



Drag You Down (Bloody Desires #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I met the Devil.

Gabriel is tall, handsome, and has eyes so deep I could drown in them.

And for some reason, hes decided to claim me. No matter where I go, he follows me. No matter how hard I try to hide, hes watching.

And no matter how much I want to forget, I keep tasting his lips on mine.

The coppery taste of Sin.

I met a Lamb.

Pure, innocent, sheltered Levi. He says he doesnt want me, but he tempts me with his gaze, with his lips, with his adorable little mewls.

And he bleeds so beautifully for me.

My boy.

Ill protect him from the evils of the world, the evils that keep him trapped and cowed. Ill show him that there is nothing sinful about what we do together.

I only kill the ones who deserve it.

And anyone who hurts him?

Ill make them suffer so much, theyll beg to be released into hell.

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Page 1

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LEVI

The city of New Bristol is dirty and crowded. The people push past me, not stopping to say hello or even so much as glance at me. They wear their overly styled suits, their revealing dresses; they paint their faces and pierce their skin, all in defiance of God.

This very city is the Whore of Babylon, dragging humanity down.

I'm being punished, and that's why I'm the one forced to confront sin like this, over and over.

I'm being tested .

I notice a handsome man in a shirt so tight, it clings to his arm muscles. He's talking to another man, holding his hand, and as I watch they lean in to kiss each other.

I lick my lips, and I wonder what it feels like to be kissed.

I've already resigned myself to the fact that I will never have that. It is not God's will. I need to be strong enough to resist these temptations that the world offers up on a platter.

Indulging in hedonism and pleasure is one of the ways the Devil hooks his claws in us.

I force myself to continue, past more beautiful men, past the people smiling and

laughing and completely unaware that all of our souls are in danger at every single moment of our lives.

I'm almost home, though. I'm almost safe from myself.

The odds and ends we need for dinner will make it back in time, and my sister and the other women will cook us a satisfying meal. I'll know that we , at least, are good people.

Just a few more blocks.

But the sidewalk gets more crowded, and I hear that obnoxious honking of the cars. Up ahead, there's yelling, and my stomach sinks in disappointment as I see police cars setting up a blockade that will keep me from reaching the other side of the intersection.

I look around, hoping for an easy detour, but there are two cars in the middle of the intersection. An ambulance is approaching, and everything swarms with spectators and news crews.

I want to see what happened.

I want to discover whether there's blood and gore on display, to stare like everyone else at what could be a tragedy or a...

A masterpiece . The word comes unbidden, like a breath in my ear, and I shudder.

It's wrong. It's so wrong.

I'm not supposed to want to see the ugly parts of this world.

I stop to take a breath so I can get my bearings.

There's always a way home. Father Zachariah made that clear. We are never alone; we are never far from the safety of his embrace.

I spot a gap between two buildings nearby. If I'm right, it should lead me away from the commotion and closer to home. The dark and the stink make me wary, but I don't have a choice. I can't be late.

I can't linger, where I might be tempted to gawk with the rest of the onlookers in the hopes of seeing something titillating.

I squeeze through, doubting myself as I lose most of the sunlight. The space between the buildings is so narrow that I bump my shoulders, and I start to doubt myself.

Maybe there's nothing on the other end, only more darkness.

Maybe I'll step into a gaping maw and get dragged down.

I whimper and squeeze my eyes shut—then force them open and look up, at the small sliver of sunlight visible between buildings.

Hurry, hurry .

Don't let the demons grab you.

I let out a sigh of relief when the path opens up into a small courtyard.

It looks unused, completely forgotten. Every window of the buildings on either side have been shattered, shards of glass emerging from the overgrowth surrounding it.

Even the bricks beneath my feet have weeds growing around them, protruding from the ground and defying the bleak, urban gray.

Despite its decrepit state, it's a small sanctuary in the middle of the disgusting city. There's a metallic scent in the air, familiar in a way I don't want to think about, and I hurry across before my curiosity can get the best of me.

I spot a gap on the other side, one that I think will take me to the streets again.

I just have to walk a few feet in relative darkness, and the light of Father Zachariah's embrace will be in reach.

Then I hear it.

A gurgle.

"Hel... Hel..." a raspy voice whispers.

I gasp and turn, fumbling not to drop my grocery bags.

This is my fault for letting my mind wander, for letting the thoughts of destruction infiltrate it.

This is my fault for stepping into the dark.

God is always watching. God is always judging.

"Hell?" I echo back, my voice trembling. "Who said that?"

It takes me a second to spot the lump of clothing lying along one of the building walls. It stretches a hand out to me.

My eyes widen when I see the growing stain all over the front of the cloth.

I drop my bags and raise my hand to my mouth to cover up a yell.

It's a man, not a pile of trash. He's bleeding, crying out, reaching for me.

Calling me to Hell.

I swallow and shake my head. "I'm... I'm not yours," I say unsteadily. "Go to where you belong."

A pathetic whimper wants to escape my lips.

I can't look away though.

The red is slowly flowing out of the man's neck. His eyes are wide, and I know he won't be moving for long.

This is what it looks like for a soul to leave a man's body.

It's painful and filthy and disgusting.

It's intoxicating.

My mouth parts and I lick my lips, and the copper in the air brushes against the back of my throat.

"Aren't you going to help him?" a rich, masculine voice inquires from right behind me.

I spin around to face the source of it, and my eyes widen as I see the man who

appeared from the dark. His dark brown hair is combed back like all the New Bristol businessmen. He's dressed neatly, in a black button-down shirt and a nice pair of trousers.

I wonder if I'm seeing the Devil.

He's too handsome, too otherworldly, to be a mere mortal.

"He needs help, boy," he says.

For a few heartbeats, I don't breathe.

All I can do is stare at him.

I finally shake off the spell he's cast on me. "What... what do I do?" I ask. "I don't know how to help. I'm not a doctor."

The man hums. "Then talk to him. Hold his hand." His brown eyes are intent upon mine as he takes a few steps closer to me. "Don't you want his final moments to be peaceful?" He tilts his head. "Comforting?" He smiles at me.

I wonder what those lips would taste like, a thought that fills me with shame and makes my cheeks flush with humiliation.

I still want to know.

The fact that I want to know is wrong, but I can't get rid of the thought now that I've had it.

"Doesn't every man deserve kindness in the face of death?" he prompts.

I swallow and nod.

The Devil wants me to comfort a dying man.

I'm too terrified to disobey. I step around my groceries and go to the man. There's a puddle of blood around him, and blood splatter on the wall. I crouch down, and with trepidation, take his hand into my own.

It's already cold and clammy, and the blood sticks to me immediately.

"He... hel..." The man repeats, his eyes on me.

"You're dying," I tell him dumbly, as if he doesn't already know. "Only God can decide whether you go to Heaven or Hell."

"Ahh," the man behind me says. "So you wouldn't pass judgement on someone? What if I told you he made others' lives a living hell?" I hear footsteps, and I can feel him hovering behind me.

"If... if it's God's will..." The words are thick on my tongue. "It isn't my place. I am one of God's flock. I follow where He leads. I don't presume to understand."

These are the same words from Father Zachariah's sermons. I remind myself of this truth whenever my thoughts go to dark places, whenever I get angry at the world full of sinners.

God will judge.

I need only live my life obediently.

"No. Sheep generally don't." There's disdain in the man's voice now.

Heat creeps up on my cheeks again as his words suffuse me with anger. He's not the first one to dismiss me based on my beliefs.

But sometimes... Sometimes I wonder what it would be like not to hold them so closely.

That's not a thought I'm willing to entertain, least of all when the Devil stands there watching me hold the hand of a dying man.

The man's eyes close, and his hand gets heavy. I set it down on his chest.

The smell of blood still lingers, consuming me. I take another breath, inhale that scent, and my eyes flutter shut.

Without meaning to, I raise my hand to my lips and lick the man's blood from my fingers.

This is what sin tastes like.

There's a sharp sound from behind me, an abrupt inhalation of breath, and the Devil moves until he's standing right beside me.

He reaches down, touching my chin and urging my face up until he locks eyes with me again.

"Aren't you the least bit worried about tasting the blood of a demon?"

"His smile is dark, deadly, and it goes straight to my cock."

I should be terrified, but I feel surprisingly bold instead. "A demon?" I repeat. "And you're the Devil, who led him here to bleed out?"

He chuckles. “After all the things he’s done? I’m more an agent of God than an agent of the Devil, little lamb.”

My cheeks flush at the nickname. It sounds condescending coming from him, like there’s something wrong with being one of Jesus’s flock.

“You aren’t... You can’t be an agent of God,” I state. “God’s agents would not look like...”

But God’s creatures are beautiful, and I can’t deny that the man is handsome.

‘The Devil will tempt you ,’ Father Zachariah always warns.

The man — the Devil — strokes my chin with his thumb. “I’ve never claimed to be God himself,” he says. “I’m proud, not delusional.”

His hands are so warm, so different from the cold death I’d just held. I shiver underneath his touch, but I can’t look away from him.

“I’m not for you, Devil,” I whisper. “My heart holds only God.”

And temptation, and sin , an insidious voice reminds me, coiled within like a serpent.

“Your heart yearns for blood,” he counters. He reaches out to cup both of my cheeks in his hands. “Unless I miss my guess, your heart yearns for many things that aren’t... godly.”

“N-no,” I say quickly.

Lying is a sin, too, but I can’t prevent myself from denying this shameful thing about myself.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

The smell of blood, the sight of it, makes my body warm and my heart beat faster.

The taste of it on my lips draws a moan from me.

Wondering what this man might look like beneath his clothes makes my body react in other, equally shameful, ways.

It's all sin.

He hums, and he gets to one knee in front of me. His dark slacks end up in the puddle of blood. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, little lamb. We all have urges. The question is how we contend with them."

He's so close to me that I can smell his cologne over the metallic scent of blood.

"I'm a good person," I whisper. "I don't... I'm not one of the..." I try to shake my head, but the man grips the back of my neck and forces me to stay still.

"What's your name, little lamb?" the man asks.

I shouldn't tell the Devil my name. There's power in it, I'm sure. I'll hear him calling for me, tempting me in my dreams.

But my mouth opens, and I say, "Levi."

"Levi," he repeats. He leans forward and kisses my forehead gently. He's getting closer and closer, touching me more and more.

My heart hammers in my chest until I'm sure it'll beat right out of it.

"Call me Gabriel." The words are casual, but the implication is far from it.

Like the archangel.

"You can't steal a name like that," I say, and while I try for fierce denial, my voice is weak. My limbs are weak, too, and I can't bring myself to pull back.

"Steal it?" He's the one to draw away, only enough to look me in the eye again. He doesn't stop touching me. This time, he brushes a few strands of my hair behind my ear. "Maybe I'm only borrowing it." He chuckles. "At least I'm not claiming 'Lucifer' or 'Azrael.'"

I recoil from him, those names enough to free me from his thrall.

"The Devil," I repeat, and I stand up so quickly I almost slip in the pool of blood. "Begone! Find another soul to tempt. I'm stronger than you."

But I can't look him in the eye.

"Strong, yes," he agrees, following my lead as he rises as well. "But untempered. You need somebody to guide you into beauty, to show you that your temptations are wondrous."

My breath becomes ragged.

I have somebody to guide me already. Father Zachariah makes sure I'm on the correct path.

He teaches me how to resist temptation.

I bend down to pick up my groceries, but the Devil steps into the space directly behind me, my body brushing against his shins.

I freeze. “The Devil can only take those whose wills are weak, who have sin in their hearts, who dare to defy God,” I say. The words are limp, nowhere the fierce declaration they are in Father Zachariah’s sermons.

But there’s hope for me yet.

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

All I have to do is resist.

He grasps my wrist, gently but firmly, and urges me to my feet. I end up facing him, unable to take my eyes off of his beautiful face. “You still have blood on your mouth,” he murmurs. “It’s hardly the blood of Christ, little lamb.”

I unconsciously lick my lips, and I taste it again, familiar and terrible and so sinful.

I shake my head. “It was a mistake. It won’t happen again. I’m not like the people of this city. I’m not.”

I’m protesting too much, I know. The more I argue, the more he’ll know I’m lying .

“And what are the people of this city like?” A smile quirks onto his lips. “Deplorable? Deranged? Do they have hate in their hearts?”

“They’ve lost faith,” I say. “They bare their sinful hearts to the world; they defile their bodies and their souls for a simple moment of pleasure. They lie and cheat and steal, and they’ll drag everyone down to the depths of depravity with them.”

It's the truth of the world, the reason Father Zachariah guards us and keeps us safe at home.

But I was the one sent out to sully my soul.

I understand that we need the supplemental groceries.

Our meager garden can only produce so much, and it isn't as though we can have a cow or even sheep in the middle of the city.

On the days between deliveries, one of us must venture outside of the sanctity of our home.

Somehow, it's almost always me who goes out.

The other men have proper work. The women need to care for the children.

My sister Eve rarely steps foot outside.

She calls me brave for doing this for us.

She also envies me, a sin she's confessed on multiple occasions.

Maybe that's why she isn't allowed to go.

"Does having faith prevent you from entertaining those thoughts?" He's smiling, but it isn't a pretty smile. "From indulging in them? Or does it punish you for simply having them?"

"I don't indulge!" I protest. I pick up my groceries and stand, and I'm conscious of the fact that I'm going to be late, that the eggs are probably cracked and the apples

must be bruised. “I don’t have thoughts like that. I don’t.”

“Everyone does,” the Devil who would have me call him Gabriel says. “The measure of a man is not to be taken by his thoughts, but by what he does with those thoughts.” He gestures back to the body with his free hand. ““Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.””

He’s quoting scripture at me. Is he implying the man sowed injustice?

I look at the dead man, whose blood must be getting cold and sticky by now.

Then my brow furrows.

“Why are you here?” I ask the Devil. “I was looking for a way around the traffic blockade. I didn’t hear your footsteps following me.” I stop, then realize something. “...You were already in the alley.”

“Investigating a commotion.” He shrugs. “I found something better.” Those dark eyes focus on me again. Eyes so dark, they could be the pits of Hell. “I found you.”

I tighten my hold on my bags and shake my head. “No. That doesn’t make sense. The man was still alive when I arrived, and those wounds are too fresh. The killer wouldn’t have been able to get far.”

“You were here before I was,” he remarks. “Should I be worried about you being the murderer?”

I bristle, but I’m suddenly aware of how isolated I am here, in a dark courtyard with the light of the setting sun getting dimmer and dimmer.

Soon, there will be nothing to stop the shadows from wrapping around my ankles.

He really is the Devil, to mock me, to terrify me.

“I’m leaving,” I say, straightening my back. “The Devil holds no power over me.”

Before I can turn, he yanks me hard, pulling me flush against his front as his hand goes to the small of my back. His lips find mine, tasting me, tasting the blood, and his tongue slides over the seam of my mouth.

I gasp, and he uses that slight parting of lips to worm his tongue inside.

I shudder and try to break the kiss, but his hold on me is firm, and all I can do is take it.

All I want to do is take it.

No, that’s not true. I want to do more than simply take it. I want to give in to it, too, to properly taste another man’s lips for the first time.

My cock throbs traitorously.

Why not now? I’ve already done this much.

What’s one more sin?

What’s one kiss?

I surrender to the Devil, even as I loathe myself for doing it.

By the time he lets go of me, I’m breathing hard, and my cock is tenting my pants. I don’t dare look down to see if he’s having a similar reaction. I don’t want to know. It’s enough to know my own sin is suffusing me, affecting me, tainting me.

“You should get home before dark, little lamb,” he murmurs. “But don’t worry. I’ll find you again.”

“You won’t,” I say, but I don’t believe it.

I turn away from him, rushing back out to the main street. The traffic commotion is long gone, and foot traffic has returned to normal. I see a few police officers directing people, and I consider telling them about what I saw.

They won’t believe me if I tell them the Devil killed a man.

They’d assume I’d done it. They’d drag me back to their police station and question me.

It’s getting dark, anyway, and I can’t handle the idea of being trapped where the light can’t reach me.

I hurry back home instead.

I’ll be in enough trouble for being late and ruining dinner.

As I enter the apartment complex, I run my tongue over my lips again, tasting both the Devil and the dead man’s blood.

This truly is the taste of sin.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GABrIEL

My little lamb — Levi — is so disoriented that he doesn't notice me following him.

It's for the best. He isn't prey, to be frightened and tormented.

He's something more than that, but he's as inextricably tied to me as my quarry usually is.

Now that I've decided I'm interested, that he's mine, there's no escaping me.

I should feel guilty for marking him that way. I should feel guilty for not giving him a choice.

I don't.

Those blue eyes of his called out to me. They demanded my attention; they tempted me.

They asked for something only I could give.

New Bristol is a bustling city, and at this early hour of the evening, it's easy to get lost in a crowd. No one notices the blood splatter across my black clothing, the wet spot on my knee from where I'd lowered myself in front of him. They won't. They never do.

As far as they're concerned, I'm one of them.

I have to slow down as we start to approach an apartment building. It would be inconvenient for him to see me now and try to lose me when I'm so close to knowing exactly where he lives, exactly where to find him again.

