut. Faith. Bitch. Dream. Not worth it. Weak. Scared. Hungry.

Athungry, I broke. Tears slipped down my face like they had back then. Back when I had nothing—no food, no firewood, no clean water. Just cold and silence. Just me.

He never knew.

He thought I left him chasing something better.

But I didn't.

Leaving him was the worst mistake of my life. I thought I was saving myself. All I did was dig a deeper grave.

The blade trembled in my hand as I etched a new word:ALIVE.

My jaw clenched, breath catching, pain flaring. My skin burned. My soul screamed.

And still, I needed to feel it.

Because if I didn't, I might have let myself die. For him. For the girl I used to be. Maybe for both.

Tears blurred my vision as the razor slipped from my hand and hit the tiled floor with a soft, final clink. The tub was full now. I stepped in.

The water scorched my open skin. I bit down a scream, then let it out anyway. A full, broken scream. Loud enough for him to hear. Loud enough to shatter walls. But he didn't come.

He wouldn't come.

He wouldn't care.

I sank beneath the surface, my scream muffled by water. It filled my lungs, drowning the last of the fire in me. And even then, I didn't fight. I didn't care. If I couldn't live for him, or with him, I didn't want to live at all.

I was already broken.

This was just the proof.

There are no princes on white horses. No saviors galloping in to pull you from the wreckage. No magical rescue at the end of the road.

That's not life.

That's fiction.

And we? We weren't just in different chapters. We were in different books.

ELEVEN

LENORE

After the bath, I crawled back into bed. Sleep tugged at me. Blood from my cuts seeped into the linens, the sting still fresh, but I didn't mind. I needed that pain. It grounded me to something real. Even if it was hell, at least it wasn't the numbness of that endless dream. I was trapped inside my own mind, spinning in circles. No control, no escape. Just the echo of a game I kept playing with myself, and I was done.

Still, I hoped.

Hoped Dorian would show up.

Hoped he'd forgive me for leaving.

Hoped he'd love me enough to heal what was broken in both of us.

Was that too much to ask? Why was I begging for love? For his love? Why couldn't I just be loved?

My eyes drifted shut, my mind pulling me backward in the past. To the night before I left him in that house.

It was two days after my eighteenth birthday. Just one day before I ran from Gloombsbury Manor. After Dad beat him, I thought I'd never see Dorian again. But he came back. For me.

I was curled on a dusty blanket in the attic when I heard the door creak open. Slow footsteps. The sound of someone dragging themselves across the floor. I turned my head, and there he was.

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His face was a mess of bruises and dried blood. He clung to the final two steps of the staircase like they were the only things keeping him alive. Rage flared in my chest.

“Dorian!” I cried, scrambling to his side.

I tried to lift him, but his body was too heavy, too broken. He collapsed against the stairs, barely conscious.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, voice cracked and trembling. “I’m sorry I’m weak.”

“No,” I whispered, pleading, “no, you’re not.”

I knelt beside him, arms trembling as I tried to lift him again. It was no use. His black shirt clung to the raw, bleeding wounds across his back, each stripe carved in by my father’s belt. I counted them. One hundred and twelve.

Tears blurred my vision. My hands, shaking, reached to peel the shirt away from his skin.

He hissed—then screamed. I screamed with him.

He grabbed my wrist, voice choked in agony. “Stop. Please, stop.”

But I couldn’t. I kept going, even as he sobbed until the shirt fell away and the full damage was laid bare.

My palms, slick with his blood, pressed to my lips as I collapsed against him.

“What did he do to you?” I cried.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, trying to smile, trying to comfort me. His hand, weak and shaking, reached into his pocket and pulled out a small necklace. Golden with a heart charm.

“Will you be my heart?” he murmured. “I never knew I had one until I met you.”

“Dorian...” My voice broke as I kissed his hand, and pressed it to my chest. “You are my heart.”

“And you are mine,” he breathed.

I slipped the necklace around my neck, the heart warm against my skin. And then I cried. Silent, aching sobs.

“Come,” he said with a faint smile. “I wanted to give you a second present.”

“You don’t have to,” I whispered, my hand brushing his face — but he pulled me closer.

“Please... please,” he breathed, searching my eyes.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Sit on the first step. Spread your legs,” he said, still smiling.

“W-What?” My voice trembled.

“Do it.”

I obeyed, stepping forward and sitting down in front of him on the first step.

I was wearing the same white nightdress I always wore, soft cotton, white and innocent. Underneath, though, I had on panties. I lifted the bottom of it as I sat, slowly spreading my legs.

“Lay back,” he said, and I arched, lowering myself against the cold step behind me. I could feel his breath against my skin. I’d never done this before. Never felt anything like this.

“I might be dying,” he whispered, voice rough, “but I won’t die until I’ve had my little stepsister as my last fucking meal.”

With a sudden surge of strength, he pulled me closer to his face.

He pushed my panties aside, revealing my swollen pussy, already aching for him. He pinched gently at first, then kissed me there before parting me with his fingers. His tongue came next, slow, tracing from the center up to my clit.

I gasped. “Oh God.”

“Yeah,” he murmured against me. “You like that, don’t you?”

“Yeah...” I moaned, eyes fluttering closed.

His tongue circled my clit as one finger curled and slid inside me — slow, coaxing, addictive. I opened for him, helpless under the rhythm of his strokes.

I’d never touched myself before. I’d always been the good girl — the quiet one. But now he was showing me how to be bad... for him.

It was so fucking wrong — and I didn’t care. I wanted more.

As his thrusts deepened, he slid in a second finger. He smiled against my clit, still working his tongue up and down my swollen, sensitive skin.

“I’ll be your first... and your last, Trouble,” he growled. I could feel every slow thrust inside me, pushing me closer to the edge.

A moan broke from my lips. “Yes... more. Please — more.”

He kept going, holding my lower lips apart as I writhed against his face. I couldn’t stop myself — my hips moved instinctively, riding his mouth, chasing the waves he sent crashing through me.

Then I started to tighten around his fingers. I was so close.

He smiled against me again, still stroking, still devouring me like he owned me.

We didn't notice the attic door was still open — that anyone in the house could hear us.

And someone did.

My father stood there. Pale. Silent. Frozen — as he watched his daughter writhing under the mouth of his stepson.

But I didn't see him — not until it was too late.

I was moaning, my body trembling, eyes fluttering open just as the orgasm hit me. I saw him — my father — and our eyes met at the exact moment Dorian pushed me over the edge.

And I screamed his name.

“Dorian.”

Dad stormed inside, grabbing Dorian by the neck and ripping him off me. His mouth was still slick with my taste on his lips, blood smeared from the blows, and he laughed.

Laughed at him.

Even as Dad dragged him across the floor, shouting, Dorian's voice cut through.

“Now she's mine, Father.”

The door slammed. Silence swallowed everything after.

I didn't move.

Tears streaked down my face, but my body still trembled — not from fear. And my lips, curved upward, soft and secret.

That night, I became his.

That night, he consumed me.

I woke with a sharp breath, upright, fingers tangled in the sheet beneath me. No clock on the wall, and never had been, but I knew. 3:18 a.m.

It was always 3:18.

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This time, he was there. Standing beside the bed.