I want to know everything about him.

Levi.

A beautiful, angelic boy, with pale skin and dark curls that contrasts sharply. His body is so slight in comparison to mine—thin, with few muscles, and I wonder if he's even getting enough to eat.

He'd radiated something I couldn't identify, some innocence that should have made him untouchable. But he'd tasted my victim's blood, and I don't think it was by chance that we encountered each other.

I think it was fate.

He needs me. He needs me to guide him, to nurture him.

He needs my loving hand to care for him in this cruel world.

The one single good thing Lansbury did in his life was lead Levi to me. I'd enjoyed Lansbury's terror, making him scream and beg and regret his actions.

I remember the courtroom interviews, his insistence of his innocence.

The way his victims cried on the stand as his lawyers tore them apart.

And the smug look on his face when he'd been declared not guilty , telling the press that a grave injustice had been righted.

No.

If the courts wouldn't avenge the victims, then I would.

The universe, God, another deity entirely — I'm not sure which, but I'd known that the standard Christian deity would be the easiest way to appeal to a lost little lamb like Levi, who had assumed that the man was saying hell instead of help.

Levi, who belongs to me.

The apartment complex Levi approaches isn't quite rundown, but it's in desperate need of maintenance.

The stoops leading up to it are dirty, the railing rusty.

The front door's glass is covered in a thin layer of dust. The building itself is showing its age, and I decide I don't like the idea of him staying here.

I'll have to find another place for him to live.

No. The only way I'll know he's safe is if he's with me, at my condo.

While the lack of security works to my benefit tonight, it will make it more difficult to protect him going forward.

There are too many evils in the world to risk him becoming a victim of someone like those I hunt down and slaughter for their crimes.

A lamb like him is too tempting for the wolves of the world.

I follow more closely as he enters the building.

He stops by the mailbox to pick up the mail, and I wait until he's gone up the stairs to look at which one he'd opened. It's labeled as belonging to apartment 302, belonging to a Z. Carpenter.

I depart before he can catch on to my presence. I don't need to spook him any more than he's already been spooked tonight.

I do wonder who Z. Carpenter is. A boyfriend? That could complicate things, but I'm not worried.

There's no question that Levi is mine. I won't allow anyone else to have him.

I shouldn't have told him my name, but I'd been unable to lie to him. I'd wanted to hear it from his lips, but he hadn't used it.

I'll have to fix that, too.

More than that, I want to hear him call me something else, something more intimate.

Daddy .

So many subs call me that, and it's never meant anything, but I know it'll be different coming from Levi. He'll mean it in a way the subs I meet at clubs never do.

I hail a cab so I can return to my own home, a proper apartment in a proper apartment building that values appearances and security far more than Levi's does.

My brown tabby cat immediately greets me at the door, rubbing against my ankles, and I reach down to pet him.

His automatic feeder should've taken care of his appetite, but like any other cat, he's

perpetually determined to make me think he hasn't been cared for.

I double check his bowl anyway, finding that he's pushed all of it to the sides, and shake it to more evenly distribute it. He immediately comes to investigate, then gives me a look like I'm an idiot

What he really wants is wet food. I pet him again, then empty a can of wet food into a new bowl for him. He immediately starts scarfing it down like the savage kitty he is.

I shake my head, wondering if Levi likes cats. He'd like Ichabod, I'm sure. It's impossible not to. Unless he's allergic...

But no. There's no need to borrow trouble, and I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'm ready to get my bloody clothes off.

The thought of how they'd come to be saturated with blood brings me back to my little lamb, and I lick my lips like I can still taste Lansbury's blood.

I wish I was tasting Levi's instead.

The fantasy has my cock throbbing in my pants, and I shed them quickly, tossing them and the rest of my clothing directly into the washing machine. By the time I get back to my bathroom, I'm fully hard, and I'm barely under the spray of the shower before my hand is on my dick.

My thoughts linger on Levi, on what I would do if I brought him home with me.

It would be simple enough to make a cut on my chest, giving him something to lick away. He doesn't need anything tainted. If his predilections include tasting it, it needs to be from me .

I moan at the thought of that tongue flicking across my skin, so hesitant but so very eager at the same time as he gives in to the fantasies I know he's experiencing.

Why else would he taste a dying stranger's blood?

Does he taste his own?

The thought threatens to bring up something dark inside of me. I don't want to think about Levi hurting himself so he can indulge in something he doesn't need to experience alone. If anyone causes him pain, it will be me.

With the coppery taste of blood on his tongue, he'll kiss me, and I'll gently urge him to his knees so he can taste something else entirely.

I groan at the idea of running my fingers through those soft black curls, pulling him closer until he's taking the tip of my cock past his lips.

Would he lie to himself and say he doesn't want it, or would he allow himself to freely take what I know he needs?

My hand slowly pumps my cock, and I lean against the shower wall as I experience my fantasy. It's so real that I swear I can feel his breath on me, the wetness of the shower spray allowing me to pretend it's the warmth of his tongue. I arch my hips into it, and I let my mind drift further.

What would he look like covered in blood from head to toe? If I taught him to slit the throat of someone who truly deserves it, would he indulge? Would he allow himself to be coated in it, reveling in it?

Would he feel the same rush I do? The same twisted satisfaction of ending a life that's only brought pain to others?

The thought is enough to send me over the edge, though the cum is instantly washed away. I open my eyes, but the image of him still lingers in my vision.

He's going to be mine.

I bathe, uninterested in lingering beneath the spray now that I've taken care of my pressing needs, then dry off.

Murdering Lansbury—and meeting Levi—took the edge off, but I know the hunger inside me won't be sated for long.

He'd called me the Devil.

Maybe he isn't entirely wrong.

I get changed, then grab my laptop and settle into bed. Ichabod jumps up to join me while I browse Wanted lists and check the news.

After a few minutes of that, I look up Levi's address and Z. Carpenter . Unfortunately, it's a much too common name, and the only thing I find out about the apartment building is that it's owned by a private equity firm.

That's usually a sign that something else is up.

My curiosity piqued, I try to find apartment listings, but there hasn't been a vacant unit in that building in years. I can't find a management office or any form of contact information either.

That's definitely not normal.

Ichabod butts his head under my hand, and I pet him.

“Looks like we’ve got a new project,” I tell him. “Who in the world is my little lamb?”

Something to look into in the morning.

Usually, I’d spend my day off looking through the news for a new target worth stalking, someone who will satisfy this incessant need to kill, but my thoughts stray once again to Levi. This itch doesn’t ordinarily manifest until I’ve found my next mark, but my little lamb is so much more than prey.

He’s an obsession.

I know on some level that I should shake it and walk away, but the thought alone is unacceptable. I won’t be able to let him go until I’ve tasted him again, until I’ve felt him beneath me and whispered in his ear how beautiful he is.

He can think I’m the Devil all he wants.

I want him to be my fallen angel.

Every free moment I have, I go to his apartment building and wait outside, hoping to see him again. Unfortunately, in an entire week of waiting, he’s never once come out. I even set up a small camera pointed at the door so I could track his habits, but Levi is nowhere to be seen.

More curiously, almost nobody leaves the rundown three-story building.

There’s a man with a full beard who leaves and returns three times, several middle-aged men who leave together in the mornings and return in the evenings, and a single woman who leaves but is back within the hour.

Other than that, there's no activity from the building at all.

When I sit there at night, I see lights on in the windows and I can see silhouettes through the blinds and curtains, so I know there are people inside—but those people never leave.

It's increasingly suspicious, and I find myself even more interested in Levi for it.

I need him to leave.

I need to see him again.

I need to make sure I didn't imagine him.

Good thing there are ways to force him out.

I stride into the building like I own it, but like before, no one is around to see me. It's disconcerting, and I have to wonder all over again why people aren't constantly coming in and out.

The lone camera in the lobby doesn't deter me. I set a package down near the mailboxes, unlabeled, and walk further in.

The building is from the 1950s, and it's easy to see that the landlord hasn't done much in the way of modernization. The handrails on the stairs are clean, though, and I don't spot obvious dirt trails like I would expect from an older building. The dust on the front door is an outlier.

I stop in front of apartment 302. It's on a corner, which tells me it's probably larger than the other units. When I lean close to the door, I can hear voices filtering through.

Is one of them Levi?

I step back and consider my options. If I knock on the door, I might scare my little lamb, and I can't even be sure he actually lives in this unit.

I glance around and spot the fire alarm on the wall by the stairs.

That's one way to get people out of a building. I don't want to risk getting seen yet, though, so I go back downstairs and pull the alarm there, using my sleeve to not leave fingerprints.

The alarm starts blaring, and I calmly walk outside and to the other side of the street, leaning against a car that's parked there. Other people stop at the commotion.

After a few minutes, several people walk out of the building.

They're all dressed in the same beige-and-white getup. Beige slacks or skirts, crisp white shirts. The women have long hair, while the few men who appear are all clean shaven except for the bearded man I'd seen on the video footage.

And, finally, Levi exits.

My heart freezes, and a small smile spreads across my lips.

He's as beautiful as I remembered.

He truly will be my fallen angel.

Soft black curls fall around his ears, and he purses his plush lips in dismay.

Levi is holding a woman's hand, but she looks similar enough to him that I assume

they're siblings. No need for jealousy.

She shouldn't be touching him though.

He's mine.

After a few minutes, the bearded man goes over to Levi and his sister. He puts his arms around them both, and my smile turns into a scowl.

I have to assume that this is Z . He looks old enough to be their father, but there's something in the way he's touching them that has me thinking he's more than that. Maybe it's my imagination, but I don't like it.

Maybe he needs to be my next target.

I force myself to calm down. I don't know what they are to each other yet. For all I know, Z is their father, I remind myself. He could be something else entirely.

I scan the crowd again, focusing on the anomalies I'm noticing. Their dress, their hair, their demeanors — it's all so similar. I purse my lips, not liking this at all, then my gaze returns to Levi.

My little lamb looks spooked.

I want to go to him and comfort him, to tell him there's no threat, but that would give up the entire game. I'm not ready for that yet.

I'm not ready to stop staring at him yet, either, but like he's every bit as aware of me as I am of him, our eyes meet even in the middle of this chaos.

He freezes, and I smile at him.

It's as gentle as I can make it, but he still turns away from me. It makes something seize in my chest, and my fingers curl into fists at my sides. I want to be the one he turns to, not the one who causes him to look to another man for comfort.

Time. I need time.

I don't know what he's going to say to Z, and I can't risk being seen there by anyone but Levi himself. Instead of lingering, I turn and walk away with calm strides.

I saw him. I didn't imagine him, didn't dream up the entire encounter.

I know where he is, and I know how to get to him.

The next step is to make him want me as much as I want him.

It'll take time, but I'm patient.

At least, I'll have to be this time.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

Father Zachariah stares at all of us with deep disapproval.

The only light comes from the small flickering lamp. The windows are covered with thick blankets to prevent any light from seeping through, rendering this room as ominous as any pit to hell.

The penance room is still better than the basement.

The hardwood floors dig into my knees, and I clench my fists on my thighs. Eve, who's sitting next to me, keeps her head bowed so her hair falls over her face. From behind me, I hear soft whimpers from one of the younger women.

Everybody is terrified of retribution.

All thirty-two of us have gathered here. I can hear the younger children making soft, distressed sounds, while the older ones have learned that silence is the only acceptable reaction. The mothers force the children to look down, while the men stay stoic.

I need to be stoic too.

My eyes catch on a dark red stain at the edge of the wooden slat underneath my knees.

Was that my blood?

“Which of you pulled the fire alarm?” Father Zachariah asks. “I know it must have been one of you.”

Guilt hammers in my chest. I remember deep, dark eyes, penetrating my soul.

Nobody says a word as Father Zachariah walks between our kneeling bodies.

He lifts up young Mary’s arm and rattles her. “Was it you, child?” he demands. “I know you like to play in the halls.”

“No,” she answers quickly. “Please, Father Zachariah, sir, I swear I didn’t. I would never.”

She’s only thirteen. Her blonde hair is pulled into two braids, and her eyes are wide with fear.

Father Zachariah scowls at her. “You’d never? But last week you stole Myriam’s cookies. We all know you’re driven to temptation easily.”

I purse my lips and give in to the urge to look in their direction. My sister Eve catches my gaze and shakes her head.

“I didn’t do it!” Mary cries out again. She tries to pull away from Father Zachariah, but her older brother pushes her back into her spot.

“You protest like the guilty,” Father Zachariah says. “Get up against the wall?—”

Get up against the wall and face penance.

“It was the Devil!” I yell.

Father Zachariah lets go of Mary and turns to look at me. “What?”

I straighten my shoulders and look straight ahead at the dirty white wall with its brown smudges.

Next to me, Eve goes even more still. I know she’d look at me if she could, but nobody would dare draw unnecessary attention to themselves.

“The Devil did it,” I repeat, my voice raspy.

That’s the truth. There is no reason for Mary to suffer when she had nothing to do with it.

Father Zachariah walks over to me and grips my hair harshly. “Why would the Devil pull a fire alarm, Levi?”

I look up at him, at the cold anger in his blue eyes.

“Because... because the Devil wants something in our home.” I swallow down the confession that wants to slip free.

The Devil wants me.

Father Zachariah shakes my head from side to side, and I bite my lip to suppress my pained noises.

“What would the Devil want from us?” he demands. “We are righteous and godly. Our halls are hallowed, and the Devil may not step foot inside here.”

I stay silent, hoping the answer will be enough.

But Father Zachariah releases me and says, “If the Devil is here, then you must all take penance, to ensure you remember your place in the world.”

He means to punish everybody for my own sin.

It isn't their soul the Devil came for.

They aren't the ones who have been remembering the gurgling sounds of a stranger's death.

They aren't the ones who have been thinking about a tall stranger with a smooth voice.

They aren't the ones who have been dreaming about a copper kiss.

“I did it,” I quickly say. “The Devil came for me. I'm the reason he pulled the fire alarm.”

The others, the children, don't deserve to suffer for the weakness in my soul.

I can feel Eve stir as much as I can see her out of the corner of my eye, and I know she's willing me to backtrack. She doesn't understand why I need to do this. She would rather everybody take a lash or two and be done with it, instead of me receiving God's full wrath.

But I know Eve can't take much penance either. I'm doing this for her as much as for the children.

I see Father Zachariah's lips curl into a smile, one not even his bushy beard can hide. “Then I'll have to drive that Devil out of you, Levi.”

My back already aches, and my stomach drops in dread, but I nod. “Yes, sir.”

If this spares Mary and Eve and the others, I’ll gladly take it.

As long as it’s penance up here, in front of the others.

As long as penance means pain and prayer and is over in a few minutes.

Father Zachariah tightens his hold on my hair and looks at the others. “Be grateful, children. Levi has done the honorable thing and confessed to his sins. Pray for his soul, for it is the most stained among yours.”

Those words cut deeper than anything else he’s said so far.

It’s because I know they’re the truth.

This is why the Devil sought me out.

But the others are still pure. Their souls can still be saved.

“Now stand, Levi, and bare yourself for penance.” Father Zachariah lets go of me and walks to the nearby wall.

The wall I’ve avoided looking at.

I stand and pull my shirt off. I hear Eve’s inhale, and the soft breaths of others in the room.

None of their backs are as scarred as mine. They take a lash or two every few months.

I take penance regularly.

I go to the center of the dirty white wall in front of me. I place my hands over a dark stain, one that's familiar and matches the groove of my hand.

Just above eye-level is another dark, ruddy brown mark.

Copper .

I lick my lips and wait for the familiar sting, for the familiar pain.

Father Zachariah removes the thick whip from where it hangs on the side wall and strides over to me. He drapes the leather across my back, stroking over the scars I've accumulated over the years.

“Watch, my children, and remember this. Levi makes this sacrifice to protect all of you,” Father Zachariah says.

Is it really a sacrifice if I've drawn the Devil's eye?

He takes several paces back, and my apprehension only grows as he puts more distance between us. As soon as he's far enough away, he'll begin.

I close my eyes instead of continuing to stare at the dark stain. I can still see it in my mind's eye, though. Focusing on it is better than nothing at all, but when my mind goes blank and the pain suffuses my entire being, I know it will be good .

Maybe if I suffer enough, the Devil will stop stalking me. The first lash falls between my shoulder blades. It isn't a particularly hard strike, but it still draws a sharp hiss from my lungs. The pain quickly transforms into something other , something that fills me with yearning and shame alike.

Father Zachariah always ramps it up by subtle degrees, drawing out the whipping to

make sure the lesson is learned and imprinted into my skin.

As it gets progressively harder, I sink into a place inside of me where the pain becomes penance, where I know that the absolution for my sins is within reach. It'll take more, I know, but I need it.

My rebellious flesh grows hard under the onslaught, but I keep perfectly still, not flinching away from the lashes, not grinding against the wall like my sinful body wants me to.

I cry out the first time the whip cuts my skin, my body shuddering. It gets more difficult to remain still as he speeds up and I have less time to relax before the next strike lands—and as the pleasure builds, aching for something forbidden.

The slow trickle of blood down my back is a familiar feeling, and as it seeps out of me, so too does my sin.