His eyes were rolled back, nothing but white, like something inside him had flipped. Drool hung from his lips. Around his eyes, thick black paint ran like tears, like he wasn't human at all.

I screamed, hand flying out to reach him.

He didn't move.

And then I saw a severed hand hanging from his fingers, streaked with blood.

"Dorian..." The word was barely breathing as I crawled to the edge of the bed.

The bedroom door slammed behind him. Shut. Locked. It was just us now.

My chest heaved. My skin prickled. And under it all, the ache bloomed again. Even now. Even like this. Maybe I could reach him. Maybe he wasn't completely gone.

He grabbed my ankle, rough fingers curling tight, and pulled me toward him. His knee forced my legs apart as he leaned in. His eyes were hollow, still seeing somehow even rolled back.

He was hard.

His cock twitched for me, ready, like instinct still lived in him even if he didn't.

I wore nothing but a tank top and a black thong. The white dress was ruined, stained with dust from the floors of this house.

His drool dripped onto my stomach. I arched, helpless. Wanting.

Then he knelt.

Fingers hooked the edge of my thong and pulled it aside, exposing me. He opened me with stiff hands. I shut my eyes, breath catching as he slid inside.

Cold.

Too cold.

But I moaned.

This was so wrong, Something was wrong.

It shifted. I opened my eyes.

He was staring at me — smiling now, something twisting behind that smile — and laughing. And when I looked down, I saw it. It wasn't him inside me.

It was Troy's hand.

Dead. Pale. Moving only because Dorian made it.

I jerked back, panic clawing at my throat, but he pinned me down, grinning wider.

“You like his fingers inside you?”

He yanked the hand free and tossed it to the floor with a sickening slap of flesh on the wood.

“No—“ I tried, pushing at him.

He leaned in closer, breath hot. “Then why’s your pussy so wet?”

His fingers slid through me, up to my clit. He brought them to his lips, tasting me like it was nothing. Like he owned me.

I couldn’t speak.

“You want him?” he asked. “Or me?”

He was too close now.

“Because I can show you where he is. And I can show you where I am.”

His fingers slipped back inside, deeper this time. Hooking me. Claiming me again.

I moaned, eyes squeezing shut.

“Answer me.”

A slap cracked across my inner thigh, the sting blooming fast.

“You—“ I gasped. “I want you.”

He smiled like that was all he needed to hear.

“Good.”

He stood and pulled me with him. My legs barely held me.

“Follow me.”

And I did.

Down the hallway.

Bare feet on the cold floor. Tank top sticking to my skin. Thong soaked.

I followed him — into whatever came next. Into ruin. Into him.

Into my destruction.

TWELVE

DORIAN

Shewasfollowingme.

I caught her in the stolen glances, reflections flickering across dusty portrait glass as I slipped down the hallway. With every step she took, her body pulled toward me, craving something she didn't yet understand. I would give her exactly what she wanted. And when I was done with her, she would crave only one thing: to leave this world the same way I had wanted to.

Death would be our only escape.

We moved down the stairs, our footsteps muffled by the dusty air. The basement loomed ahead, the hallway stretching into shadow. Whispers greeted me the moment I opened the door, desperate voices curling like smoke around my ears.

They were calling me again.

Another sacrifice.

But not this time.

This time, I wasn't delivering her to them, I was delivering them to her. Their

salvation, their so-called chosen one, was my curse. And that curse was going to burn them all down.

She followed, hesitant, fingertips brushing along the stone walls. Each step chilled her more than the last. As we moved deeper, the basement revealed itself in two parts. To the left stood the altar, Ezekiel's portrait still hanging above it, red roses wilting beneath his watchful gaze. Robes still clung to rusted hooks, stiff with dried blood and time.

To the right: the table. Chains. A salt-stained wall, where they had pressed bodies for years.

He promised me he wouldn't touch Lenore... if I brought him others.

So I did.

I killed for her. Whispered his prayers while carving into flesh, breathing life into this cursed house. I made it alive. But something in me died, and nothing, not even her, can bring it back.

She paused in the center of the room. Her eyes locked onto the chains... where her father hung. Where my mother twitched in silence, still trying to escape. Her ex-boyfriend—he was nearly ready. I just had to wait for the blood to drain so I could place him in the wall with the others.

They reek less when they're drained.

I'm sick. Sick, sick, sick. And even sicker without her. The voices, they never stop. They wrap around my mind, whispering violence, feeding my hunger to kill. To slash throats. To end it all.

But not her.

The voices like her.

We like her.

Nagi was already curled on the table, coiled like a secret. More snakes waited in the box beneath the altar, each one chosen, collected over the years. I always knew I'd need them.

She stood at the edge of the room, her gaze drifting across the horror. Her eyes welled. “What... what did you do?”

I laughed. “I did it for you.”

“No.” She shook her head, eyes wide. “Why would you do this?” Her voice cracked. “You psycho!”

She spun, palms pressed to her mouth, trying to slip past me.

But I caught her.

Her fists pounded my back as I slung her over my shoulder.

“Let me go!”

I sat her at the table beside my pet snake. Grabbed a rope from the floor and tied her wrists tight, the knot biting deep into her skin.

“There,” I growled. “Try to run and you’ll hang like the rest.”

“Are they...” her voice trembled, lips quivering, “are they alive?”

“Yup.” I strolled over to my mother, and gave her body a shove so it swung gently. She whimpered.

Bitch lost her tongue. Talked too much.

“You’re sick,” Lenore shrieked. “Crazy, Dorian!”

I laughed again. The sound echoed. Circling the room, I dropped to my knees in front

of the altar, pressing my palms together, lips twitching with a broken sort of devotion. From beneath it, I pulled the black book. Returned to her. Dropped it on the table with a dull thud.

“Your father had a dream,” I said, grinning. “A sick dream.”

I exhaled slowly.

“He thought if he killed his virgin daughter and drank her blood, he’d live forever. And the rest of them, his little cult of believers, they thought the same. Sacrificing their daughters one by one. Sons were curses. But daughters?” I laughed bitterly. “Blessings in disguise.”

“They wanted to kill you, Lenore,” I hissed. “They wanted to end you.”

I turned, voice rising.

“And I stopped them. All of them.”

She stared at me, barely breathing. “What do you mean...all?”

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“Look around you,” I shouted. “Behind these walls, rotting in the dark—eighty-four cult members. Murderers. Cannibals. Monsters.”

I lowered my voice to a whisper, eyes gleaming.

“Bad people, little stepsister.”

A chuckle escaped me, soft and sharp. “All I did was kill, kill, kill,” I said, tilting my head like a child remembering a song. “All I did was chop, chop, chop.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but I kept going.

“But you... you killed me.”

I swallowed hard, staring at her. “And your little boyfriend? He wanted to hurt you. Take you from me.”

I laughed, bitter and guttural. “So he had to go. He had to go. His dick too.”

I pointed to the wall where a small frame hung. Inside, was his tiny cock I severed a couple of hours ago.

She gasped.

“Tiny, isn’t it?”

Her face drained of color.

“Are you scared?” I stepped in closer. “Are you scared of me?”

I circled the table slowly. Nagi slithered up her arm, tongue flicking, hissing, winding her way to Lenore’s neck like a living necklace.

Her whole body shook.