There is nothing but this pain, this euphoria.

This is supposed to be penance, yet I chase it, want it.

Cleanse me.

Make me feel .

I stifle a moan as the lash hits me once more. I attempt to turn my thoughts to God, but instead of the beautiful, shining light, I see dark brown eyes and a lurid smile.

I see the Devil, smirking at me.

Little lamb .

I gasp and squeeze my eyes shut, arching my back for the next lash so I can drive these thoughts away.

It's harder than the rest, cutting more deeply into my skin. I never count. Father Zachariah doesn't like it when we count, preferring instead for us to put our faith in him to determine how many strikes are needed to absolve us of our offenses.

I expect another, but it doesn't come.

My heartbeat thuds in my ears, then I feel Father Zachariah's hand directly on my back, over the cuts.

I let out a small, strangled sound, and my tears finally fall.

Because it isn't Father Zachariah's face I see behind my eyelids. It's still the Devil, that being who stole an angel's name and wears it like a bad disguise.

It's his kiss I feel against my lips, filling my mouth with copper once more.

It's his hand I imagine brushing across my burning flesh, his tongue lapping up my blood and telling me that I have earned this pain, that I deserve it, but that I am forgiven.

"Your penance is done, my child," Father Zachariah says, still stern. "You may return to your room."

No, I want to say. The Devil is still in my thoughts! He hasn't been driven out!

But I nod, and I turn to face the rest of the flock, hunching forward to hide the embarrassing truth of my arousal.

Eve's bright blue eyes are on me, and I see the pity there, and the gratefulness.

She never argues to save me. She says I shouldn't sacrifice myself for the others, yet she won't prevent it, either.

It would be worse for her if she did. The women are held to a higher standard, and as his future wife, Eve is held even higher than that. She might not be lashed, but there are other punishments.

Worse punishments.

I stumble in her direction, and she stands to help me. She grips my arm, and her body helps shield my shame from the others.

"Levi won't be fit to collect our groceries tomorrow. Jacob, you'll go," Father Zachariah says. "Eve, tend to your brother."

"Yes, Father," she says, her voice carefully demure.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

When we're in private, she isn't nearly as subdued, but in front of Father Zachariah, she has no choice but to be docile and meek.

She takes my arm and helps me out of the room. I have to lean heavily on her, but she's stronger than she looks.

Or maybe it's that she's had a lot of practice doing this.

Carefully, we make our way out of the apartment as the others filter around us. They don't stop to express empathy.

I don't deserve it.

Eve helps me to our apartment, which is only a few doors down the hall, and I'm grateful when I get to my bedroom. I collapse onto my stomach, and Eve hovers right behind me.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she asks.

"Do what?" I try to lift my head, and it makes my back burn in a way that heats parts of me that should remain unspoken.

"I know you didn't pull the fire alarm," Eve says. "Why did you cover for someone else?"

I lower my head again, sighing against the clean pillow. "Because I drew the Devil here. I saw him on the street outside. He looked straight into my soul, Eve. It wasn't

fair for Mary to take penance for something that had nothing to do with her.”

Several seconds pass without Eve speaking. I’m about to lift my head again, half-convinced she won’t be there anymore, when she replies, “Why do you think you drew him here? None of us are free of sin, Levi.”

I part my lips and lick them, remembering the taste of the kiss.

“I’m tempted all the time,” I whisper. “Things I cannot say out loud.”

“Levi,” she begins, only to pause. “Let me get the first aid kit.” I hear her footsteps retreating, then she returns.

Before I can speak, she says, “We are all tempted. Tell me what it is. I’m sure you aren’t as terrible as you think.

” I feel a cool, soft cloth run against my back.

It stings, but I stay still as she wipes the blood away.

My face heats with embarrassment.

I can’t tell her about the blood.

I can’t tell her about the kiss.

I shake my head. “No. It’s nothing. Thank you for tending to me, Eve.”

She sighs, but she’s used to me keeping my thoughts to myself. Part of me wants to confide in her, but while I trust my sister, I cannot expect her to lie or keep things from her new husband.

Why does he need a third wife, though?

The other men only have one wife. As God's prophet, Father Zachariah deserves some privileges, but I can't imagine sharing with another person.

I would want to be the sole focus of my partner's attention, and know that they loved only me, and would do anything for me.

But that's selfish.

We fall into silence as she spreads the cool ointment over my skin and slowly bandages it all up.

Would the Devil tempt me with soft touches like these, or would he only whip me as Father Zachariah does?

"Okay, you're done," Eve says. "Do you need anything else? Water? Food?"

"No. Thank you, Eve," I say. Before she can go, I reach out and tentatively touch her hand. "Truly. I wouldn't be able to survive without you, Eve."

She gives me a crooked smile. "The same goes for you, brother. I hope you'll remember that the next time you do something stupid like volunteer for penance. Let the others have a turn. Surely by this point, you've completely cleared your soul of sins?"

I laugh along with her, although there's nothing funny about what she said.

I'm still dirty.

Eve shuts the door as she leaves my bedroom, and I squeeze my eyes shut. My back

tingles from the ointment. When I flex my back, I have to stifle a moan.

It hurts, but I deserve it.

It hurts, but I need it.

It hurts, but I love it.

My cock, which had settled a bit while Eve was here, grows rigid again. I thrust my hips against the mattress, giving in to the shameful desires.

I've never been able to stop myself from doing this.

I try, so hard. I attempt to resist.

Don't I?

No. That's a lie.

I've never been able to wait more than a few minutes before I give in. I reach into my trousers and wrap my hand around my cock, that simple touch alone already making pleasure zap through me. Every movement makes my back twinge in pain, but none of it matters.

I stroke myself quickly, because the faster I do this, the faster it's over with.

What's the rush, little lamb?

I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. No, no. I won't fantasize about him. Whether he's the Devil or not, he's a temptation I need to shove aside completely.

But I've already failed to resist. I'm already masturbating like an animal.

My hand slows, and I remember his breath against my cheek, his strong hand on my hips.

Would he stroke me fast or slow? Would he simply watch as I did it, and call me a lamb , as if a lamb would ever do anything so shameful as this?

I press my mouth against the pillow to hide my noises as I lift my hips up. My back protests again, but as ever, it only makes my head grow dizzier with arousal, and I grip myself tighter.

Good boy , the Devil whispers into my ear.

That's the problem.

I'm not good.

I'm dirty.

I'm tainted.

I'm disgusting.

No matter how much I pray, no matter how many times I repent, this stain stays within me. I judge the world around me, but I know that the dirtiest, filthiest place is inside my soul.

Only the Devil would think I was good .

My thoughts continue to spiral as I masturbate. Pleasure and pain mingle while I

imagine the Devil touching me, egging me on.

While I imagine him kissing me.

I groan and reach for my back, pressing down on a welt I can reach. The bandage feels wet already, and when I draw my fingers away, I see a hint of red. I suck on those fingers and taste my own blood, delicious and sinful and wrong .

My vision is blurry when my orgasm slams into me. My seed spills, and I keep pumping myself until my cock is too sensitive to continue.

Then I lower myself down, not caring that my stomach lands directly against the wet spot.

I'm too exhausted to move.

The tears trail down my cheeks, and I sob quietly into the pillow.

Why am I like this?

Why does God want me to suffer with these terrible thoughts?

I breathe hard, trying to work through the moment, then I rub my eyes to erase the tears. I have no right to cry. All of this is my own fault.

I just need to be stronger.

I just need to resist.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GABrIEL

“I ’m innocent!” the man yells, his wide eyes flicking to the sharp serrated knife I’m holding.

“I haven’t even accused you of anything,” I point out, circling the chair he’s ziptied to.

He swallows hard enough to where I can see his throat working, and I imagine slitting it, letting the blood splatter out all over me so I can feel it and taste it.

It reminds me of my little lamb.

But I have better plans for Nathan Morretti, bigger plans, and they don’t involve a quick or easy death. He’s caused too much misery, too many deaths of his own. The police have done shoddy detective work, half-assing the case.

My contact at the police station believes it will be declared an accident instead of arson, and that simply won’t do.

Not when three people died because of the man in front of me.

So what if it was a run-down building, and the only people living in it were squatters?

My lips thin into a line.

Well, we have our own run-down little building now, and plenty of unsafe wiring

around us.

“Please, whatever you want, I’ll get it to you!” Moretti begs.

The only thing I want is a gentle young man with a taste for blood.

“What I want is to ensure you can never murder anyone ever again,” I say with a brittle smile.

I trail the knife over the skin of his collar bones. A small line of red wells up.

If I lick it, will I taste the same sin Levi did?

“Why did you do it?” I ask Moretti, blowing into his ear.

He’s sweating profusely already, fear radiating from him as he tries to pull away from me. I grab him by his thinning hair, forcing him to stay in place, and inhale the scent of sweat and blood.

The stale air of the building doesn’t detract from the moment. If anything, it adds to the moment, adds to the fear I swear I can taste.

Maybe I can. People can do all sorts of unordinary things, can’t they? They can see music and hear numbers; why wouldn’t I be able to taste fear? Whether I imagine it or not, it’s still intoxicating, and I lick my lips to get more of it.

I wish I was kissing my little lamb. I wouldn’t want to taste his fear again. I want to taste his longing, his need for the coppery taste of blood.

I will give it to him.

And when I do, he'll call me "Daddy" with pleasurable sighs.

Not today, but someday soon, I will smear my own blood across his lips. We'll taste it together when we kiss, and I'll hold him in my arms and assure him that there's nothing wrong with what we're doing.

His fear will turn into lust, and that will be the sweetest taste of all.

"—I promise," Moretti is saying.

I'm not sure when I tuned him out, but his voice has begun to get on my nerves. I usually enjoy the begging that comes with their realization that their lives are coming to an abrupt end — untimely, they think, but they're only getting what they deserve — but today, I find it lonely.

I wonder if Levi would learn my methods. I may call him my little lamb, but there could be a wolf in sheep's clothing there after all. I could teach him to research, to hunt, to punish.

To kill.

I could teach him so much.

It would take the innocence from his eyes, but it would replace it with something even more alluring. His confidence would be delicious.

"Hmm?" I ask, cutting another slice over the other side of his collarbone. "I apologize. I should be paying closer attention to your final words, shouldn't I?"

Moretti struggles harder against the chair he's bound to, but all he does is manage to upset it so he tumbles to the floor. I observe dispassionately, not moving to right the

chair again. The fire department will label this arson as well as murder, but there's nothing to trace me to Moretti.

Even if there was, I'm at peace with the idea of eventually getting caught.

It won't be from this murder, though.

It won't be today, or even a week from now.

When it happens, the public will condemn me as a murderer or hail me as a vigilante.

I'm neither.

My little lamb believes I'm the Devil.

"Do you think I'm the Devil?" I ask Moretti, genuinely curious.

He stares up at me. His cheeks are ruddy from strain and panic, and he strains against the zip ties keeping him attached to the metal chair.

I casually kick him in the side, making him cry out. "I asked you a question."

"N-no," he says through gritted teeth.

I hum, considering. If he doesn't think I'm the Devil when I'm about to burn him alive, why should my little lamb believe I am?

Even my own parents had thought me possessed.

But Moretti doesn't know the rest of my plans yet. He probably thinks I'm going to use the knife I'm holding and make this fast.

He couldn't be more wrong.

I am ready to begin cutting, though, and I anticipate the sight of even more blood trickling from each and every wound I leave behind. The two I've left are nothing compared to what I plan to do to him.

"Tell me if you change your mind," I say.

"You're a crazy fucker," Moretti tells me, and the edge of panic is nearly palpable. I breathe it in deeply, wondering again if it's truly something I can taste or if I am losing my mind after all.

A good person wouldn't get off on hurting another—but a good person wouldn't burn down a building with people inside, either. I don't regret what I'm about to do to Moretti.

He thought he wouldn't get caught.

Does it make me insane to want to punish him?

Does it make me the Devil, or does it make me an avenging angel?

I know what my little lamb thinks.

I realize I've lost track of Moretti again, and it's a frustrating thought.

I want to hear him cry out, want to hear him scream, but I want to find Levi more.

I want to find a way to reach him, despite how difficult it is to get to him while he's hiding in that apartment complex no one ever seems to leave.

A smile spreads across my lips as I think of a way I can get to him. Apartment 302 wasn't that hard to reach, in the end.

"It's your lucky day," I tell Moretti, unable to keep the excitement from tinting my voice. "I have better things to do than cut you into ribbons."

His relief, too, is something I think I can taste.

"Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you," he babbles. "I won't tell anyone about this. I'll be quiet."

"And you won't do it again?" I ask, still smiling at him.

"I didn't—" he begins.

I quirk a brow.

"Never again," he rushes to say.

"No, you won't," I agree.

His gaze darts from me to the door, and his breathing comes in short gasps. He wets his lips, and I see his uncertainty.

I continue to smile down at him. "I won't keep you. You have important things to do."

I walk off, and he shouts, "Hey, wait! You can't just leave. You need to untie me."

Anger roils within the pit of my stomach, and I turn partially to glance at him. "I don't need to do anything," I say coolly. "But don't worry. I'm not leaving. Not yet."

I grab the container of gasoline I'd set nearby for this occasion, and his eyes go wide.

"Wait, no! No. You said?—"

"I said I wouldn't cut you to ribbons," I tell him, flashing him an icy smile. "I didn't say I wasn't going to light you on fire and leave you to burn to death like those poor souls."

His babbled pleas reach my ears, but I feel nothing toward him. No sympathy, no hesitation, no regrets.

"Do you think I'm the Devil yet?" I ask him.

"Yes!" he yells. "Yes, I think you're the fucking Devil! Is that what you want to hear?"

I purse my lips. "I hate when people tell me what they think I want to hear," I tell him. "I much prefer honesty." I shrug. In the end, it doesn't matter, does it? "If you believe in God, you should start praying," I tell him.

It won't matter either way; if there is a God, he won't intervene in something like this.

He never has before. Why would he start now?

I open the container, then slowly circle Moretti as I pour it generously onto the floor in a circle around him. I consider him, then decide I don't want to be merciful and risk the chance of him dying of smoke inhalation — or of this being stopped.

I dump more of the gasoline over his head, and it splatters all over the place. These clothes, I'll have to get rid of instead of simply washing, but that's fine. It's a price

I'm willing to pay.

Humming again, I tune out his pleas — he's begun praying — and start to dump the rest of the gas in a line leading toward the door. The remainder is left in a pool right beside it, and I take several steps back before lighting a match.

I throw it, and as much as I want to stay and watch that motherfucker burn, I turn and walk away.

I check the camera feeds on my phone, noting that the halls of the first three floors are empty. It's every bit as strange as no one leaving the building at all, and while it's fortunate for me, it also has my hackles up.

There's a part of me that wonders if this is a trap, but at the same time, I know that's paranoia talking. They have no way of knowing about me... unless my little lamb decided to tell someone about this.

I don't think he did, and I would be disappointed if he had. That means someone else could be living with him, and that this is a calculated risk.

But so is everything I do. Every time I hunt and kill, it's a risk, and this one is much less so than normal.

I'd watched the feeds enough to know that while people go into apartment 302 more frequently than anyone else, Levi and his sister mostly go to 304.

I haven't seen him leave it since the last time he went to 302, though, and the video footage of him leaving had been strange.

He'd been walking oddly, leaning against his sister.

I've watched the video several times, trying to discern what's wrong, but I can't quite determine what might have happened.

I stroll into the building like I own the place.

There's a rusty elevator, but I choose to take the stairs because it's faster and quieter.

I get to the third floor, and in front of the door to apartment 304, I set down the gift box.

It's neatly wrapped in shiny silver wrapping paper.

I'd debated the one with hearts on it, but that seemed too blatant.

The tissue paper inside does have little pink hearts all over it, though, along with sheets of pink that surround the jewelry box with my gift inside.

I purse my lips, wondering if the accompanying note inside will be enough to coax him out.

It'll need to be enough.

I straighten, wishing I could knock on the door and demand that he come with me now. But no. I have to be patient.

He will come to me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

L amb,

Y ours,

an angel in disguise

I stare at the note. The handwriting is neat, the letters printed clearly and with elegance. There's nothing sinister about the paper, although I half expected it to smell of sulfur.

It shouldn't be here though.

I don't receive mail. I shouldn't exist to the world outside. The less they know of me, the less likely they are to corrupt me.

"Levi?" Eve asks from inside the apartment. "Are you coming or going?"

I bend down and lift the box the note was attached to. "Going out. I'll be back with the ingredients you need!"

How many times have I lied to her in the past week now?

The guilt consumes me, but with how shameful my thoughts are, I can't possibly tell her the truth.

Part of me had hoped that the Devil had been satisfied with that simple prank, but of course I'd called him back to me.

This box proves that I've been naive.

He's been in my mind every day for the past week, and my back might have been healed faster if I hadn't kept jostling it in the middle of the night. No wonder the Devil is drawn to me. I seek pain alongside mortal pleasure in ways no one should.

I place the box into my reusable grocery bag, then head toward the stairs. I'm almost there, already past Father Zachariah's apartment, when I hear the door open.