“I saved you,” I whispered, stopping in front of her. “Can you save me?”

She didn’t answer. Just trembled.

My fingers brushed her chin.

“Can you, Trouble?”

She nodded, slow and broken.

“You see,” I smiled, gentle now, “we’re the same, you and I.”

I leaned in, voice soft.

“We’re both thorns. Just like roses.”

A chuckle.

“Thorns bite. Hurt. But we come with beauty, too—you with that pretty face...” I touched her cheek. “And me?” I laughed quietly. “A beautiful mind. Sometimes.”

She stayed silent as I leaned in, and still, she didn’t resist when I pressed my lips to hers. Her trembling faded as her body arched toward mine. My tongue slipped past her lips, twisting, tasting her. Nagi hissed, coiled now around my neck.

My hand slid behind her back, pulling her tight against me. Her legs parted, and I stepped between them, the world around us fading.

Somewhere in the basement, my mother and stepfather began to stir.

Muffled groans.

I didn't care.

I'd slit their throats eventually.

"I can't," Lenore whispered. "Not when... they're watching."

I pulled back, studying her. Then I walked to the corner, opened the closet, and grabbed three white sheets. I twisted them tight in my fists, walked back, and unfurled each one, draping them gently over the heads of the hanging corpses.

Blood seeped through, blooming like poppies.

"There," I said with a shrug. "Better?"

She didn't answer. Just turned away, tears still wet on her cheeks.

I came up behind her, gently licked one from her cheek with the tip of my tongue. Sweet and salty. The snake around my neck shifted—tightening.

I slipped her from my shoulders, placing her back around Lenore's neck. As Nagi coiled tighter, wrapping her body slowly around Lenore's throat, she gasped.

"Beg," I whispered.

"Beg for air."

I grinned.

"Beg forme."

“Please,” she whispered, voice trembling like a secret begging to be kept.

“Tell me what you want,” I said, my breath close enough to stir the hair at her temple.

“You,” she answered — no hesitation, just the sharp truth I craved.

I crushed my mouth against hers again, lifting her into my arms like she weighed nothing, her body melting into mine. I carried her to the nearby hook, fastening the rope above her head. Her body hung exposed, and utterly mine.

With one sharp tug, I tore her white top open, the fabric giving way like it had been waiting for permission. Her breasts spilled free; round, full, begging for the heat of my mouth. I hooked my fingers around the band of her thong and dragged it down, letting it fall to the floor in silence.

Nagi, slithered across her shoulders, hissing low as it coiled down her spine. It loosened, then tightened again at her throat, snake, just like me, knew how to wait. How to strike.

I cupped her breast in my palm, kneading it slowly before teasing her nipple between my lips, biting, just enough to make her gasp, just enough to raise goosebumps along her skin.

My cock was already aching, straining against my pants. I wanted her — the weight of her, the tightness, the way she’d open for me like no one else. I circled her like a predator, dragging a finger across the curve of her hip, letting the anticipation stretch until it snapped.

She met my gaze — wide-eyed, hungry, ready.

I unbuttoned my pants, letting them fall, the belt clinking as it hit the floor. Then I

stepped forward, lifting one of her legs onto my shoulder.

But not yet. Not until I tasted her.

I kissed the inside of her thigh, then moved in — lips brushing against her lower lips, tongue gliding over the slick heat of her. She was already wet, her body honest in a way her mouth hadn't yet learned to be.

I teased her clit with the tip of my tongue, then circled it, building her up, dragging the tension higher and higher. Her moans turned to whimpers, her hips pressing against my face, begging without words.

I slid two fingers inside her, curling them until I found that place that made her shudder. Her inner flesh clenched, tight, pulsing around me.

“Yes,” she cried. “God, yes.”

And still, the world around us didn't matter. The ruin, the chaos, the half-alive shadows watching from the dark, none of it existed at this moment. Just her. Just me.

As her pleasure built, I withdrew my fingers, slick with her. I rose to my feet and pressed my fingers against her lips. She took them eagerly, sucking them clean while staring into my eyes like she could devour me whole.

I kissed her, tasting her on both our tongues.

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Then I spun her gently, stepping behind her. Her back arched, legs trembling slightly from the pleasure still echoing through her.

The snake hissed again, tightening once more around her neck. She gasped, not in panic, in pleasure.

“Harder,” she whispered.

I smacked her ass once, the sound echoing off the walls, the chain clinking against the metal above. Her body jolted, then melted into it. I grabbed her hips, pulled her close, and thrust inside her in one long, deep stroke.

She cried out, voice raw, high, perfect.

I wasn't gentle.

I didn't need to be.

And she didn't want me to be.

THIRTEEN

LENORE

I think I forgot how to breathe.

My scream tore from my throat like it had claws. It scraped out of me, raw, as he

drove into me with the kind of rhythm that made my spine arch and my soul rattle.

Pleasure bloomed, jagged like glass melting inside my skin. Every thrust carved me open, deeper, wider. His grip on my hips was strong, and his pace was relentless. Thrusting inside me, and not stopping for a second.

I was unraveling.

One hand braced against the cold wall, the other wrapped in the chain above, but none of it anchored me, he did. Every breath was stolen by the weight of him inside me, by the way, he stretched me, filled me, ruined me.

He leaned in, his mouth brushing the shell of my ear, voice pouring into me like poison laced with honey.

“You’re going to come for me.”

The words didn’t land in my ears, they rooted between my legs. My knees buckled. My chest stuttered. My brain fizzed out, sparking on nothing but the command in his tone.

I nodded.

Or tried to.

It didn’t matter. My body moved first, betraying me beautifully.

The heat cracked through my belly and up my spine, blinding and brutal. I clenched around him so hard I felt his breath stutter against my skin, a ragged inhale like I was choking him.

He didn't stop. He slammed into me, again, and again, and again, until the pleasure ripped through me, messy, stealing every ounce of strength I had left.

I shattered with a sob, my legs collapsing beneath me, caught only by the arms that had just undone me.

And when he came, it wasn't silent.

He growled.

A deep growl, chest pressed to my back, hips flush against my ass as he spilled into me, pulsing.

His hand slid around my neck, not tight, not harsh, just there. Like a collar. Like he was holding me together, piece by trembling piece. His pet snake crawled to him, passing from my neck to his hand as she knew that letting me go would bring him peace.

I slumped forward, breath hiccuping out of me, the chain creaking above as it caught my weight. My thighs shook. My lips were parted, but no words came.

He didn't move right away.

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He stayed inside me, buried to the hilt, like pulling out would break the spell we'd cast around ourselves. Like if he let go, I'd vanish, and maybe I would. Maybe I wanted to.

The chain above me creaked again, a soft metallic groan as my body sagged forward, spent and shaking. My wrists were raw, my thighs trembling, but all I could feel washim.

Still hard. Still deep.

Still watching me like I was prey he hadn't finished consuming.

"You're quiet," he murmured.

His voice slithered into my bones. It scraped across something inside me I didn't know was waiting to bleed.

"I think you broke something," I whispered. It was a joke, I think.

His palm slid up my back until it curled around my throat. Not squeezing this time. Just... resting. Claiming.

"I'll fix it."

God help me, I almost asked him to break more.

He slid out of me, slow enough to make me whimper, then caught me by the waist

when my knees tried to give out. He turned me around, eyes dragging over every inch of my ruined body.

My thighs were slick with us. My chest heaved. My lips were swollen and kissed raw.

And still, he looked at me like I wasn't enough.

Like he could still devour more.

He leaned in, brushing his nose along my jaw, then down to my collarbone, his breath hot against my sweat-slicked skin. His voice was quiet, "I should keep you like this."

Hung up.

Open.

Ready.

My breath caught, heat flooding between my legs again like my body was too stupid to learn.

"You say that like it's a threat," I whispered, voice hoarse and cracked.

He chuckled. God, that sound. It was a sound made for sinners.

"No," he said. "It's a promise."

He unhooked my wrists carefully like he hadn't just ravaged me like I was fragile now. My arms fell limp to my sides, too numb to lift. He caught me before I could crumble and scooped me up, carrying me across the ruined floor like I was something precious instead of desecrated.

There was a mattress on the floor near the altar, covered with a single threadbare blanket that smelled like dust and sin. He laid me down gently like I was something fragile. Something breakable.

Maybe I was.

I curled into myself, muscles sore, skin flushed, throat raw. He knelt beside me, one knee cracking against the stone, his shadow stretching over my spine.

“I can’t let you leave.” His words were quiet.

Not cruel. Not even cold. Just inevitable.

My head snapped toward him, hair clinging to my damp cheek. “What?”

He didn’t look at me. His gaze dropped to the floor, like if he saw my face, it might change his mind. Or worse — it wouldn’t.

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“I brought you here to lock you up,” he said. “You’re meant to be here. With me. Forever.”

The silence pressed hard against my ears.

Then—

Laughter.

Sharp, familiar, from under the sheet across the room. My stepmother’s voice, cackling like this was all a joke she already knew the punchline to.

I had forgotten they were still there.

Stillwatching.

Stillbreathing.

I turned my face into the blanket to swallow the scream I didn’t want to give them.

“You belong to me, little stepsister,” he said, voice thicker now, like even he could hear how monstrous it sounded. “Only to me.”

Something inside me cracked.

Not from surprise. Not even betrayal.

From recognition.

Because I knew it was true.

And I hated it.

How could I be so stupid?

How could I look into those eyes and not see the iron bars hiding in them?

How could I want him, still, when I could taste the cage in every breath?

That's what you get, Lenore. For falling for a beautifully wrapped nightmare.

Now you're locked up, all alone, while the woman who hated you from the moment she saw you laughs behind your back.

And the worst part?

My body stillachedfor him.

Still pulsed with the memory of his hands, his breath, his darkness pressed so deep inside me it felt like it lived there now. My thighs were sticky. My lips are swollen. My heart cracked wide open and somehow still reaching for him like a fool.

He didn't look back.

He just stood, turned, and walked away, like he hadn't just destroyed me.

Like I wasn't still trembling from the ghost of his touch. The door shut behind him locking me inside of my tomb.

I used to think I meant something to him.

The way his eyes sparkled for me, the way his fingers brushed my cheek like I might shatter, it felt like love. Like I belonged in his world. Like I was safe there.

But real love doesn't do this to you.

It doesn't leave bruises. It doesn't lace hope into every harsh word and call it tenderness. It doesn't turn silence into a weapon.

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And yet, I still can't let go. God, how I wish I could.

This has always been me — chasing the kind of love that was never mine to begin with. Trying to become someone worth loving. But I was always background noise to the people I wanted to matter to. Always nothing.

I bent myself into shapes just to fit in — guessing what they thought, what they felt, trying to stay one step ahead of their rejection. I'd imagine they hated me just so I could pull away first. All I ever did was sabotage myself. No one needed to ruin me. I beat them to it.

And him... I tried. From the moment he showed up at my door, I tried to understand him. Tried to figure out what love looked like to him, just so I could wear it like a second skin. But you can't make someone love you. You can't twist yourself into someone else's version of enough.

He didn't love. He obsessed. There's a difference.

And now his obsession has me locked away.

A cage. Four walls. No key. What's next — chains?

I wanted to scream, to tear open the silence and make him see me. But he already knew I was here. That's what made it worse. He knew — and chose not to care.

He didn't lie to me. He showed me exactly who he was. I just kept closing my eyes.

I sealed my eyes shut, convinced blindness was safer than truth. At least with him, I had a roof. Now I'd trade that roof for freedom in a heartbeat.

I didn't know what I wanted — not really. But I know what I didn't want:

Someone too broken to not break me, too lost to see me, too cruel to stop.

I am a joke.

I let him destroy me.

He destroyed me beautifully, and I thanked him for it.

FOURTEEN

LENORE

Exhaustion knocked me out. I don't even remember falling asleep. But I woke up at the sound of chains rattling in the air. When I blinked my eyes open, a single red rose was on the floor beside me.

I once read that if you want a rose, you have to learn to love its thorns.

Was this his idea of love?

Here I was again—second-guessing myself like a fool. And still, my heart held onto some small, stubborn hope. Because I did cry for him. I did love him. I still do.

Back when I had no home, when I ran from the one I had, I used to imagine he'd come for me. My prince on a white horse, riding in to rescue me. He was supposed to be my happy ending.

And now? I'm clinging to hope for a damn horse.

Is this karma? If it is, what sin am I paying for? Or maybe my life's just been one long, cruel joke. A story written in spite, not love.

When I first met him, I didn't even know what love meant. But I looked at him and Isawit—or thought I did. After so many jerks, and so many lies, I clung to the illusion. I spun the fantasy over and over: him waiting for me in a little cottage on a lonely hill, far from the world. I'd run into his arms, he'd lift me like I weighed nothing, carry me inside. We'd make love. He'd call me his, I'd call him mine. The next morning, we'd walk hand-in-hand, talking shit about everyone else and laughing, just us, real and raw. Our own tiny universe, untouched.

Why do we do this to ourselves?

Is it really that easy to dream a better life? Maybe that's why I slept so much. In dreams, I was safe. In dreams, I didn't have to wake up and face the truth.

And now that I've seen him again... he's nothing like the version I kept locked in my head. That version, the one I made up—I miss him. I miss that stupid first love, that soft illusion. Not the man standing here now.

Even roses feel empty. Just flowers. And me? Just a person. A person who wants, and needs to be seen, to be loved, to be understood.

I sat up slowly, eyes adjusting. Troy was gone. I guess he was getting rid of them now.

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I got to my feet and stepped forward. He was working on something near the wall, his focus pulled away.

That's when I saw skulls. Some stripped clean. Others with scraps of flesh still clinging to bone. All collected in the walls like a mosaic wall he built for himself.

My stomach flipped. I moved one foot at a time, trying not to make a sound. I reached the first step.

Then he tilted his head.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" he shouted, standing up.

My heart exploded into motion. Panic took over. I ran. My legs were barely under me, tearing up the stairs as he came crashing after. The basement door flew open, and I rushed into the stairwell, lungs burning. I didn't stop. I just kept running, desperate to reach the upper floor, to find a door I could lock behind me.

The stairs weren't supposed to be this long.

I counted ten when I was a child. Eleven if I skipped the broken one that always moaned beneath the heel. But now, as I clawed my way upward with a bruised knee and raw palms, there were at least twenty. Maybe more. Each one groaned like something alive. Hungry.