"Levi?" Father Zachariah says. "Do you have a moment?"

I nod obediently and head back to him. My back still twinges from the penance.

"What can I do for you, Father Zachariah?" I ask, keeping my eyes down.

I can't decide if I want him to know what I've been doing, what I've been thinking, or if I hope I've gone unnoticed.

If he knows, he might force me to take penance again.

I yearn for the lashes, but my back hasn't recovered enough yet. If I'm too injured, there's no way for me to protect Eve.

When I'm too injured, penance isn't lashes.

I bite my lip and force myself to stay here, in the present, and not dwell on the alternative.

There's a long pause before he responds, "Be careful out there. I've been sensing demons in the air. Something is trying to harm our congregation. We must all remain vigilant."

I swallow, my tongue thick and slow as I respond, "Of course, Father Zachariah."

I should tell him about the small package weighing down my bag.

I should tell him that I've been seeing the Devil every time I close my eyes.

But my back still hurts, and I welcome penance, I do, but my body can't take more right now.

And I don't want the other form of penance.

"I'll be back soon," I say, and Father Zachariah waves me off.

I hurry down the stairs and out the building, making sure to lock it this time. Father Zachariah doesn't want to take any chances anymore, not after the fire alarm was pulled.

I stop, staring at the door to the building.

It was locked.

How did the package get inside?

I let out a small whimper of fear, then continue down the street. I follow my usual path to the grocery store, but I stop before I enter.

I need to know what the Devil sent me.

No.

I should throw it away.

There's a trash can outside the grocery store, and I angrily take the box out, the note still taped to the top, and go to shove it in.

I stop before I do.

The box doesn't smell of sulfur.

But, even out here, with the scent of dirt and filth, I swear I can smell something else.

Copper .

My hands shake and I pull the box back to myself. It can't be. I'm imagining it. I've been drowning in the scent of blood for the past week, the Devil's kiss on my tongue and my back bared in penance. That's all it is.

But I step away from the trash can—a woman gets angry at me for getting in her way—and go past the grocery store to sit on the steps of the apartment building next to it.

I take the lid off the box. Nestled inside, among packing paper, is a smaller box.

The deep violet box is prettier than anything I've ever owned. It's long and slender with delicate hinges and a soft cloth-like exterior. I don't recognize the logo on top.

It looks like the kind of box I see in the jewelry store display windows.

I open it with trepidation.

Laying inside on the white silk fabric is an elegant wristwatch.

I stare at it in confusion.

There's no blood on it, nothing gory. The leather strap is a rich shade of brown. The watch is polished silver, with delicate hour and second hands ticking the time away.

Why did I think it smelled of copper?

I lift it out and turn it around in my hands.

'Angel & Lamb ' is etched on the back, along with a date.

The same date we'd met.

I shake my head angrily. "You aren't an angel," I whisper to the watch. "And there's nothing to celebrate about that day."

"You okay?" somebody asks.

I quickly stuff the watch back, then glance up to see an older man in a gray suit looking at me with a concerned expression.

"Yeah," I say, trying to smile. The expression pulls at my cheeks awkwardly. "I'm fine."

Another lie to add to my pile. Soon I'll be nothing but lies, living in a garden of them.

I stand up and walk back to the trash can, glad the man takes me at face value and walks on. I move the box toward the trash can opening?—

And stop myself again.

It's a very beautiful watch. I've needed a watch for some time, but Father Zachariah never deemed it a good use of the congregation's funds. Father Zachariah says it's enough that he has a watch.

If I keep this unnecessary material possession, the Devil will continue to chase me.

But he chases me regardless. Why shouldn't I keep the watch, then?

I clutch the box against my chest, and I'm furious at myself for being this weak. I need to be vigilant, and strong, and cast aside temptations and demons and the entire outside world.

Meet me at 3 p.m.

With shaking hands, I open the box again and see the neat clockwork hands displaying 2:43 p.m.

I still have time to confront him and tell him to leave me alone.

As I walk, the nearby billboard catches my eye, the one with its big flashing lights and ads that depict half naked people or material goods that provide fleeting pleasures.

The picture changes to a close up of a man's face, lips and jaw freshly shaved.

The man is handsome, but I think he'd look better if the jaw were thinner, if his lips fuller, if?—

If he licked the blood from my lips.

I shudder and wrap my arms around myself.

My sin, my weakness. I need to show the Devil that I don't need any of this. I'll throw this box back at him. I don't want this wicked token.

I make my way to the small courtyard again, going through the narrow gap between buildings to the dirty, corrupted sanctuary.

The sounds of the city are muted here, blocked out by the tall buildings enclosing the space. When I look up, I can see the sky, but the entire courtyard is shaded in a creeping darkness. Nothing good can grow here.

There's nobody here.

No Devil, no angel in disguise .

I clutch my bag and reprimand myself for even having entertained this thought.

For being disappointed.

I should be glad I'm alone. I should stay away from any temptations, and the Devil is temptation distilled into the form of a single handsome man.

I pull the box out and go to set it where the man had lain dying all those days ago. There's nothing but a dark smear there now, no hint that a soul had been extinguished.

"Take your gifts and leave me alone," I whisper.

"Why would I do that?" a familiar voice asks.

I startle.

I hadn't even heard him approach, but as I spin around, I see him.

He's dressed all in black again, that same style of button-down shirt and trousers that fit him nicely without being too tight.

Too nicely.

I need to stop noticing these things. Nothing about the Devil is nice .

"Because there is no place for you here, Devil," I say, but my voice is unsteady. Even to my own ears, it sounds like a lie.

The Devil who calls himself Gabriel chuckles, striding closer to me.

I stand my ground. I won't back down.

Maybe I don't want to.

Maybe I can't help but wonder what his lips taste like.

"Are you sure about that, little lamb?" he replies. "It sounds to me like you're protesting too much."

I glare at him, despite the pounding in my chest. "Who wouldn't protest the... the unwanted gifts, the stalking, the kisses?"

"One visit, one gift, one kiss," he counters, stepping into my personal space. "Why are you pretending not to like the gift?" He tilts his head to the side, scrutinizing me. "You certainly liked the kiss."

“I didn’t,” I hiss, pressing my hands to his chest and pushing. “You need to leave me alone, whoever you really are: the Devil, a man doing his bidding, or just a regular sinner.”

Without so much as budging, he replies, “Is that what you really want, little lamb?”

“Of course it’s what I want!” I shout. My voice echoes in the courtyard. “I want to be good, and pure, and worthy of Heaven. Whatever you’re doing, however you’re invading my thoughts and tempting me, it won’t work. I won’t fall for it.”

He smiles at me. “You’ve invaded mine, too. Tempted me. I think about you often.” He gestures in the direction of where I’d set the box down. “All the time. I thought a watch was an apt gift. It seems I was right.”

My face flushes red. “I’m not—I’m not thinking about you. I try to drive you from my nightmares!”

Nightmares that left me hot and bothered, that drove me to touch myself and imagine his voice calling me lamb and boy .

“Somehow,” he says, touching my face, “I doubt they’re nightmares. If they were nightmares, you wouldn’t be tempted by them.”

His fingers on my chin are scalding, yet I can’t pull away.

I should do more. I should deny all of this, deny him .

All my visions of righteously smiting the Devil have fled though, and I’m left only staring into his deep brown eyes, seeing myself reflected in them.

Seeing the want and desire that I know all too well.

“Please,” I say, but I don’t know what I’m begging for.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

I shake my head and try once more to get away from him. This time he wraps an arm around my back to stop me, and I cry out in pain as he puts pressure on my healing wounds.

He releases me, but before I have time to feel relieved, he's spinning me around. The air hits the healing lashes as he tugs my shirt up, and I whimper as the cloth rubs against the ones higher on my back.

When he speaks, his voice is shaking with what I think is fury. "Who touched you? Who touched what's mine?"

"I'm not—" I try to step away from him, but he grips my shoulder tightly. "I took penance. Because of the fire alarm." I try to glare at him. "So it was your fault."

"You took penance for something you didn't do," he states. Even in its darkness, even in its anger, his face is still beautiful. "Who punished you, Levi?" He lets out a dark laugh. "Who do I need to fucking kill?"

The vehemence of his words startles me.

Nobody has ever been so upset on my behalf.

But they terrify me too, because nothing about his demeanor makes me believe he's bluffing.

He really wants to kill Father Zachariah, all for taking a whip to my back.

I wonder what his reaction would be if he knew that this is the penance I prefer, the one that gets me hard.

“No!” I struggle against him, which only makes my back hurt more, makes the pain spread out and fuzz up my mind. “It was right! I’m the reason you were even there. Why should somebody else be blamed for it?”

“I don’t care about ‘somebody else.’” He grips my shoulder more tightly. “I care about you .”

“Why do you care?” I demand. “You don’t know me! I’m a single, corruptible soul in this sea of sinners.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he says intently. “You’re so much more than that. I see the yearning in your heart for something more, something better, and I will be the one to give it to you.”

I try to shake my head, to deny it.

But it’s another lie, one I’ve been repeating to myself for longer than I can even remember.

I do yearn.

I do want.

I do wish.

“I can’t have that,” I say unevenly. “That’s not my place in the world.”

“Your place in the world is anywhere you wish,” he replies, every bit as confident as

I'm uncertain. "As long as you're at my side, you can do anything you want. You're my boy, and I'll take care of you and give you everything you could ever desire."

The idea of having choices is so foreign to me.

My life is already decided for me. I'm going to support Eve and help care for her future children.

I'm going to protect our small congregation.

I'll do as Father Zachariah asks, I'll take my penance, and day in and out, I'll simply watch over the others.

What would it feel like to have somebody take care of me for once, to have somebody want to give me presents and pamper me?

"You're presenting a... a fantasy," I say. "Something not real."

Something terrifying.

"It can be real," he says, his other hand coming up to rest on my opposite shoulder. "You don't deserve to be afraid, to be miserable, to be hurt ." His expression flashes with something dark and cold. "You deserve love and tenderness and for someone to take care of you."

My face heats up.

The only person who ever touches me is Eve, and even she limits how much she does that.

Sometimes I wonder if I enjoy penance so much because it forces another person to

pay attention to me, to patch me up.

Gabriel isn't the right person for it. I know that. He's worse than the people out in the city. I saw how he looked at that dying man; I've seen the darkness and the hunger in his eyes.

But he's also the first person to look at me at all.

He's the only person who wants to be close to me.

"Please," I whisper, and again I'm not sure what I'm asking for.

"I'll take care of you, little lamb," he murmurs back, his voice tender. Then he's leaning in, and his lips are pressing against mine as he kisses me again. It's dangerous and terrible and arousing and perfect all at once, and it makes me feel like I'm flying.

There's no blood on our lips this time, but I smell the copper all the same, and it only makes my blood pump faster. I flex my back, but the pain is nothing compared to this kiss.

His tongue runs gently over my lips, and he says, "Open for me, little lamb."

I don't hesitate. I part my lips for him, and his tongue slides inside my mouth.

This should be off-putting, filthy, but I moan into it and lose myself in that strange, wonderful sensation.

His grasp relaxes on my shoulders, and he starts to slide one of his hands down to my back before pausing. It's almost enough to break the fantasy of the moment, but then he's kissing me harder, and it's all I can focus on.

“You are perfect,” he murmurs against my lips as he draws back to allow us both to take in a breath.

I’m not perfect. If I were perfect, I wouldn’t be here, kissing the Devil.

But I want it to be true. I want somebody to look at me and not see all my failings. I want somebody who doesn’t tell me my soul is dirty.

“I don’t want to think,” I admit.

“Don’t think,” he urges. “Feel.” He cups my cheek and kisses me again. “There’s nothing wrong with desire, my lamb.”

I lean into the kiss and reach out to clutch his shirt. My hips thrust against him.

I feel something hard press against my own rising cock.

I freeze and break the kiss.

“Shh,” Gabriel murmurs, trying to draw me back, but I know what I felt.

I look down, and there, between our bodies, I can see the tent in his trousers, one to match my own.

What would it feel like to have our naked cocks sliding against each other? How much better would it feel, when it isn’t my own hand I grind against?

“No,” I say, letting go of him. “No, I... I can’t. This isn’t right. Father Zachariah says?—”

“You don’t need that mockery of a ‘Father,’” he replies. “You need something more.”

He meets my eyes, and his are so dark and intent that I try to shrink back. “You need a Daddy . You need me .”

“I don’t!” I shout, and I shove him hard. He stumbles back a single step, but it’s enough that I can get out of his embrace, get out of his dangerous aura.

The Devil, the Devil.

“Little lamb!” Gabriel shouts. “Levi. Stop.”

I frantically pick up my empty bags and jog to the exit of the courtyard. “Leave me alone, demon! My soul isn’t for you!”

I shimmy through the opening between buildings, and I hear Gabriel call out for me. Once I’m back on the main street, his voice disappears, drowned out by the bustle of the city.

The word “Daddy” reverberates in my mind, over and over, and I hate how it makes my cock take interest.

I can’t believe I almost fell for it. The Devil dangled temptation in front of me, and I almost accepted.

I need to talk to Father Zachariah.

I need to cleanse my soul.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GAbriel

Me

Dinner? Ichabod misses you.

I send the text to Dominick, smirking. I know perfectly well that he's not a cat person, which of course means that Ichabod spends every second Dom is over trying to get into his lap.

What we need to talk about isn't fit for public venues, though, and I vastly prefer my own orderly space to his organized chaos.

Dom

Only if you're paying.

Me

Even better. I'm cooking. Pasta alla vodka.

Mentioning liquor of any kind should be enough to get him to agree to come over, even though we both know the alcohol will burn off during the cooking process. He knows he'll get to "taste test" to make sure everything is up to par.

Dom

Yep. Gotta wrap up a case. Fucking paperwork. 8:30?

A case. That could be interesting, but if he's wrapping it up, chances are it was actually solved. Never mind that that doesn't mean a conviction is imminent, though.

Me

See you then.

I set my phone aside and turn back to my laptop, where my own work is waiting. The accounts I'm balancing are a mess, and no one bothered to escalate the issue to me until the tangle was beyond what standard back-office staff could handle.

Good thing I like puzzling things out.

I usually like the challenge, but tonight, my head isn't in it.

All I can think about is Levi, my little lamb, who wanted me so desperately that it scared him away.

I glance at the box I'd given him, the watch still inside, and I scowl. I don't understand why he didn't take the gift. Was it too fancy? Too worldly for someone obsessed with religion and a deity that's long since abandoned him?

I know plenty of religious people who revel in luxuries.

Maybe I need to start off smaller. Would he like flowers? They wither and die so quickly, but they're beautiful. Chocolate? He's thin, too thin, and he could use the treats. New shoes? His had seemed battered and faded.

I doubt it would escape Father Zachariah's notice.

I grit my teeth, and instead of turning back to the accounts I'm meant to be sorting out, I open up a new tab on my laptop. I type in the name "Zachariah Carpenter," but nothing immediately stands out. That's suspicious in and of itself, and I grab my phone to send another text to Dom.

Me

I need a favor.

Three dots immediately pop up, which tells me how involved in his paperwork he actually is.

Dom

Of course you do.

I snort.

Me

Can you run the name Zachariah Carpenter? Something related to religious activity? Probably an alias, but he receives mail under that name so there has to be something.

I add the address of the apartment complex.

If anyone can find out more about the motherfucker who took a whip to my little lamb, it would be Dominick.

Dom

Yeah. I'll bring the file later.

Later. I don't want it later. I want it now. I start typing again, but another message from Dom pops up.

Dom

This is related to an investment client, right?

I don't even hesitate to lie.

Me

Yes. He's setting off red flags.

Dom takes a few minutes to respond this time.

Dom

K. I want the good bourbon tonight.

Of course he does. I send a thumbs up emoji.

I go back to my laptop screen, scrolling the page. There are too many Zachariah Carpenters, and even adding "father" to the mix doesn't come up with anything helpful.

Father .

My lip curls into a sneer. Someone who beats a member of his congregation so thoroughly isn't deserving of the name.

I try the background check service I subscribe to, but even that one can't help me

unless I know which Zachariah Carpenter I'm looking for. It also refuses to believe that Zachariah is not the same as Zachary or Zack, so I get even more possible results to spend \$20 on to unlock.

Ichabod suddenly jumps onto my desk and plonks himself directly on top of the keyboard, closing the tabs I'd been working in. I scowl at him, picking him up and setting him to the side.

Purring, he steps back onto the keyboard, and I have to move him again to keep him from entering random numbers into my spreadsheet. As little as I want to wait for Dom to arrive with his information, I'm not getting anywhere by obsessing.

That doesn't mean it's easy to stop, though.

I focus on Ichabod's purring, petting him so he stops trying to climb onto my laptop, and it's soothing enough to temporarily redirect my thoughts away from Zachariah onto Levi.

I wonder what he'd sound like in the throes of pleasure.

Would he mewl for me, squirming and whining for more? Would he moan and whimper?

Would he beg for "Daddy" the way I want him to?

My thoughts stray back to the whip marks on his skin.

Those were too severe, too much to be pleasurable.

I could show him what it could feel like to be caressed with a whip instead of taking penance from the pain.