My fingers slipped on the old banister. The varnish had peeled away long ago, leaving it as raw and splintered as my skin.

Behind me, the basement door hung open, exhaling cold breath like a wounded animal. The damp was inside my bones now. I still smelled him. The way he smelled in the dark, metal, cedarwood, sweat.

My body called Dorian even when I didn't want it to.

Up. Up. Up. Don't look back.

The house sighed around me. Wood popped. A low creak stretched across the ceiling like footsteps walking overhead. But I was the only one upstairs.

Wasn't I?

I reached the top and froze.

There was a door where there hadn't been one before.

Pale green paint. Cracking in long strips like old scabs. It breathed, or maybe it was just my breath bouncing off the silence. Either way, the air felt too thick to pull in and too heavy to let go.

The doorknob was made of brass, warm as skin. It turned too easily in my hand.

The door swung open, and I stepped inside.

The first thing I noticed was the smell.

Sweet. Decaying. The scent of peppermint crushed beneath rotting fruit. Like something trying too hard to cover its death.

The room had no windows. Just walls that stretched high, smothered in peeling

wallpaper. A sickly green, weeping from the corners. Beneath the curled edges, there were words.

Not words. Accusations.

Scrawled, carved with fingernails, etched in what I hoped wasn't blood.

LIAR. YOU WILL PAY. NOT TRUE. DREAM. NIGHTMARE. RUN. STAY.

They covered the walls like wallpaper of their own—layered over and over until the letters bled into one another like bruises. There was a movement to them. As though, if I looked long enough, they'd rearrange themselves into something new.

I stepped further in. The wooden floor creaked beneath me, and as I looked up, there was only one thing in the center of the room now. A dollhouse.

A miniature of Thorn Hall, down to the crooked shingles and broken front gate. The windows were dark, just like the real ones. The front door was slightly ajar. My stomach flipped as I looked down. Teeth.

The entire floor was made from human teeth, fitted together like puzzle pieces, stained and polished, making the floor of the dollhouse look like marble. I couldn't breathe.

I backed up, but the door had closed behind me. The knob was gone.

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On a shelf behind it stood thirteen dolls. Each wore a tiny white dress with a lace hem, stained at the edges. Their hair was blonde, red, black, brown, strawberry-gold. Their glass eyes caught the low light and reflected it like the eyes of animals in the dark.

I inched closer. Something about them made the skin on my neck pull tight. They weren't like the dolls I used to collect. These were... older. Real.

One had a scar just below her eye, shaped exactly like the one I had from falling off the swing in the orchard when I was nine. Another had a chipped front tooth. One had fingers burned down to the nub.

No.

My stomach clenched as I reached out and touched one of the dolls' heads. The hair was soft. Too soft.

It wasn't synthetic.

It was human.

I pulled back my hand like I'd touched something alive.

I stumbled toward the dollhouse, needing to look away from the row of tiny eyes. But the house didn't offer comfort either. The miniature rooms were perfect. Too perfect. They mirrored the real Thorn Hall precisely. Even down to—

I blinked. Leaned in.

There was a figure in the miniature basement.

A boy.

Bent over, arms outstretched, pressing something into the wall. A girl knelt before him. Her hair was dark, and long. Tangled.

It was me.

I reached to open the dollhouse roof, to rip the whole thing apart—

Then the smallest doll on the shelf moved.

Her head twisted to the side with a small, mechanical click. Her lips did not part. But a voice poured out of her anyway.

A girl's voice. Mine. Not mine.

“Run, run, run.”

My body started to shake. Cold swept through me like winter wind under a door.

Then, from behind the door of the room I was in, I could hear Dorian's voice. He hit the door with an axe, enough to leave the whole big enough to fit his whole head, and as he pulled his head into the whole he licked his lips just before he said, “Here comes the Trouble.”

Calm. Icy. It echoed as if he were everywhere.

I turned. The door was cracking even more as he tried to pull his hand through the hole.

He was smiling. Wild-eyed. Beautiful. Terrifying.

His breath steamed in the cold air.

“I found you,” he said softly. “Trouble.”

He pushed through the opening, and his hand finally opened the door. The sweat slicked his hair to his forehead. There was something creepy in the way he stood like every nerve in his body was stretched to snapping, and he was daring the world to pull first.

“Stay away from me,” I whispered.

But I didn’t move.

His eyes dragged down my body like a touch.

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“You were always going to end up here,” he said, stepping closer. “You can run from the house. But you can’t run from what you are.”

“I’m not like you.”

“You are exactly like me.”

He dropped the axe with a thud. It didn’t make a sound when it hit the floor. Just a hush.

He walked toward me.

I backed up. Hit the wall.

There was no escape.

“You’re insane,” I said. My voice broke. “You need help.”

His hand came to my throat—but he didn’t squeeze. Just held it. His thumb pressed under my jaw. He tilted my head up.

“I need you,” he said.

The words slithered through me, dark and warm.

My heart beat so hard I thought it might crack a rib.

“I hate you,” I breathed.

“You love me.”

His lips were on mine before I could lie again.

Rough. Desperate. The kind of kiss that tastes like blood and grief and hunger. I clawed at him. Hit him. Held him. He caught my wrists and pinned them above my head.

My breath caught. My knees buckled.

He didn’t let me fall.

“I want to leave,” I whispered, but it was a prayer with no god.

“You never will,” he said against my skin. “This house doesn’t let go. And neither do I.”

He pushed his forehead against mine.

I closed my eyes. And saw the dolls. The teeth. The words are carved into the walls.

Maybe I was dreaming.

Maybe I was still in the basement. Still tied up.

Or maybe this, him, me, the house; was the only thing that had ever been real.

“I’m scared of you,” I whispered.

“Good,” he murmured, kissing the words away. “You should be.”

And still, I kissed him back.

He is going to ruin me. He was my ruin. But even ruins have beauty, and I mistook his wreckage for romance.

FIFTEEN

DORIAN

Iknewshewasobsessedwithme—just as I was with her. But I? I was a reckless fool. And I had no control left in me. I could've snapped her neck in an instant—no hesitation, no remorse.

Of course, I wanted to love her. But not before she paid.

She needed to learn. She had to understand I was the axis her world spun around. Call it narcissism if you want—but that's who I was. If she wanted my love, she had to fall for the blackest corners of my soul first.

That's how you know someone's yours. If they love your darkest parts without flinching, they're meant for you. If they ran, they were only chasing a dream. And me? I don't do halfway. I'm all or nothing, baby.

Troy was gone. Just a memory now. Next, her father. Then my mother. Once they were out of the picture, it would just be us. Alone. And finally, the house could breathe again.

But the house... it started pushing back.

Rooms she wasn't supposed to enter cracked themselves open. Secrets I'd buried clawed their way to the surface.

Shewasn'tsupposed to see it. No one ever had. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't fix it. I was breaking apart. And she couldn't stitch me back together.

My hands still wrapped around her throat. She gasped, clawing at my wrists.

“I had to take them all,” I whispered, breath hot against her skin. “They told me to.” My jaw clenched. Teeth bared. “If I didn’t take them... they would’ve taken you—“

I faltered. ”—from me.”