Any amateur can hurt and cut skin — the thought suffuses me with rage all over again — but it takes a deft hand to pleasure the way he would deserve.

That's assuming he'd ever want to feel the kiss of a whip again.

Ichabod decides he's had enough attention and swats me, and I release him so he can spring off of my desk and onto the floor.

I force my attention back to my accounts, trying to undo the mess that others have created and sort them into something more orderly, and I'm startled when the doorbell rings.

A glance at my camera shows me it's Dominick, and I get up to let him in.

Dominick Cho is an innocuous looking guy. He's only 5'10", and although he works out, he doesn't keep muscle quite the way I do. I keep telling him he needs to lift more, but he blames his Korean genetics for keeping him small.

Excuses, excuses.

I do a double-take when I see him up close. "Since when do you have a beard?"

Dom grins at me. "Since this past week. My brother claimed I'd look terrible with one." He strokes his chin and the dark hairs of his new beard. "I think I look dashing."

"Dashing," I repeat, shaking my head in amusement. If it wasn't for the fact that I know he's every bit as dominant in the bedroom as I am, I might've slept with him at some point. But he and I are similar enough to occasionally clash. "Is that what your nonexistent boyfriends tell you?"

“Look, just because Pratip didn’t work out...” Dom sighs and steps inside.

Ichabod races into the room, making a beeline for Dom’s ankles. Even though he’s been here enough time to know how to handle the cat, he almost trips.

My eyes immediately go to the backpack he’s wearing.

The files I need are in there. Forget the small talk; I need the files.

“Pratip was a prat, as they say in England,” I answer with a smirk, leading Dom to the kitchen. “Watch out for the cat. He’s trying to kill you.”

“Pratip was in the closet,” Dom corrects. “Also, you aren’t British. Don’t get all hoity-toity on me.” He sits down at the kitchen counter, setting his backpack down by his feet, and Ichabod rubs up against it.

I go to grab the backpack behind the cat, but Dom stops me.

“Food first,” he says. “I’m starving. I had to work through lunch so I could get off even remotely on time.”

“8:30 isn’t even remotely on time,” I remark, but I’m one to talk. I need those files, and I’m not sure I can be patient enough to cook before finding out what’s in them. I reluctantly start pulling ingredients out of the fridge. “Tell me what you found while I cook. See if you earn your bourbon.”

“I thought it didn’t smell tasty enough in here,” Dom remarks. “I skipped eating the celebratory cake somebody brought because I knew I’d be eating here, and now you make me wait?”

Ichabod jumps up against his leg, butting his head against Dom’s knee, and he stares

down at him.

“Hate him less, and he’ll leave you alone. And I didn’t want everything to sit for too long,” I say, only to amend, “and you might not be the only one working late. Now, tell me.”

“About my day? Yeah, sheesh. It was this big fucking mess. We arrested a guy—who thankfully was too stupid to consider lawyering up—but then it turns out he and somebody else we had in knew each other? And they get into this loud fight, a nose gets broken, blood goes flying.”

As he rambles, I put water on for the pasta, salting it and trying not to let my impatience get the best of me.

Normally, I’d be amused by how many times Dom has to lift Ichabod and move him from his lap, but my stomach is in knots.

“While they’re fighting, some of the other people we brought in try to escape...

Just a huge commotion, all while I’m trying to do the paperwork I need to get the fuck out of there.

” Dom lets out an exaggerated sigh. “I got called in to deal with some of the fallout, Martino then begs me for some help with his shit?—”

I clear my throat, stirring the onions in the pan. “As much as I care about your shit-tastic day, I need to know more about Carpenter.”

It’s so obviously a fake name that I’m not sure even Dom or one of the tech whizzes in the department could’ve pulled something, but they’ve impressed me before.

Dom gives me a pointed look. This time, when he sets Ichabod down, the cat runs off, finally tired of tormenting his favorite visitor. “You weren’t at Club Alpha last Friday,” he says instead of actually answering my question.

It takes me a few seconds to realize what he’s even talking about.

But I always go to Club Alpha on Fridays. Club Alpha is the best BDSM club in New Bristol. Membership is exclusive, discreet.

But I hadn’t even considered going last Friday.

I’d been too busy trying to find any information at all about Levi. Without a last name or even a birthday, I have even less to go on than for Zachariah Carpenter.

How is it possible, in this day and age, that Levi barely exists? I’d tried calling the building office, but I got a generic phone tree with no way to talk to a real person. The city property office only listed the holding company as the owner, no further contact information.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

Birth records for “Levi” are useless, never mind that I don’t know if he was even born in New Bristol or somewhere else.

So how could I possibly go and whip or spank a boy I don’t care about, when my lamb is being tortured and abused by another man?

“There were a few newbies,” Dom continues. “Found a needy brat who really wanted a good Daddy. I told him about you. He’s keen to meet you.”

I open my mouth to tell him off but change my mind. “You think I’d make a good Daddy for a boy?”

Dom peers at me. “Uh. Depends on what the boy wants and needs? You’d be good at the whole pain play part. You’ve got the whole being a dominant asshole thing down. But the caretaking side...” He shrugs. “Not your style.”

That’s not true.

That can’t be true.

I’d take good care of my lamb.

“Whatever. I don’t want to talk about my love life,” I say mulishly. “I want to know about Zachariah Carpenter.”

Dom huffs in annoyance. “This guy got you this worked up? What was he even doing, that he got onto your radar?”

“You know I can’t divulge information like that,” I tell him, glad to have redirected the conversation.

Of course, he’s not supposed to share the kind of information I’m asking for either, but plausible deniability is one of the ways we operate.

Dom keeps staring at me, until he says, “Well. You’re right about bad vibes.

Zachariah Carpenter is his newest name. He’s had five already, but his last one was Joshua Baker.

It looks like he’s been moving from city to city...

and the last name, about fifteen years ago, was convicted of child endangerment and child abuse.

He had a compound outside of Calamity City, and they found about ten people living with him. Two of the women had kids with him.”

I add the fresh pasta from the fridge to the boiling water, glancing at the time. It gives me a moment to compose myself even as the cold anger starts to build back up within me. “Was there any sexual abuse?” I ask.

Dom doesn’t answer for a while, watching me stir all the food together. “I’ve only got summaries, and I’d have to call the Calamity PD to see if they have more detailed case files. But the news articles about it don’t paint a pretty picture.”

Of course they don’t.

“So he’s bad news,” I summarize, grabbing bowls so I can plate the pasta for us. More than bad news. He might not have escalated to some of the more unsavory

behaviors befitting the type of environment I suspect he runs here in New Bristol yet, but that doesn't mean he won't.

That doesn't mean my little lamb is safe.

Fierce possessiveness races through me, and the urge to go straight to Levi's apartment and bring him home has me taking a step in the direction of the door before I manage to stop myself.

How long has Levi been there? How much damage has Joshua Baker done to him?

"Am I right in thinking it's a cult?" I ask, my voice harsh. "Or am I jaded?"

Ten other people in a compound, including two with his children, Dom had said. This is no typical religious congregation.

At least, I don't think so.

What do I know about what "normal" religion looks like?

"Yeah, it was almost definitely a cult." Dom shakes his head. "I don't get these idiots."

I swallow back my anger. Levi is far from an idiot.

Dom continues, unaware of my darkening mood as I set a bowl in front of him.

"They really can't see through the two-bit con artists?"

Zachariah, Joshua, whatever, he's been running scams like these for years.

Before Joshua, he did romance scams. Guess he was still young enough to pull it off then.

And some sort of fake investor scam? And that's just the ones he got caught for.

I bet plenty of people got conned and never reported it. ”

“Getting scammed doesn't make them idiots,” I tell him, stabbing my fork into my pasta. The itch to grab Levi, consequences be damned, is only growing stronger. “How many of them were young and impressionable?”

“Young and impressionable, old and gullible, sad and desperate...” Dom shrugs as he scoops up his pasta. “They all fall for it. You try to teach them how to think, but so many of them fall for it again and again.”

I eat in silence, thinking back to the bearded man I'd seen touching Levi the day of the fire alarm. Maybe I'll cut his tongue out before I kill him so he can't spin lies to those who are unable to resist.

“And what do the cops do when people report these crimes?” I ask. My voice is terse because I can already guess that the answer is absolutely nothing . They probably act like Dom is, assuming they're fools who can't be taught differently.

“Okay, I know that tone.” Dom waves dismissively.

“There's not a lot we can do, okay? We can arrest people like Zacky here, but we need proof of crimes.

A lot of the victims hand the money over willingly.

Then if the con artist isn't even in the US, those guys are out of our hands.

And no matter how many warnings we distribute, no matter how many bank tellers tell the victims they're being scammed, the victims go through with it anyway. "

"So when it's a cult, what then? You know what they're capable of doing: rape, exploitation, murder. You know they escalate. So when do you act? Once it's done, and... oops?" I ask, shoving my bowl away from me.

"They're grown-ass adults, Gabe. If they don't want to leave, we can't exactly force them." Dom calmly keeps eating. "What's it matter, anyway? Just don't tangle up your money with this guy and you're fine."

I debate how much to tell him, and again, I come back to plausible deniability. The less he knows, the better. "I'll refuse him as a client," I tell Dom. "Thanks for the info."

I'm going to murder Zachariah fucking Carpenter.

It will be slow, and it will be painful, and I won't have to worry about this turning into a mass suicide. Maybe the victims will go on to fall for another scam, but Levi?

He's mine, and I'll never let anyone else fool him again.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

There's a note underneath the front door. I wonder which of the kids in the apartment building would send Eve a note like that instead of actually delivering it. I stoop to pick it up, unfolding the card.

"Eve! You've got a mess..." I trail off when I see what's inside.

A simple image of a lamb, drawn in ink. The lamb is wearing a collar with a clock on it.

"I've got a what?" Eve calls back from the kitchen.

"Nothing! Never mind!" I say, quickly ripping up the card.

I head to the kitchen and drop the card into the trash with all the compost. Eve gives me a strange look.

"What are you making?" I ask. I notice the vegetable scraps on the cutting board, so I take those and dump them into the trash on top of the card.

Good. There's no way Eve will want to rummage around now.

"A vegetable soup. Although I'm apparently out of potatoes. Can you run to the bodega?" Eve asks as she starts chopping up a bell pepper.

Is that a ploy to get me out of the apartment so she can check what I threw away? But

that would be deceitful. I can't imagine Eve doing something like that.

But I know I've been acting strange ever since I saw Gabriel, and she's perceptive. I bite my lip, considering refusing, but she'd think that was even odder.

"Sure," I say, grabbing my wallet and putting it in my back pocket. It's all I can do not to glance in the direction of the compost again, but I don't want to draw attention to it.

She continues chopping, and even though I'm acting suspicious, she isn't.

I have to hope I'm being paranoid.

I leave, heading out of the apartment complex and toward the bodega down the street. Almost immediately, I have the oddest sensation that someone's watching me, but a quick glance around shows no one suspicious.

It would be easy to hide in the crowds that are everywhere this time in the afternoon, but I would see Gabriel if he was in it.

I know I would.

I think about those dark eyes anyway, eyes that seem to see right into my soul, and I shiver.

I should've spoken to Father Zachariah as soon as I'd gotten back from our meeting, but I hadn't. I'd been too much of a coward, and now the sin festers beneath my skin.

I enter the bodega, and it's only a little cooler inside than out in the hot summer air. The city always has an oppressive cloud during the heat, one that presses down on me and reminds me of how depraved it is.

I still feel like I'm being watched.

I shake off the feeling and grab the potatoes, hoping to be in and out quickly. Unfortunately, there are multiple people in line ahead of me, and I hear the person at the counter arguing with the clerk about exact change and the price of something.

I shift from side to side, reminding myself that patience is a virtue.

The newspapers and magazines are in a stand next to where I'm waiting, and I reach for the religious magazine. Maybe I can buy this and discuss it with Eve.

Next to it is the New Bristol Chronicle. The front-page article is about some missing businessman and how his company is now looking for an interim CFO. There's a note that the missing CFO had been embroiled in a trial last year.

It's more proof of the city's sins, but?—

But I recognize the man.

He's clean in this photo, his face shaved bare, and smiling for the corporate world. The suit is snug on him.

When I'd seen him, his eyes had been wide with pain, and the dirt and blood caked his face and torso.

This is the man I'd seen die in front of me.

My heart starts to beat faster, and I stare at it for so long that the clerk calls out, "Are you buying it or not?"

I nearly drop the paper. Half out of guilt and half out of dreadful curiosity, I nod

quickly and grab one of the religious magazines, too. I pay and step out of line.

Eve will wonder why I bought a paper, but hopefully the magazine will distract her from that.

I wonder if she's looked in the compost.

I wonder if she's seen the lamb.

I wonder if she knows something.

It's paranoia, all of it. At least, I need it to be, because the idea that she might know anything at all has me even more on edge.

I tuck everything into my shopping bag and turn, hurrying back into the crowd.

The feeling of being watched returns, and I stop short. A man bumps into me from behind, snarling out a curse, but he steps around me with a dark look before continuing down the street. I can't bring myself to care about his irritation.

I look around me, trying to find where Gabriel could be hiding.

The Devil could be everywhere. His presence is ubiquitous, and no matter what I do, I can't escape it.

I can't escape him.

I clutch my bag tighter and jog the rest of the way to the apartment building. I try the door, relieved that it's unlocked.

Had I locked it on the way out? I must have forgotten to do that.

I lock it now, sighing in relief when the door is firmly shut.

I look out through the door's dusty glass pane.

Gabriel is standing on the other side of the street. He waves to me with a sinister smile, and I freeze in my tracks.

I have the sudden, bizarre urge to go back outside and confront him, to find out why he's here — to find out what I need to do to get him to leave me alone even though I know it's a terrible idea.

He's dangerous.

He's stalking me .

I need him to stop.

I square my shoulders and unlock the door, crossing the street before I can stop my feet from moving. Once I'm directly in front of him, I say with only a small tremble in my voice, "You need to leave. You need to stop ."

"What have I done?" Gabriel asks. He raises his hand. I need to back away, but I do nothing as he gently strokes my cheek. "You're all flustered, pretty lamb."

I should pull away, but instead, I find myself leaning into his touch. "The businessman," I blurt out. "You killed him. Why?"

"What businessman?" Gabriel asks. "What's your last name, Levi? You never told me."

"You know who I'm talking about," I say, ignoring his question. " Why ?"

Thou shalt not kill .

Despite what scripture he'd quoted at me, it doesn't erase the fact that that's the most important. Murder, adultery, taking the Lord's name in vain... It's all there . It's all indisputable.

Gabriel sighs softly. "I actually don't know. When's your birthday? So I can get you a nice gift."

I remember the watch, and despite how much I wish I'd kept it, I know taking gifts from this man would lead to nothing good. "I don't want your presents. And I mean this businessman!"

I pull the newspaper out of my bag and shove it against his chest.

He takes several steps back, leading me out of the flow of foot traffic that has been going around us. We're up against the building by the time Gabriel takes the paper and glances at the front page. I notice his lip curl in distaste.

"Oh. Him. Well, whatever happened to him, he deserved it."

Impatience courses through me, and I want to reach out and shake him. It's so unlike me that it makes me take a step back, afraid of the sudden whim. I know why he's lying. I know he will never admit to what he's done.

But I still want to know why.

"If you don't tell me why, I will walk away, right now." I should walk away anyway. I already know he committed murder.

Gabriel opens the newspaper and folds it over to a later page. "He wasn't exactly a

nice man,” he says. “But this world isn’t kind to women who stand up to powerful men, and it loves to prop up those who already have power.”

I don’t understand what he means until I read the passage where he’s pointing.

Mr. Lansbury is a controversial figure after his public trial last year, following several allegations of rape by former female employees.

Though found not guilty, the allegations dog his steps.

Before joining Paladin Industries as CFO, he worked at tech giant Asteroid, who parted ways with him once the trial began.

Spokespeople for both companies have declined to comment.

My mouth goes dry.

“How do you know that he did it?” I ask, my voice hoarse. “How do you know he was guilty? The courts judged him already.”

I still want to shove him.

“Who gave you the right to do... to do this? You aren’t an angel in disguise,” I say emphatically. My voice has risen in volume, and a few passersby glance in my direction. I close my mouth in a hurry.

“Did you watch the trial?” Gabriel asks. “I know these men. I’m certain that whatever happened to Lansbury, it was a reckoning his soul deserved.” Gabriel strokes my hair. “You understand that, don’t you, lamb? ‘For the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out.’”

I stare at him, briefly uncomprehending. “How do you know all of these?” I demand. “You’re no holy man. You keep quoting scripture, but you don’t believe it. I know you don’t.”

Or does he? Am I wrong? What if he does?

What would that mean for what he’s doing?

Gabriel gives me a strange smile. “Any person can quote scripture, Levi. Belief isn’t necessary. And even belief doesn’t stop the priests from forcing themselves onto children, or the pastors from stealing from their flock.”

I swallow hard. I’ve heard those allegations, but Father Zachariah insists that the Devil only seeks to malign the holy with these smear campaigns.

Gabriel suddenly pulls me closer, and I’m pressed up against his body. I tense and open my mouth to complain, but a group of kids on skateboards suddenly rides past us.

Oh. He pulled me out of the way.

“Th-thanks,” I say automatically.

I glance up into his golden-brown eyes, not dark at all with the soft afternoon sun reflected in them.

Gabriel smiles at me. “I’m always watching over you, my lamb.”

That’s what I’m scared of.

“I need to go,” I say, my voice thick. “And you need to stop.”

“I’ll never stop,” Gabriel says. “And you don’t need to go. Come with me. You don’t need to go back to that dingy apartment.”

I glare at him. “I don’t need a fancy place to live. I don’t need worldly possessions. I only need my faith.”

My faith, which has been increasingly shaken lately.

“I don’t need you. I don’t want you.” I turn away, but I’m almost disappointed when he doesn’t try to stop me from rushing across the street and returning to the apartment complex.

Inside, I’ll be safe.

I go upstairs, skirting around the door to the basement, and return to my dingy apartment. I don’t know why I’m suddenly ashamed of it. I really don’t need worldly possessions to be happy.

Eve is standing at the window, her hip pressed against the wall. She turns to face me as I walk inside, and my cheeks drain of color as I realize she’s been staring out of the window that overlooks exactly where I’d been standing with Gabriel.

“I was getting worried,” she says, sounding defensive. “I was afraid something happened to you at the bodega.”

“No,” I say. “The line was long.”

Her eyes search my face. “Is that all, Levi? You know you can talk to me about anything, don’t you?”

Not about this. Not about this at all. “I know,” I say, forcing a smile. “But there’s

nothing. Just a long line, and I bumped into someone and had to apologize.” I hold up my bag. “I have those potatoes you asked for.”

Eve doesn’t say anything. The silence stretches long enough for it to get uncomfortable. I itch to confess to her, but I know she wouldn’t understand.

I don’t want to put her in danger either. My soul might already be tainted, but I can’t risk bringing the Devil’s attention to Eve.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” I say awkwardly, like that’s really going to help the situation. “I’ll chop them up for you. Okay?”

It’s not going to help. She was already concerned, and now that she potentially saw me with Gabriel — now that she potentially saw him pull me out of the way and closer to him — I don’t know what she’s thinking.

I will her to believe me, or at the very least, to let it go.

“Okay,” Eve finally says. “If you’re sure nothing happened.”

“I’m sure,” I reassure her, but my heart is tight in my chest. I hate lying to her. I can’t tell her the truth.

I can’t.

She nods, returning to the couch to work on her latest crocheting project.

I watch her, half expecting her to press the issue, but she doesn’t. I go to the kitchen, trying to focus on potatoes.

All I can think about is Gabriel.

I have to hope he stays out of my life.

But I don't think he will.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

I 'm having a hard time parsing the words in the book I'm reading.

It's supposed to be a mystery novel, but the descriptions seem lifeless, and the main character bores me.

I have to reread the same page three times before I figure out that a second body has been discovered, and instead of the main character, I picture Gabriel standing over the corpse, extending a bloody hand to me.

I close the book quickly. The corpse in this book isn't even bleeding. There's no reason I should be thinking of him.

The running water from the kitchen stops. Eve must be done doing the dishes. A few moments later, Eve comes out to the living room, drying her hands on one of the dish towels.

"I'm going to Ruth's," Eve says to me as she drops the dish towel into the laundry hamper we have next to the bathroom door.

"Okay." I sit up straighter on the armchair and try to look like I've had a productive time reading, and not like I've been thinking of the Devil kissing me and tempting me into sin.

She pauses, looking at me with a frown. "Is something wrong? Ever since..." Her expression falters. "Well, you know."

I don't. Ever since what? Has she noticed a change since the first time I met Gabriel? The fire alarm? The last time, when I'd returned his gift from him and kissed him again?

Or because she'd seen me talking to him outside the apartment:

I must look blank, because she goes on, "The fire alarm? You've been acting weird."

"No?" I say, and of course that's another lie. I smile, hoping to ease Eve's worry. "I'm fine. My back feels good too. Do you need me to run an errand for you?"

I shouldn't volunteer to leave the apartment. I'd only narrowly escaped Gabriel last time—it had taken all of my will to do so.

If I did it once, I can do it again, right? My soul is strong.

But the flesh is always weak, and lately, I've discovered how weak my flesh truly is. Every night since that kiss, I've touched myself, imagining his smooth voice whispering in my ear, calling me a good boy, and I don't even understand what's so appealing about those words.

Of course I'm good.

I have to be good.

Except for the lying, and the temptation, and the sin.

"You just went out," she points out. She bites her bottom lip, then toys with the hem of her dress's sleeve. "Levi... The Devil isn't tempting you into seeing someone outside of Father Zachariah's flock, is he?"

My breath freezes in my throat, as if I'd suddenly been plunged into the lowest level of Hell. I clutch my book tighter. One of the pages rips.

"Why... why would you think that?" I ask Eve.

Eve tugs at her sleeve, an absent gesture she always does when she's the one who's nervous. She lets out a weak laugh. "I don't know. The other day. You were so adamant that you'd drawn the Devil's eye, and..." Swallowing hard, she hesitates before asking, "That isn't it, though, right?"

My heart is slamming against my rib cage, threatening to break out. "No, that was... I didn't want Mary to get in trouble. She didn't deserve it."

That's an even worse lie than before.

I don't know who I am anymore. I'm supposed to be pious and righteous, but I don't want to tell Eve the truth.

Gabriel isn't really the Devil, my traitorous mind supplies. An agent, at most. Surely the Devil wouldn't waste time with me.

I expect Eve to look like she doesn't believe me, so it's no surprise when she slumps. But what's worse is the disappointment I see in her eyes. "Okay," she says. "I'm going to Ruth's, then. Maybe... Maybe you should talk to Father Zachariah."

"Maybe," I agree tepidly.

Had anything really happened, though? I'd told Gabriel to leave me alone. Surely that's proof that I'm holding strong against him.

Never mind that I keep remembering his hands on me, his lips against mine, and how

he said he wanted to care for me.

If I take penance again?—

But with my back still injured, it might not be the lash I take. I give Eve a crooked smile. “Anyway, have fun. Remember that gossip is a sin.”

Eve frowns at me. “I wouldn’t betray your trust, Levi,” she says. “But I do think you should talk to him.” She shakes her head, turning for the door. Before she opens it, she turns back to look at me. “I will pray for you.”

“Thank you. You’re always in my prayers too,” I say, and guilt stabs me again.

I’d forgotten to pray last night.

I’d been so busy thinking of Gabriel that I’d fallen asleep before I said my nightly prayers.

Eve opens the door, and when the creaks creak, I have the bizarre urge to ask her not to go.

The door doesn’t close immediately, and when I look at her, I see that she’s crouching down in the doorway. “Levi?” she asks, standing up. “Do you—” She catches herself, then steps quickly back inside and closes the door behind her.

She’s holding a box with shiny silver wrapping paper, topped with a neat bow.

“Do you need to tell me something?” she asks. I think she’s trying to sound stern, but the words come out with her sounding bewildered, lost.

So young and innocent.

Everything that I'm not.

"What's that?" I ask, like I don't already know.

How had Gabriel gotten into the building? I always make sure to lock the building's front door now, and even Father Zachariah has impressed upon everybody that we need to be more vigilant and make sure our doors are locked to outside threats. Nobody wants a repeat of the fire alarm incident.

"It's a gift box," she says. "There's nothing on it, no note or anything." She starts to unwrap it.

I get up and cross the room, my heart racing. As much as I want to snatch it away from her and refuse to let her open it, I've already been acting suspicious. Too much more of that, and she might end up reporting to Father Zachariah after all.

It's another slender jewelry case with the same logo as last time. She opens it, and inside is a silver necklace with a small crucifix. It's surprisingly simple, with a thin chain, and the crucifix is unadorned.

It is absolutely beautiful, and my fingers itch to take it.

"Who's sending you jewelry?" I ask Eve with a shaky voice. "Father Zachariah?"

"Levi..." she replies, not sounding better off than I feel.

"This had to have cost a fortune. Father Zachariah wouldn't have spent that on a necklace.

" Her eyes find mine, searching, and my breath catches because it feels like she can see right through me.

“Tell me the truth, Levi. Then you can repent. We can go to him together,” she pleads.

I snatch the necklace away from her and shake my head. “There’s nothing to talk about, Eve. If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

What am I doing?

My voice doesn’t even sound like my own anymore.

I am the corrupted version of myself, the one that covets things and people and has forgotten that Father Zachariah only looks out for us. I should want to confide in him, so that I can cleanse my soul of these terrible thoughts.

Eve recoils, and she takes a step away from me. “I think I should go,” she says, her own voice wobbling. “Ruth... needs help with the baby.”

“Yes,” I hear myself saying.

I clutch the necklace tight in my hand, the delicate silver digging into my palm.

Eve meets my gaze, and I know I’ve hurt her.

“Wait,” I say, and I hold the necklace out to her. “I’m sorry. Take it. Give it to Ruth.”

It’s mine , my mind shouts, but it’s only a necklace. I don’t need material goods.

I’m above all of this.

“No,” she says. “This is wrong, Levi.” Her eyes dart between me and the door. “You should go to Father Zachariah. He can... He can sell this, and we can buy more

food.” She looks so pleading that my heart threatens to crack open.

“Okay,” I tell her.

She doesn’t look like she believes me.

“I will. Right now,” I tell her.

I feel sick.

Eve nods. “Levi... If you don’t tell him, I will.”

The betrayal that slams into me is almost more than I can stand. I stagger physically like she’s dealt me a physical blow.

I know, in theory, that she’s only worried about my soul, that she doesn’t want either of us to end up needing to take even more penance by deceiving Father Zachariah.

It doesn’t make it hurt any less.

She turns and walks away, and this time, the door does close behind her, the creaky hinge the only thing announcing her departure.

I stare down at the crucifix, running my finger over the raised Jesus figure hanging from the cross.

“Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum,” I whisper as I feel the INRI that’s familiar from every single crucifix I’ve ever seen.

I know what it means. I know it’s meant to remind us of Jesus’s sacrifice, of his victory over death.

I want to know why he chose it.

Was it only because he thought I'd like it? Or is it supposed to mean something more?

I turn it over, and I freeze as I see the small engraving on the back of it. Like the watch, it has a simple inscription: the date I met Gabriel.

Will it always haunt me?

I swallow hard. It needs to go. I need to confess.

My heart is heavy as I turn for the door, and my steps are heavier as I force myself to walk into the hall. I knock politely on Father Zachariah's door, and one of his wives, Sarah, answers it.

She smiles at me, but it's a nervous smile. Ever since the fire alarm, they've all been treating me differently.

I'd be treating me differently, too.

The Devil came for me , I'd said.

"Levi! What a pleasant surprise." Her tone tells me it's not. "What can I help you with?"

My words stick in my throat. "I need to speak to Father Zachariah."

The crucifix continues to dig into my palm, the chain gathered up around it, as I keep my fingers closed around the gift.

I'm going to have to tell him the truth.

I'm going to have to tell him everything.

But what if this sin is unforgivable? What if he casts me out instead?

Maybe that would be better.

Better than being plunged into the dark, sobbing for the light.

"I'll fetch him," she says. "Have a seat."

I fidget while I wait, imagining the whip digging into my back and splitting my skin open.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

I shouldn't want that. It isn't penance if I like it.

It doesn't take long for Father Zachariah to come out of his office. He's wearing his usual dark trousers and light dress shirt, and his beard looks freshly trimmed.

His eyes rake over me with concern. "What is it, my child?"

I duck my head, staring down at the floor. The metal is warm in my hand, and I wish I had its small comfort around my neck.

I wish I had the weight of the watch around my wrist, too, to bolster me and give me courage. It's ridiculous, because it's the exact opposite of soothing when I'm about to confess that I met someone out there who is sending me gifts.

Not just someone, but another man.

It is an abomination.

My mouth is dry, and my throat is tight, and I can't get the words out immediately.

I can't get them out at all.

I can't.

"I have a confession to make," I whisper.

Father Zachariah reaches out and pats my back. "I am always happy to help you

unburden the weight on your shoulders. I told Sarah to keep the kids in their rooms. We have some privacy now.”

Here, in his living room, right by the front door.

I need to tell him the truth. I can’t be absolved of my sins if I don’t confess them.

But maybe there are some sins I don’t want to be absolved of.

Maybe there are some sins I want to cling to.

“I have been having... thoughts,” I say, stumbling over my words. It isn’t a lie. I can’t lie. He’d know. Is lying by omission really a sin?

Father Zachariah peers closer at me, and his thick, bushy brows furrow. “Thoughts?” he repeats. “What kind of thoughts?”

I open my mouth to speak again, then falter.

“I wonder if God has abandoned me,” I blurt out.

“I have doubts. There’s...” I scramble to pull together thoughts I have had, thoughts that have nothing to do with my personal Devil.

“The world outside is so tainted, and I don’t understand how He could abandon so many and save so few. ”

Father Zachariah purses his lips. “We’ve spoken about doubts, Levi. They’re the first foothold of the devil.”

I’m beyond the first foothold.

I'm beyond the second, or even the third. The way I touch myself after taking penance, the Devil's incessant interest in me, the thoughts of men, the way I'm coveting this gift, the lies, the doubts... There are so many things I think and do wrong .

“Why does He allow so much suffering, Father Zachariah?” I ask, defaulting to my old questions, questions I've never had satisfactory answers to.

Father Zachariah puts an arm around my shoulder. “It is as I have told you many times, Levi. God wants us all to persevere. It is not true faith if you cannot continue to believe through pain and through suffering. Do you remember the story of Job? He?—”

Before he can continue the familiar parable, somebody knocks on the door.

Father Zachariah makes a frustrated sound and lets go of me to open it.

I don't know what I expect, but it isn't to find Gabriel standing on the other end.

He's wearing a maintenance uniform, with a baseball cap on his head. In one hand he's got a clipboard, and in the other, he holds up some sort of ID badge.

“Who are you?” Father Zachariah asks warily. “How did you get in?”

“I'm Gabe March,” Gabriel says, lifting the badge up higher. “Building inspector. I got a concerned call after a fire incident last week.”

My heart threatens to beat right out of my chest as I stare at him, dumbfounded. I can't believe how bold he is, to come into the heart of the congregation and lie to Father Zachariah.

Why is he even here?

“There was no fire,” Father Zachariah says instantly. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be talking to the building supervisor?”

Gabriel glances at me briefly before turning his attention back to Father Zachariah. He writes something on the paper on his clipboard, even though I know he isn’t actually a building inspector.

At least, I think I know that.

“Funny. Couldn’t find anyone listed as building supervisor, and the administration office number is dead. So I came to the building owner. That is you, right, Mr. Baker? Joshua Baker?”

Joshua Baker?

Who is Joshua Baker?

I blink at Gabriel in confusion, the crucifix necklace feeling like it’s searing my hand, pulsing like it’s alive.

“You’ve got the wrong person,” Father Zachariah says immediately. “My name is Zachariah Carpenter. Now leave.”

He grabs the door and tries to slam it shut, but Gabriel blocks the door with his shoulder and forces his way inside.

“Zachariah Carpenter, then,” Gabriel says, looking around. “There are some issues with the fire safety standards of the building, which were noted by the fire rescue team when they arrived.”

Another lie.

Does the weight of his sin weigh down on him like mine does?

I want to ask him why he's here, but I bite down on my bottom lip instead.

"There are no issues," Father Zachariah answers, and I can tell he's growing angry. He's always quick to anger. We all know when it's better to drop a matter, because the consequences can be severe.

"There are issues," Gabriel insists, smiling darkly at Father Zachariah. "Why don't you give me a tour so I can get a good look at everything that's wrong with the building?"

"I don't have time for that." Father Zachariah looks between me and Gabriel. His anger seems to melt away in an instant, the small frown morphing into a smile. "But I can see I won't convince you to leave. Levi will give you a quick tour of the maintenance areas, then escort you out."

I freeze.

Everything in me howls in denial at the idea of going into the basement.

I've been down there so often, too often, and it feels like I'm being punished all over again.

Maybe I am. Maybe this is God's way of ordering me to repent before I'm truly lost.

Why else would Father Zachariah send me down there with Gabriel?

It's akin to handing me over to the Devil on a silver platter. There will be nothing to

stop Gabriel from taking me.

There will be nothing to stop him from touching me.

From kissing me.

From losing myself with him.

“Okay,” I say. “This way,” I tell Gabriel.

I can already feel my soul fraying.

GABrIEL

I watch my little lamb as he leads me to the stairs.

I want to go back to Zachariah's apartment; I want to punch his face in and carve him open and let him know exactly what I think of the way he's been abusing Levi. I could still do it, too. That flimsy door wouldn't be able to stop me.

But I know if I do that before Levi is ready, I'll only lose him forever, and Levi is more important than the rage coiling inside me.

Besides, there's nothing I can do for Levi if I'm arrested. He's going to need care and comfort once he's pulled out of this hell disguised as salvation.

"This way," Levi says, his voice adorably breathy.