“Who?” she coughed as I loosened my grip. “Who, Dorian?”

“Them.” I turned toward the corner of the room, eyes wide. “You don’t see them?”

She scanned the room—blank walls, silent air. No one.

But sometimes, even I wasn’t sure anymore if they werereal—or just shards of my own broken head.

“Ghosts of the psyche,” I muttered, pinning her against the wall again. “They chant it over and over—kill, kill, kill—and chop, chop, chop—until there’s nothing left but pieces.”

I leaned in, voice a hiss. “And I won’t let them take you too. I won’t let you be another damn poster.”

I shoved the dollhouse aside.

Beneath it, twenty missing posters. Faces of children. Vanished since 1978.

“Someone took them,” I rasped, voice cracking with a sob I couldn’t let out. “Right here. In this room.”

She stared in horror.

“They’re calling me,” I whispered. “They want me to free them.”

“Dorian... no one’s here,” she whispered, stepping closer. Her hand brushed my cheek, soft and trembling.

“They’re everywhere,” I breathed, carefully placing the dollhouse back over the posters.

She didn’t believe me. No one ever did.

Only I saw them. Only I heard them.

Something inside me was splitting wide open. Something rotting behind my eyes. One second, I’m sane, fine. The next?

A crazy, crazy, crazyman.

My eyes rolled back again—I always did that when the breaking point was close. And she saw it. But this time, instead of pushing me away and running, she stepped closer. She pulled me into her, brushed her lips against mine, and kissed me.

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She loved me. I knew she did. And I was too selfish to let her. I had to ruin it first, destroy us, believing somehow that in all the wreckage, everything would still be okay.

She was my little stepsister. I was supposed to protect her. But how could I protect her from anything, when I couldn't even protect myself?

I lifted her into my arms, and carried her out of the room, closing the door behind us like it had never existed. I took her to her bedroom, and closed that door, too—like the world might come crashing in before I even had the chance to worship her the way I always meant to.

I laid her down on the bed. She wore only the oversized shirt I'd dressed her in while she slept. Now, I pulled it off her. Her nipples were hard—so achingly hard. I leaned down, cupped her breast, and took her nipple between my teeth.

Nothing was like it had been before. Tonight, I didn't want punishment. I just wanted to let her love me. The way it should've been all along.

I could always punish her tomorrow.

She knelt before me, her blue eyes staring right through me, like she could see my soul. She braided her hair into two pigtails, one on each side. And when she was done, she reached for the zipper of my jeans. She pulled it down and tugged my pants low.

My cock sprang free, already hard, already hers. She knew exactly what she was doing. She always did. This wasn't about innocence or shame. It was about forgetting

the ghosts that haunted both of us.

She wrapped her fingers around my cock, guiding him to her mouth. She teased the tip with her tongue, slowly, then took him in—deeper and deeper—twisting her tongue along the underside of my shaft. One hand played with my balls, gently. The other pulled my cock deeper down her throat.

My eyes rolled back. I moaned, grinding my teeth, staring up at the ceiling like there might be a trace of salvation hidden in the plaster.

There wasn't.

There was only her.

She quickened the pace, gagging softly as she shoved me deeper. I looked down—saw a tear slide down her cheek—and caught it with my thumb before it fell.

Then I took her face in my hands and thrust into her mouth, relentlessly. Her eyes started to roll back. She gagged, struggling to breathe.

I slapped her cheek. "Take it all the way, little stepsister."

And she did. I felt her throat tighten around me—and then I pulled out, making her choke. I grabbed her neck and pulled her up to face me. I kissed her, deeply, tasting myself on her tongue. Then I twisted her around and shoved her down onto the bed, her back arched, her ass in the air for me.

I slapped her ass, spread her open, and pushed her inside.

She gasped.

“No mercy,” I said, watching her.

I drove deeper, harder. Her head tilted back, her mouth falling open in a silent cry.

“Love me harder,” she whispered. “Show me.”

“Love you?” I laughed, grabbing her by the pigtails and pulling her head back, her back still arched, her body trembling. “I’m going to fuck you like no one ever has. I’ll love you later, Trouble.”

And I did.

I pounded into her, her ass slapping against my hips, the sound echoing through the room. She was already tightening around me, and I hadn’t even begun. I kept going, relentless, as her moans grew louder, filling the space between us.

Each thrust went deeper than the last. Her eyes fluttered shut, her mouth falling open, screaming my name between gasps—sharp, consecutive, desperate. She was getting tighter around me, clenching harder, and just as I felt her near the edge, I pulled out.

I saw another snake coming from under the bed, coiling down my leg like it had been waiting for its turn.

This house was full of them.

I pushed Lenore back onto the bed, my voice low. “Lie down. Don’t move.”

She obeyed. Arms stretched above her head, body spread out, her hair tangled, half-braided, half-loose.

I picked up the snake from the floor and placed it gently on her chest.

She gasped.

Snake slithered toward her face, hissing softly as it wound its way up her body. And while it moved, I spread her legs and leaned in.

I buried my face in her heat. My tongue gently circled her clit, tasting her, feeling her tremble beneath me. I looked up, and saw the snake easing into her parted lips, slipping between them as she welcomed it, barely breathing.

Still, I kept going. I slid two fingers inside her, then curled them, hooking her to me. I pulled her open from the inside, and her thighs began to shake.

“Yes, please,” she whispered, barely audible. “Please... more.”

I obeyed. My tongue danced over her clit, her wetness dripping down my hand, her body shivering as she climbed closer to the edge. I could feel how close she was.

I pulled my fingers free, sat back on my knees, and dragged her body toward me.

Then I shoved my cock back inside her with a single, hard thrust.

She gasped—airless, raw—her chest rising as the snake slid from her mouth and coiled down to her breasts, circling one before gliding to her neck.

I kept thrusting, deeper, harder, until I couldn't go any further. She was so tight, so unbelievably tight. And just as she broke apart beneath me, I pushed even deeper.

My eyes rolled back. I was right there with her. She started gasping, her body locking around me as I pulsed inside her—filling her, emptying myself into her, letting her squeeze every last drop from me.

And as the last pulse left me, I collapsed forward, bracing myself above her, panting against the heat of her neck. The snake coiled lazily around her collarbone now, its tongue flicking at her skin like it, too, had claimed her.

She was soaked in sweat and breathless, her eyes unfocused, still trembling beneath me like her body hadn't realized it was over. Or maybe it wasn't.

I stayed inside her. Neither of us was ready to let go.

Her fingers brushed against my side, trailing gently, grounding me. The house groaned somewhere behind the walls. Shadows crept longer like they'd been watching.

"I can still feel you," she whispered. Her voice was rough, hollowed out from all the moaning, from all the gasping.

"You will," I murmured back, brushing her hair from her face. "You'll feel me for days."

She smiled. A dark, quiet kind of smile. The kind that only came when you'd been ruined in exactly the way you asked to be.

The snake slid down her shoulder and back onto the sheets, disappearing beneath them like it had never existed. Maybe it hadn't. Maybe none of it had. Maybe we were still dreaming.

But my cock was still inside her.

I pulled out slowly, feeling the wet warmth of her still clinging to me. Her thighs twitched, reflexively trying to keep me there.

I sat back on the edge of the bed, looking at her.

Her legs were still spread, her body a mess of sweat, cum, possession.

She closed her eyes again, and for a moment she looked peaceful—devastated, yes, but at peace in it. As if all the chaos, all the taboo, all the things we couldn't say out loud had finally stopped screaming.

Then I walked to the window and cracked it open. The night air flooded in, sharp and cold. Outside, the woods waited dark, alive. I could hear the hissing again. Faint, crawling closer.

She would sleep like this. Open. Claimed. And I would watch the night to make sure it didn't take her away.

Not yet.

I came back to her bed, and I laid down, closing my eyes on her chest. I finally found peace. She was my peace, and all my demons were calm when she was around. She tamed me, and my broken heart.

SIXTEEN

LENORE

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When you grow up in a broken home, with broken people, you think that the real world that's out there will fix you, but that isn't true. It will make you worse. And I kept coming back to the memories—where did I go wrong? And then I lowered my head down, seeing him closing his eyes, sleeping on my chest.

And a tear falls down.

It's not the kind that burns or demands to be noticed—it's the quiet kind. The kind that slips out like a secret you didn't mean to tell.

He looked peaceful. Too peaceful. Like someone who didn't know he had wreckage stitched into every part of him. Or maybe he did, and this was just the eye of the storm—his moment of rest before becoming a hurricane again.

I held my breath, afraid that even the sound of it might wake the version of him I didn't know how to handle. The one that made me feel like love was a game I never learned the rules to.

People say the heart knows. But mine? Mine was confused, bruised, and too loyal for its own good.

Maybe that's what love was for people like us—damaged and desperate. A battlefield where even silence feels violent. A kind of hope that looks too much like hurt.

And still... I stayed.

And still... he rested.

Not knowing he was the reason I no longer recognized myself.

People romanticize broken souls like we're just waiting for someone to love us right.

But when two broken people find each other, it doesn't heal anything.

It just teaches you how to bleed in sync.

He was cracked, yes. But I was already shattered.

He screamed with his fists; I screamed with silence.

He broke things around him. I broke myself.

And somehow, we still called it love.

We were never a home. We were a war zone dressed in soft words and false promises.

He'd say, "I didn't mean it," and I'd nod like it made the bruise fade faster.

I'd say, "I'm fine," while pressing a towel to my own wounds—some visible, some not.

But there's no exit sign in relationships like ours.

You don't run. You drift.

You sink slowly beneath the surface, and before you realize it, you're drowning in everything you swore you'd never allow.

I used to draw lines on my skin when the noise inside got too loud.

Not because I wanted to die—

But because pain made things quiet.

Pain was something I could control.

He never noticed.

Or maybe he did and just couldn't care through his own chaos.

Some nights, I'd sit on the bathroom floor, listening to him sleep like the world wasn't crumbling around us.

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And I'd think—maybe if I just hurt enough on the outside, I'll stop feeling everything on the inside.

But pain doesn't save you. It just delays the collapse.

And eventually, the mirror stops lying.

You realize you're not the victim anymore.

You're a co-conspirator in your own suffering.

Because you stayed.

Because you let the hurt become routine.

Because you confused punishment with penance.

And the saddest part?

You stopped hoping he'd change.

You just started hoping he'd stop noticing when you did.

I woke up at 3:18 a.m.

I didn't have to check the clock. I always woke at the same damn time. But this time, it wasn't the usual silence that pulled me from sleep—it was a voice.

He wasn't there.

And the voice... it wasn't his. It was female. Soft. Familiar.

She was singing that lullaby—the one I used to hum to soothe myself to sleep. But now it wasn't a comfort. Now, it was calling me.

I sat up, slowly.

My skin prickled with cold. His black shirt clung to me. I didn't remember putting it on.

I stood, barefoot, each step across the floor a whisper. The house felt different—thicker, slower, like it was watching.

Then I saw her.

A little girl at the end of the hallway.

Her hair was tied in pigtails, swaying as she twirled. She laughed, light and sharp like glass hitting tile. The lullaby slipped from her lips in a singsong voice, sweet and eerie all at once.

And she kept singing.

And I kept walking.

“Hush now, darling, close your eyes,

The stars are whispering lullabies.

Moonlight paints your dreams in gold,

Safe and warm, though nights are cold.”

“Tiptoe shadows, don’t be scared,

Mommy’s gone but someone’s there.

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Hearts can break but still beat on,

So sleep, my love, till the pain is gone.”

“Roses bloom where no one sees,

Ghosts still hum beneath the trees.

So hush now, darling, time to rest—

With broken dreams against your chest.”

And as she darted down the hallway, I chased after her. Something about her was too familiar. I reached out, almost grabbing her sleeve, but she vanished behind the door of a room I was never supposed to enter. Dad had always forbidden it.

I slipped inside.

The room was still, dust-heavy. Shelves lined the walls, weighed down with framed memories—photos of smiles, laughter, lost time.

At the center, a woman sat in a wooden chair, gently rocking a child in her arms. Her voice rose soft and sweet, humming the same lullaby I once sang.

“Mom?” I whispered. “Mom... is that you?”

She turned.

Her face was breaking, skin sagging, rotting away in slow motion. Bone peeked through. A hollow eye met mine. I screamed, the sound ripping from somewhere deep, shaking my ribs, rattling my soul.

“Run,” she whispered, barely audible.

The room shoved me out, walls breathing, floor trembling, and I stumbled back into the hallway.

Dorian stood by the attic door.

He was still. Watching. His eyes were stark white, blank like glass. Something inside him wasn't him anymore.

His face sagged in slack terror, lower lip trembling. Drool spilled from the corner of his mouth. And in his hands was an axe.

“Kill. Kill. Kill,” he murmured, again and again, a twisted smirk blooming across his face.

I shrieked, pinching my arm, clawing at my skin to wake up—please let this be a dream. But the pain was real, sharp, nerve-deep.

I ran.

Down the stairs, feet slipping, heart thundering. I missed steps, stumbled sideways, and nearly fell.

This isn't him, I repeated. It's something else. Something inside him.

I reached the front door. Yanked it open.

And I ran.

Into the night, lungs burning, eyes stinging. My vision blurred, but I didn't stop. The air tore through me as my heart pounded like war drums in my ears.

No matter how fast I ran, I always ended up back inside.

The house looped around me, folding in on itself—an endless circle I couldn't break. Door after door, hallway after hallway, and every time I thought I'd reached the exit, I found myself in a different room. A new memory. A fresh nightmare.

I was trapped.

Haunted.

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I kept looking for him—searching corners, shadows, mirrors—but he was gone. Gone, or hiding.

Then the phone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

I hesitated, heart pounding, then snatched it off the receiver. Static hissed, then his voice slid through the line, low and cold:

“You should’ve never come back, little stepsister.”

Air caught in my throat. I gasped, clutching the phone like it could anchor me.

But the floor beneath me felt like it was shifting—tilting, breathing, alive. And his voice... it kept echoing through the hall, even though the line had long gone dead.

Then he appeared.

At the top of the staircase.

But it wasn’t him—not anymore.

He wore a mask.

Rough jute stretched over his face, stitched tight. Two holes punched out where his eyes should be, dark and unreadable. Where his mouth should've been... there was a line—drawn in blood. A smile, red and crude, carved across the mask like a wound. A smile that didn't end. A smile that cut straight into my brain and stayed there.