"Of course, little lamb," I whisper.

I follow him a step too close, and he tenses but doesn't turn around.

He also stops right in front of the entrance to the building. "You need to leave," he hisses.

I notice two things right away. One, there's no conviction in his voice. Two, his right hand is closed in a fist.

Then a third as he turns to face me.

There's trepidation, of course, and fear. But there's yearning, too, and it's all I can do not to lean in and claim his lips in a kiss.

"I haven't done my inspection," I say to Levi, and I step even closer, crowding him against the wall of unused mailboxes. "I need to make sure this building is safe for you."

I can see the way Levi's Adam's apple bobs, and how his eyes widen. I lean in, bringing my lips a hair's breadth away from his.

"What... What do you know about examining buildings?" he whispers. "Is this what you do when you aren't k-killing people?"

"You think this is my job?" I ask, my lips curving into a smile. I want to ravage him right here, but I'm more than aware of how many people are currently in the building, potentially waiting to run down and discover us.

I back off, and my little lamb shows me such obvious disappointment that it hurts not to kiss it better.

"I think your landlord said to show me the maintenance areas," I say. "Where's that?"

"In the..." Levi swallows thickly. "In the basement."

His hand is still clenched into a fist, and I take his hand into mine. Carefully, I unfurl his fingers, revealing the reason for the tension.

In his palm, imprinted into the skin now, is the crucifix necklace I'd sent him.

My heart does a strange thing, something I've never felt in all my life, pain and elation in one swirl of emotion that is impossible to detangle.

I take the necklace from his hand and gently fasten it around his neck. Levi doesn't move at all. I brush my knuckles across his jaw.

"It looks as good on you as I imagined," I say with an unfamiliar rawness to my voice. "You're so perfect, Levi."

"I'm not," Levi says with surprising ferocity, shaking his head. "None are perfect. I am... I am a sinner."

I have a hard time believing Levi knows anything of sin, no matter how often he repeats it. I've stared murderers and rapists in the eyes—before cutting those eyes out—and I know what the darkest heart of the world looks like.

It's nothing like Levi.

"You aren't a sinner," I say more fiercely than I intended. "You're good, Levi."

Levi chokes out a laugh. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," he says, quoting a familiar verse. "If I'm not a sinner, if I'm good, then why—" He cuts himself off, giving another quick shake of his head. "Why are you here, Gabriel?"

Hearing my name from his lips is like what I imagine his Heaven would feel like.

The only other word that could have such an effect on me would be for him to call me Daddy, to accept my comfort and my care as my boy.

"I'm here to save you," I say, making Levi's breath catch.

It's the truth, if a simplified one.

I'd been watching the cameras I'd placed, sitting outside the building and hoping to catch a glimpse of Levi opening the present I'd left him. His sister picking up the gift instead was unexpected, and she'd shut the door, preventing me from seeing what happened inside.

I did see when Levi went to Zachariah's apartment, though, and the burning jealousy I'd felt had me abandoning my parked car and pretending to be a building inspector.

I'm not going to let that con man lay another hand on Levi ever again. There will be no more whippings, no more punishment, no empty penance.

The only one who gets to touch Levi is me.

Levi licks his lips, then says, "If you don't think I'm a sinner, what do you think I need to be saved from?"

I keep his gaze, taking in the gentle curve of his cheek and his adorable nose. There's a small freckle on the side of his eye that he probably never even notices.

Levi turns red under my scrutiny, making me smile in turn.

"Why don't you show me the basement," I say, not answering his question. I raise my clipboard. "So I can do my inspection." His lips part in what I know will be a protest, so I press a gentle finger against his lips. "Show me."

He whimpers, a sound that goes straight to my cock, but he says quietly, "I need you to move out of the way."

If I move, he might choose to flee.

But I can't get him alone if I don't.

I carefully step aside, just enough that he can head toward the door to the basement but wouldn't be able to dart past me to run back upstairs.

His gaze flicks to the elevators, but then he goes to a door across the room.

His hand shakes as he pulls on the handle, and he shuts it once, twice, before finally opening the door all the way.

He hesitates before flicking the dim light on to reveal a set of stairs that look like they've seen better days.

He starts down them, and I follow without crowding him, not wanting him to panic and trip.

The air becomes suffocating as we descend.

Levi's breaths are loud and heavy.

It's dim and dank in the basement, matching the feeling of the rest of the building. The exposed brick is chipped in some places, and now that I'm down here, I wonder if I should call a real building inspector because I'm no longer sure the building is actually safe.

There's a single light bulb in the center of the unfinished basement room. Several boilers are set up along one wall, with exposed pipes running up into the ceiling.

I note rat droppings along one wall, but that's not a surprise. It'd be harder to find a New Bristol apartment without rats.

"How old is this?" I ask as I look around. The exposed architecture is old and half-rusted. Levi lingers at the base of the stairs, and the adorable blush from his cheek is

far gone, replaced by something deathly white.

He's afraid.

"I don't know," he says, his voice strange.

I look around again, trying to find the source of his discomfort. There are no chains or whips or any obvious torture devices down here. The only thing unusual is a single wooden chair, lying on its side next to one of the boilers.

"The building is from the 1950s," I say. "But it must have been updated since then." I get closer to Levi and place a hand on his shoulder.

He jumps and almost stumbles backward into the stairs.

"Do you want to go back up?" I ask gently.

He's looking at me, but I get the feeling he's not seeing me.

His lips part, but no words come out. He's trembling, and he wraps his arms around himself, pressing them close against his chest. "I c-can't," he whispers, his teeth chattering so hard that I have a difficult time understanding what he's said.

"Little lamb," I say, cupping his jaw. "Look at me. Tell me what's wrong."

Just as I say those words, the flimsy lightbulb flickers.

And dies.

We're plunged into darkness.

Levi cries out, an animalistic sound of raw terror.

“Levi,” I say.

He sobs desperately, and he slips from my grasp only to trip against the stairs. I catch him before he smashes his head against the hard concrete.

“Levi!” I scoop him up into my arms, and he shakes his head, crying out and flailing.

I end up having to hoist him over my shoulder so I can carry him up the stairs and into the light of the hallway. I almost stumble and fall myself thanks to his flailing, but he’s a lithe young man with nowhere near enough muscle on him.

When I set him down in the hallway upstairs, I look at his beautiful face and see the tears streaming down his cheeks.

The anger slams into me, but I force myself to remain calm. “Shh, boy. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“C-can’t,” he says again, shaking his head. “You need to go before?—”

When he doesn’t complete his sentence, I ask, “Before what?”

He gives me a wide-eyed look of fear. “God cast even angels into Hell in... in chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until judgement. What if judgement never comes?”

I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but I’m certain that Zachariah Carpenter has something to do with it.

I refuse to let my little lamb stay here, alone, panicking on his own.

He deserves better than this congregation of naive fools who look the other way, who allow their fellow congregants to be abused right under their own noses.

I make a snap decision.

I scoop Levi up in my arms and walk toward the apartment door. “You will not be cast into Hell,” I promise him. “You are the light, Levi, and if anybody tells you otherwise?—”

Well, I am much more the Devil than Levi could ever be.

“Wait!” he says, but he’s still shaking.

I can’t leave him here. I won’t.

I push the front door open and carry him around the block to where I’ve parked my luxury sedan.

There’s a parking ticket on the windshield, but I ignore it as I get the door open.

Levi tries once more to run away from me, but I get him into the plush leather seats and strap him in, shutting and locking the door fast.

I hurry into the driver’s seat and start the car before he gets ideas about jumping out.

“I’m taking you home,” I tell him sternly. “You don’t get a choice, boy. I’m going to take care of you.”

My words must have some impact on him because instead of trying to unbuckle the seatbelt and get out of the car, he stays put. “He’s going to be so mad,” he mumbles. “That I left with the Devil.”

“The only Devil you know is the one living in that apartment complex,” I say harshly as I pull out into traffic. The traffic ticket flutters in the wind, threatening to escape its spot underneath the windshield wiper.

Levi chokes on whatever words he was going to say, and he shrinks back into the seat. I want to comfort him, but I need to get him home before I can pull him into my arms. “My sister,” he whispers after a few minutes.

“What about her?” I ask, mentally threatening the driver in front of me with mutilation when they slow down at the yellow light.

“She needs me.” There’s something else he’s not saying, but I wait him out until he continues, “He might hurt her. Take me back. Take me back, I’ll pay my penance, and no one will have to suffer because of me.”

I grip the steering wheel tighter. “No. You had a panic attack because of that basement room—the basement room your Zachariah sent you into.”

“It wasn’t—” he begins.

I give him a sharp look.

He withers beneath it. “But I’m okay now,” he tries.

“You aren’t.”

Traffic finally starts moving again, and I break a few traffic laws in order to get back to my condo building in time.

When I finally park the car, I turn in my seat to face Levi.

“I’m going to take you up to my condo. I’m going to give you a nice, hot shower or bath, your choice.

I’ll cook for you. And you will tell me why you panicked, so I can—” I almost say, break the fingers of whoever hurt you, but I’m going to do so much worse.

He already knows I’m a killer though.

I shake my head. “I’m going to take care of you, little lamb.”

“And who’s going to take care of her?” he asks bleakly.

I couldn’t care less about his sister.

“She’ll survive one day without you,” I say.

She can survive the entire rest of her life without him.

I brush back some of his sweat-slicked curls. “You deserve to be taken care of, boy. Especially right now.”

“She always takes care of me,” he protests. His voice is weak, lost, and he sounds so fragile that my urge to destroy the person who made him this way burns hotter and brighter.

“Don’t argue with me, boy. I’m not giving you a choice,” I say firmly, and to my surprise, Levi’s face turns bright red.

Interesting.

“One day, then you stop stalking me,” he says. He’s trying for firm, too, but coming

from him, it's a lot less convincing. "I have a life. You can't just... do this."

I almost tell him that I absolutely can — that I just did.

"One day," I say, merely to reassure him. I have no intention of giving up on him.

I get out of the car and walk around the other side to open the door for Levi. He hesitates before taking the hand I offer him.

I pull him up—and against my chest, wrapping my arm around him.

"You're safe with me," I promise him, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

He lets out a broken laugh. "Safe, with the Devil."

I smile. "Nobody would dare harm you with the Devil protecting you."

Levi shivers.

I'll be the Devil if it chases the shadows away from his eyes.

LEVI

I should fight this. I should run.

Instead, I let Gabriel half carry me into his luxury condo building, where every person we pass looks like they're making "more money than God."

What a saying.

The condo itself is richly furnished, every decor item carefully fitted to match the next. The open kitchen has beautiful, bright granite countertops. The appliances are all stainless steel, not the old grungy beige ones that Eve and I have.

There's a large TV suspended on the living room wall, and three doors I can see that lead to other rooms. This is so much wealth for one person. So much opulence.

I reach up to clutch the beautiful crucifix necklace.

"Home sweet home," Gabriel says as he shuts the door behind us. "I'll give you a tour later, but I think a hot bath would do you good, first."

A hot bath sounds sinfully good. My apartment doesn't have a proper bathtub. I have distant memories of being bathed in one, but those were so long ago that I barely remember anything beyond splashing and playing with bubbles.

Stupid.

“I don’t have clothes to change into,” I tell him. I’m still feeling hazy, distant, like this is happening to someone else. I go to continue, but before I can, a tabby cat makes a beeline to us, bumping its head hard against my calf.

“I have clothes for you,” Gabriel says. He smiles down at the cat. “That’s Ichabod. He loves people, and he loves baths.”

I freeze. Gabriel has clothes for me? Why? How does he even know my size?

And the cat... loves baths?

All of it is so much, and I’m dizzy enough to where I have to reach out and touch the wall to rest some of my weight against it.

The cat is purring loudly, still rubbing up against my ankles.

“This is wrong, Gabriel,” I whisper.

Eve.

I have to think of Eve.

While I’m being tempted by the Devil, she’s with Father Zachariah.

She’s to be one of his wives. She’ll be safe.

I think she’ll be safe.

I have to hope she will.

It’s only for one day.

Gabriel puts his arm around my back and leads me toward one of the doors.

On the other side is a large bedroom, with floor to ceiling windows on one wall that give a spectacular view of New Bristol.

The curtains are a deep red, as are the sheets.

They both contrast sharply with the black of the walls.

My eye is drawn to a painting hanging over the headboard. It's a modern art piece, disgusting and garish and with no real meaning, but the red and gold stand out against the black background.

The way the red splashes on the canvas, in long diagonal lines, makes me think of the whip slashing across my back.

"The bathroom is here," Gabriel says as he leads me past the bed.

I almost trip when we enter. The bathroom is larger than my bedroom. There's a shower stall with clear glass walls and door, a nook for the toilet, two sinks, even an ottoman.

And in the center is a large tub that could easily fit three adult men, with jacuzzi nozzles on the side.

Gabriel directs me to sit on the ottoman.

"Wait here, my little lamb. I'll start filling the tub. I'll get drinks for us too." He kisses my forehead and starts the water before he simply... leaves.

He's trusting me to stay here.

The cat mrows and rubs against my legs. I watch, and when the cat realizes I'm not going to pet it, it jumps onto the side of the tub near the faucet and begins batting at the water.

"I thought cats didn't like water," I tell him.

I've never had a cat of my own before, so I don't know much about them, but I'd thought that much was true.

The cat doesn't seem to mind it, though, and I stare at it as it gets wetter and wetter under the water that gushes from the spigot. I want to reach out and pet it, but I'm scared to touch it, too.

What if it hates me?

I glance in the direction of the bathroom door, not sure if I want Gabriel to come back sooner rather than later or if I want him to forget about me completely.

Before I can decide, Gabriel returns, carrying a tray with two large glasses of water.

"You're still dressed," Gabriel says as he sets the tray down on the small table next to the bathtub. "That's all right. Stand up, I'll help you out of your clothes."

I blink at him, my cheeks burning. "What?" I ask dumbly. "No, you can't stay in here while I undress."

I'm an adult.

And he's a man, a man I'm desperately attracted to despite my best attempts not to be. Being naked in front of him would be a temptation I'm not sure I could resist.

He's made it clear he has no reason to try to resist touching me, either.

I stand up anyway.

Gabriel smiles gently at me, an expression that is so at odds with the predator I know he is. He reaches for the collar of my shirt and undoes the first button.

My cheeks flame up instantly.

Nobody has ever undressed me before. Even when Eve had to patch me up, it was always after I'd already taken my own shirt off for penance.

It feels worse, somehow, to be undressed in this manner, more intimate as Gabriel slowly unbuttons the shirt to reveal my undershirt. He kisses my chest, over the undershirt, before moving on to the next button.

My entire upper body is red from embarrassment when Gabriel gets down on his knees to undo the last button.

His hand lands on my belt. "I've been dreaming about you, my lamb."

I've been dreaming of you, too.

"Stop," I whisper, shaken by the veracity of my own thought.

On his knees, looking up at me, I can't help but wonder about things that have only figured into my fantasies. Terrible things, wrong things, things that I should confess to and seek penance from.

I'm too ashamed.

It's too late, though. Even if he stops now, he'll know just by looking at me that I'm aroused, that my body is interested even if my mind is screaming that this needs to stop before it goes too far.

Gabriel kisses my crotch, and even through the fabric of my beige slacks I can feel it. My cock twitches, and I'm terrified of becoming fully aroused from something so simple as a kiss through my clothes.

Gabriel sits back and undoes my belt, but to my dismay—it should be relief, why isn't it relief? —he stands to gently pull my shirt off my shoulders. He sets it aside on the ottoman, then directs me to lift my arms so he can remove the undershirt.

Why am I complying so easily?

What's wrong with me?

Gabriel kisses my forehead again. “You're so beautiful. Exactly as I imagined,” he says, running one large hand down my torso.

I'm shaking, and I'm not sure if it's because I never stopped to begin with after being in the basement or because of his touches.

Both, probably, though the reasons are so vastly different.

Then, it was God's terrible judgement that terrified me into panic.

Now, it's the Devil's sweet temptation.

“Why are you doing this?” I find myself asking.

I desperately need this answer, a reason a murderer is interested in me .

“Are you going to kill me, too?” I blurt out before he can even answer the first question.

Gabriel scowls. “Why would I kill you, my little lamb? The only people I would ever—” He cuts himself off. “There are people who deserve it. Whose blood is better spilled, lest the rot in their veins infect the rest of the world. You understand, right?”

He meets my gaze, searching for something.

It feels like a waste of blood, I find myself thinking despite myself.

I wet my lips with my tongue. “Who are you to judge them?” I ask, my voice wobbly.

How is this different from Father Zachariah meting out punishment based on what he judges to be sinful , wrong? But he knows better than we do. It’s his responsibility to herd us in the right direction.

“I’m not the Devil, Levi,” Gabriel says, brushing back a lock of my hair and sending a shiver down my spine. “I’m an avenging angel. I punish those who dare to hurt the innocent.”

He’s said as much before, and I don’t know what to believe.

“I don’t think you’re the Devil,” I tell him, and I realize that much is true. “But the Devil works in... in mysterious ways.”