This was it.

Hause had him now. He wasn't here to speak. He wasn't here to plead. He was here to kill me.

I screamed—raw, throat tearing. My head jolted to the right—and that's when I saw him. My father.

His body hung from the ceiling, limp, hanging from a rope. His eyes were wide open. Lifeless. Watching nothing.

This was the final act.

He—the thing in the mask—was here to kill me.

How did it come to this?

How could Dorian become this?

How could the boy I knew slip into something so hollow, so monstrous?

Then the doorbell rang.

A sharp, jarring sound that didn't belong. Like it came from another world entirely.

I stumbled to the front door. Opened it.

Dorian stood there.

Alive. Normal. Breathing.

“Lenore?” he asked, confused. “What are you doing here?”

I screamed again, stumbling back, heart slamming against my ribs.

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I turned—slow, terrified—and saw him. The masked one.

Still inside.

Still watching me.

I reached out, tried to move toward him, tried to grab him, to unmask him—but my body wouldn't move. I was frozen, paralyzed, like I'd sunk beneath ice.

And all I could do was watch.

Watch as that figure crept closer.

The mask grinning.

The blood smiling.

And I was ready.

Ready to die.

SEVENTEEN

LENORE

I woke up in a bed.

Dorian, my father, and my stepmother stood above me, framed in soft white light leaking through the slats of the blinds.

They didn't move. Just watched me like I was a stranger who'd wandered into the wrong house. My father's jaw clenched like it always did when he didn't have the right words. My stepmother's nails tapped against her thigh in a rhythm too slow to be nervous.

I blinked. My eyes burned.

I pinched my arm beneath the covers. Hard. The sting was slow to register, but when it did, it settled in. Stayed. The kind of pain that doesn't fade. The kind that leaves a bruise.

"Lenore," my stepmother said, tilting her head. Her voice was low like she'd practiced saying it in a mirror over and over again. "You woke up last night. You were screaming at us. Do you remember?"

No clock ticked in the room. No sound but the hum of something I couldn't name.

"What?" I croaked, my throat paper-dry. "I saw..."

But my voice collapsed on itself, like even it didn't believe me.

She crouched at the edge of the bed, resting her manicured hand on the blanket. Her skin smelled like lavender. Expensive. Fake. "It's okay," she whispered. "You had an episode. Again."

I didn't ask what that meant.

I just looked at Dorian.

He leaned against the doorframe, jaw working a piece of gum like it owed him something. He was barefoot. Always barefoot. He didn't look concerned.

When they left the room, he stayed.

Just a breath longer.

Then he winked, slow, crooked. "Welcome home, little stepsister."

He popped his gum.

The door clicked shut behind him.

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The air grew colder.

I sat up.

The sheets felt stiff. Unwashed. Familiar. My fingers brushed the edge of the night dress I wore. Cotton, white, ribbon straps knotted at the shoulders. The one Mom sewed the summer before she died. The seams had started to fray.

The mirror across the room had a crack splitting it from top to bottom, like a lightning bolt frozen in glass. My reflection stared back at me.

Younger.

Softer.

Wrong.

I stepped off the bed, knees buckling slightly like they weren't used to holding my weight. My legs carried me to the wall before I even decided to move. I reached for the peeling wallpaper—the green one with faded roses.

The edge peeled back easily.

Underneath, written in frantic strokes, black and uneven were written words; “My mind is a dark place no one can ever escape.”

The room exhaled around me.

Or maybe I did.

I stepped away.

Hands trembling.

I looked at them.

At my skin, pale lines were carved up and down my wrists, some faint, some deeper.
Faded words stared back. SORRY, FAKE, NEEDY, NOISE.

My legs. Same story.

Scars like whispers. Like secrets, no one ever wanted to hear.

I opened the cabinet in the corner. The wood moaned like it hadn't been touched in years. Inside, a piece of paper sat alone on the shelf. Folded once. Slightly crumpled at the edges.

I picked it up.

Unfolded it.

Two words, scrawled in uneven letters: "HELP ME."

My throat closed.

The handwriting was mine.

But I didn't remember writing it.

Couldn't remember when.

Couldn't breathe.

The mirror caught my eye again.

The girl in the reflection still hadn't moved.

She watched me.

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Waited.

I backed away slowly, my heart thumping against the inside of my ribs like it wanted out. I didn't know where to go. The room wasn't mine anymore. Maybe it never was.

I laid back down, curling in on myself. The blankets were too tight. The air is too thick.

I stared at the ceiling.

Waited for the room to settle.

It didn't.

Somewhere inside me, something began to splinter.

Memories I didn't ask for.

Flashes that didn't belong.

A swing set.

The smell of wet earth.

Blood on the stairs.

Dorian's voice. "You promised."

The walls started to pulse, like something was crawling just beneath the surface.

I turned my head and saw her.

Myself.

In the mirror.

But she was closer now.

She mouthed something I couldn't hear.

I closed my eyes.

And I saw it again.

The garden.

Black roses blooming against a sky that didn't have stars. Dorian standing barefoot in the dirt, skin pale, lips cracked.

"You left," he said, voice low. Too low.

"I didn't mean to," I whispered.

"You let them bury me."

"I didn't—" My voice cracked like ice underweight. "I didn't know."

"But you do now," he said, stepping forward. "You always did."

The ground opened beneath me.

I fell.

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Woke.

Back in bed.

Sheets cold now.

The scar on my thigh was bleeding. Fresh. Red. The word was new.

LIAR.

I ran to the mirror.

Touched my face.

Still young.

Still not mine.

I pressed both palms against the glass.

And the girl behind it smiled.

I guess you never really know. What's real? What's a dream? Where it begins or where it ends—or if it ever ends at all.

Sometimes I think I should've set this place on fire, and let it all burn with everyone still inside. But maybe that wasn't the end of my story. Maybe that was just the

beginning.

Maybe this is a dream. Maybe I was meant to start from scratch. Or maybe... I'm just another version of myself, drifting through some fractured dimension, split off from reality.

What is real?

Do you know?

When you stare into the mirror, what stares back? Is it really you—or something wearing your face? Are you real to yourself? Or just a reflection stitched together by what others see?

And all of this—this noise in my head—is it buried deep in my brain, locked away in some dark corner? Or is it a nightmare, and I'm just waiting to wake up?

I once heard about a dream within a dream. Maybe I'm one of those people. Maybe I never woke up.

And if I didn't? If this is still the dream?

Then what I did—what I became—wasn't a choice. It was the script I was handed. A glitch in the sequence. A bleed-through from some other version of me, the one who didn't survive the fire but learned how to live inside the ash.

I tried to be good. I swear I did.

But goodness doesn't grow in a mind like mine. It gets swallowed. Chewed up. Rewritten in red.

People say you find yourself in the wreckage. But what if you are the wreckage?

What if the only thing left to find is silence?

And maybe that's the truth I keep circling back to:

That I was never lost.

I was erased.

And this, this flickering, fractured echo of me, is all that's left.

End of chapter.

Epilogue

“Somehouses don't need ghosts—just memories sharp enough to bleed, and someone too broken to leave them behind.”