Isn’t that supposed to be God? Is God working in a mysterious way to grant me a temporary reprieve from the penance I know I’ll receive so soon?

Gabriel smiles at me. “I’ll detangle the mysteries for you, my lamb.”

I watch as he gets on his knees again and taps my foot. I lift it automatically, and he takes the shoe and sock off.

The Devil would never debase himself for anyone.

“Stop,” I mutter, pushing at his shoulders. “I can do it myself.”

Gabriel looks up and winks. “But I want to do it for you, boy. I want to make you feel good.”

I jolt at the word boy . I’m not sure whether I love it or hate it when he calls me that. It conjures up images, thoughts, of safety.

I already feel strangely good, strangely excited, by his touches.

That word only makes it feel even more intense, even more immediate.

“That’s the problem,” I say, swallowing thickly.

Well, not the only problem, but it’s one of the many, many things wrong with this scenario.

I’ve been stripped of all but my pants and my underwear, and it’s only a matter of moments before that little bit of armor is gone, too. What will I do then?

What will he do when he realizes that I’m so affected by this that I’m half-erect? Shame suffuses me, making my cheeks flush with even more heat.

Gabriel reaches for the waistband of my slacks and slowly pulls it down, like I’m a present to be unwrapped. I stay completely still.

When I'm in nothing but my boxers, Gabriel leans in and presses his nose against my crotch, inhaling deeply.

"You smell good, little lamb," Gabriel says.

This is sinful. This is beyond filthy. He shouldn't be doing this.

I shouldn't be letting him do this.

But at the same time, there's something tender about it.

He's not stripping me down for the sake of hurting me.

I don't entirely know what he is stripping me down for, but it's not for penance.

It's not so I can sit naked in the dark and recite prayers that only make me more and more terrified and?—

I shudder.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

Gabriel slowly peels my boxers away to reveal my cock, already half-erect and straining for more attention.

“Beautiful,” Gabriel whispers, his breath ghosting across my sensitive flesh and making my skin break out in goosebumps.

I don’t feel beautiful.

I feel afraid... and exhilarated.

I have fantasized about something like this for so long, too long, and now that it’s here, the fear is turning into excitement.

And trepidation.

Oh, I don’t know what I feel, but his proximity to me is almost more than I can stand.

The cat suddenly meows, and Gabriel’s attention breaks. He looks at the tub, where the cat is dipping its paw into the very full tub.

“Thanks for the warning, Ichabod,” Gabriel says. He gets up to turn off the water, leaving me standing naked in the cool air of the bathroom.

I’m still trembling, but I don’t think it has to do with the temperature of the bathroom. It has everything to do with the fact that I’ve allowed another man to see me naked, another man who clearly lusts for me.

A man I lust for in turn, and it's so wrong .

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, I think.

I can't.

They're too much a part of me now.

"Can I get in?" I ask, my voice high and strange as I near the bathtub. I try to keep myself positioned so he can't easily see the way my cock strains and bobs with each step, but I know he can.

"Of course." Gabriel extends his hand to me, and I realize he means to help me into the tub.

I take it. It's warm, shockingly so, and his touch is firm and comforting in a way it has no right to be.

He helps me into the tub, and it's so full that the water threatens to slosh over the sides.

Anxiety flares inside of me, and I go very still to avoid making a mess of his bathroom floor.

It doesn't quite work, and water splashes out.

"Sorry!" I say quickly. My heart races as I prepare myself for admonishment — at the very least. He's going to regret having taken me here.

Maybe that's for the best.

But Gabriel shrugs. “I’ll mop it up later.”

I don’t understand the tears that threaten to spill out of my eyes. Why would this , out of everything, make me want to cry? I should have cried the first day we met, when I’d felt him claw into my soul, not because he didn’t even look at the mess I’d made!

He pulls the ottoman closer so he can sit beside the tub. He dangles one hand into the water. “How’s the temperature?”

“It’s good,” I say.

It’s better than good.

It’s warm and comforting, and it feels like a hug.

It shouldn’t.

It’s an indulgence I haven’t earned, an indulgence I shouldn’t enjoy.

My hand comes up again, toying with the crucifix around my throat. “Why did you buy me this?” I ask him, unable to keep myself from asking the question any longer.

“It was something you would like,” Gabriel says. He picks up a bath sponge and pours something that smells flowery on it. “You didn’t take the watch. Was it too flashy for you? But the crucifix is perfect.”

He starts to lather up my body, attending to me like he’s a bathhouse slave.

I’m still not convinced there wasn’t a hidden meaning behind it. “But why a crucifix? Why not a cross?” I press.

He smiles at me. “A cross can’t shield you from demons.”

“It’s very thoughtful of you,” I say despite the fierce pang of regret, “but I can’t keep it.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Father Zachariah will want to know where I got it,” I tell him. “My sister... She saw it, too.”

Once, I would’ve thought it would be our secret. Now, though, as she gets closer and closer to finding her purpose as one of his wives, she seems less and less willing to protect me.

Maybe she shouldn’t.

I am coveting this.

I shouldn’t be.

Gabriel continues to bathe me, his touch gentle and warm. “Don’t worry about any of those things for now. Just focus on feeling good, boy. Let me take care of you.” He suddenly leans in.

I could evade his touch. The tub has plenty of space, and I could move to one of the other sitting ledges.

But I stay, allowing him to brush his lips against mine.

“Let Daddy take care of you, boy,” Gabriel says.

The words run down my spine like an electrical current.

Daddy. Boy.

Why are they so compelling?

They shouldn't be. They sound so wrong.

"You aren't my father," I whisper. "I have Father Zachariah to take care of me."

But Father Zachariah doesn't call me little lamb, or boy, or anything that makes warmth blossom inside of me. What does it mean that Gabriel wants me to call him Daddy ?

"I'm not your father, but I'll be your Daddy," Gabriel says. He kisses me gently, and I sob against his lips, my head so hot, my cock hard .

When Gabriel pulls away, he smiles. "I'll be so good to you, my little lamb. I'll make sure to give you everything you need. I'll protect you from the world and keep you safe in my arms. You won't ever have to be afraid again."

It sounds like a dream, a distant dream that I've fervently hoped for so many times. How many times have I wished for someone to help me, someone to save me?

But no matter what he says, he's no avenging angel.

He's temptation incarnate.

"What about my sister?" I ask, because for a moment, I consider what he's offering.

It's a terrifying proposition, but so is the idea of going back and facing Father

Zachariah.

A small scowl crosses Gabriel's brow, but he smooths his expression quickly. "We can get her out too, if you want. I can afford to get her a private apartment somewhere."

Something in me falters. "Why wouldn't I want to? She's my sister . Don't you have family you want to protect?"

Gabriel's expression freezes. "I have a brother. And parents. But they live in Benton. I don't see them often."

Benton City is only a few hours away. I can't imagine living so close to Eve but not seeing her often. She's too much a part of my life.

But it's obvious Gabriel's family is more complicated than mine.

I realize I don't know what to say now, and I slide deeper into the water so it comes up to my chin. I'm still hard, still needy for things I shouldn't think about, for things I can't think about lest the worst happen.

"Here, boy. Lean back and get your hair wet so I can shampoo your hair." Gabriel presses against my chest to tilt me backwards.

I let him.

I lean back, and back, not just getting my hair wet but submerging myself in the tub.

He holds my body to prevent me from going too far under. I am cradled in the warm water, and I think?—

This is a baptism.

I can never go back to my old life.

Even if I return to Father Zachariah and Eve, even if I somehow manage to avoid Gabriel, I'm forever changed.

I'm not sure if I'm falling or flying.

Only once my lungs start burning, and Gabriel pushes against my back, do I raise my head out of the water again.

“ Be baptized and wash away your sins ,” I murmur, mostly to myself.

“ When you pass through the waters, I will be with you ,” Gabriel replies, kissing my bare shoulder.

I press my nails into my thigh to prevent myself from grabbing my erection instead. Gabriel shifts the ottoman so he's behind me, then pours shampoo onto my head.

The shampoo is different from what I'm used to, and while the scent is strong, it isn't overpowering. I don't know what scent it is, but it's pleasant, piney and... something else. The conditioner is no different, and he helps me sit back up when he's done.

I blink a few times to clear the water from my vision, then I look up at him in a haze. Everything is fuzzy around the edges, but I feel different.

I feel clean.

Where do I go from here, when my savior is a killer and I've been baptized into a new life that I know is forever entangled with his?

“Come on, boy,” Gabriel murmurs. “Let Daddy take you to bed—and take care of what I know has been bothering you since before the bath started.”

I freeze. “It would be an abomination,” I say, but my voice is weak. My conviction is weak.

I want him to take care of me.

I want him to touch me.

Gabriel scoffs at me. “What isn’t an abomination?”

There are only seven, I want to protest. Seven things.

But he’s right. They encompass so much.

I cling to my last shred of conviction. “Father Zachariah says?—”

Gabriel’s expression turns stern. “He isn’t your Daddy. I am. So listen to me, and let me give you all the pleasure you deserve.”

I’ve never had a dad . I’ve only had a Father, and certainly never a Daddy .

And I want to know the difference between them so badly it aches.

“Yes, Daddy,” I whisper.

The words feel right on my tongue.

“Good boy,” Gabriel answers, pulling me close for another kiss.

I surrender to it, surrender to him, and I'm breathless by the time he releases me. He helps me out of the bathtub, and I'm as shaky as a newborn colt.

It doesn't feel like it's in a bad way. It feels like being reborn has taken its toll, but Gabriel will fill that emptiness with attention and praise.

He'll care for me.

Why am I disappointed that it won't include bloodshed of my own?

LEVI

G abriel guides me back into the bedroom with a hand on the small of my back.

I'm keenly aware of my nudity, and of the fact that he's fully dressed. The imbalance is striking, but I'm terrified that if I see what's beneath his clothing, I might be tempted to do things I shouldn't even think about.

Things I shouldn't want to do.

"Lay down on the bed, on your back," Gabriel says. "I'll show you more pleasure than any other person ever has, my lamb. You'll never want to go back to any other lover."

Go back .

I stare up at him with wide eyes. Does he think I've known pleasure by any hand other than my own? Does he think I've dared ?

I've never been interested in women, and men...

It's beyond forbidden.

Unease threatens to erase some of the arousal.

Pleasure is a trap. Worldly sensations are a trap.

But I want it.

I want him.

I go to the bed, lying down, and I watch him warily.

Gabriel smiles at me and begins to pull his shirt off—his ridiculous costume, the one that let him pretend to be a building inspector.

My mouth goes dry as he reveals an expanse of muscle and hair, all leading down into his pants. I don't dare lower my gaze more, because if I see an obvious tent there, I don't know what I'll do.

“Shall I start by sucking you, boy?” Gabriel asks with casual dominance. “I’ve always enjoyed bringing a boy to tears with pleasure.”

I’ve cried while touching myself before, but never because of pleasure.

No, it’s always because of shame and pain and misery.

This is all new, all strange, and I don't know what to do with all of these words.

“I’ve never—” I blurt out, my cheeks flaming hotly. “I mean, I haven’t. There haven’t been lovers at all.”

Gabriel stops moving, and I wrap my arms around myself in shame.

It should be a good thing. I was saving myself for marriage—marriage that I would never have. Yet now I wonder about how I’ll fail him. If I don't perform the way he wants, will he cast me aside?

“You’re... you’re a virgin?” Gabriel whispers.

He climbs onto the bed and grips my shoulders.

Before I can react, he presses his lips to mine, desperate and possessing, like he can’t get enough of me.

I part my lips for him and let him take from me, not sure about this reaction but letting myself get swept away in it.

I whimper when he nips at my lower lip and pulls away.

“You saved yourself for me,” Gabriel says with awe. “My beautiful, perfect lamb.”

Did I avoid temptation all of this time only to surrender to this avenging angel?

For a moment, I think that he’s simply going to defile me and be done with me, but something within, something fiercer, insists that he’s going to take me over and over again, to make me reach new heights each time.

How have I gone from being so terrified to yearning so deeply?

Gabriel slides down the mattress and presses a soft kiss to my thigh. “Unblemished. Untouched. Mine .”

The words send butterflies fluttering through my stomach. I should protest, refute the words, remind myself that I’m still not sure he’s not of the Devil after all.

Instead, the word mine goes straight to my cock, and I bite my lip to hold back a whimper.

His mouth moves from my thigh to the tip of my cock, and I suddenly have an embarrassing vision of spending too early and ruining the entire moment. I clutch the sheets, whimpering, as his warm tongue swirls around the tip.

I have never felt anything like this. My hand had no way to replicate the sensation of another person doing this for me, another person willing to get their mouth on my cock and kiss it and lick it and worship it.

Because that's what he's doing.

It isn't a simple debasement. Gabriel gets my cock wet and blows across the slick skin, sending cool gusts of pleasure through me. I draw my thighs together, but he holds them down and kisses, licks, sucks all in concert, driving me out of my mind.

I bite my lip to stop myself from making any embarrassing noises, but a small groan escapes despite myself.

Gabriel sits up and meets my gaze. "You can be as loud as you want, my lamb. The walls are very soundproof."

Even accepting pleasure is difficult enough as it is. I'm so used to being as quiet as I can, to avoiding letting anyone know what I'm doing, that the idea of adding noises to it makes it even more daunting. I quickly shake my head.

Gabriel smiles and takes my cock in his hand, squeezing gently. "I won't continue until I hear your beautiful voice."

"I don't think I can," I whisper, blinking back tears at the idea of this wonderful moment coming to a close — at the knowledge that once it ends, that's it. It's done. No matter what he says, this has to be a one-time thing. I'll return to Father Zachariah and pretend this never happened.

“That sounds like a challenge.” Gabriel sits up, and I watch as he undoes his belt and lowers his pants and underwear.

I choke back a cry when I see his cock.

It’s so large , nestled in a thick patch of hair. His legs are as hairy as his chest, none of which I would have guessed from his clean shaved face.

Gabriel discards the rest of his clothes and crawls back toward me, lying almost entirely on top of me. I’m surrounded by his warmth.

The heat of Hell?—

Or the warmth of Heaven.

“Shh. There’s no need to hold back with me,” Gabriel murmurs, kissing my jaw.

His erection rubs against mine, and I almost come from that sensation alone. All of this is so much better than my hand could ever be, than the sensation of rubbing against my scratchy sheets.

“I’m afraid,” I admit, my anxiety ratcheting up as I make the confession.

Gabriel’s movements still. “Of me?”

“No,” I say, and it isn’t until I utter the word that I realize it’s true.

I’m not afraid of him.

I’m afraid of temptation.

I'm afraid of what this means for me.

I'm afraid of this pleasure, of knowing I'll never feel it again.

Gabriel presses another kiss to my lips. "Whatever it is, I'll get you through it. Nobody will ever hurt you again, little lamb. You're mine, now. My boy."

My insistence to myself that this is a one-time thing, that it'll last no longer than today, falters as I realize he means it.

He's claimed me as thoroughly as if I've chosen to steep my life in sin.

Worse, I want it . I want him to get me through this with as much patience and care as he's been showing. I want to be safe and protected.

I want to be his little lamb. His boy.

I want all of it.

"Daddy," I whisper, and Gabriel groans in turn, kissing me again.

Our erections rub against each other, and I will come from this.

But I want more.

"Please," I say when he breaks the kiss. "Can you... I know..."

How do I tell him my deepest desires, the strange thoughts that sometimes plagued me in the night. The shame I feel even mentioning it.

"Can I what?" Gabriel prompts. He reaches between us and strokes my cock gently.

I try to swallow my sounds, but a whimper escapes nonetheless. “The thing men do. When they... The sin of Sodom.”

I’m not prepared for Gabriel’s loud moan.

“You call me tempting, little lamb, but it’s you who’s tempting your Daddy,” Gabriel says. He leans in to suck on my neck. “I was going to wait, after you told me you’re unspoiled. But I would love to claim you like that.”

I want to know what it feels like.

I want to know what this sin feels like, this sin they call an abomination.

I want to know why men do it anyway.

I nod, and I carefully reach up to touch him — his shoulders first, then down his arms before sliding them to his back. He’s undeniably male , everything I’ve fantasized about so many times.

And he wants me to be his.

I think that maybe I want him to be mine, too.

Gabriel gives me one more brief kiss before he pulls away from me. I grip his shoulders to keep him in place, and he laughs but shakes his head.

“I need to grab the lube, boy. I don’t want to hurt you, especially not your first time.”

His thoughtfulness isn’t a surprise, not when he’s been so intent upon being gentle with me, and I watch him as he moves to the bedside table and opens the drawer.

I want to reach down and touch myself, but will he think I'm too lewd if I do? Too impatient? Will he change his mind about wanting me?

I grab the blankets instead, twisting the sheets in my hands, to keep myself from touching my erection.

Gabriel returns to me, this time settling between my legs. His large hands urge my thighs up. "Spread for me, boy. Show Daddy your hole."

The crude word makes me blush, makes me hesitate, but even though it's filthy, it's titillating, too. I spread my legs more, trusting him despite the part of my mind that's still coherent enough to question why I'm letting a man touch me — let alone a killer.

An avenging angel.

The Devil.

My Daddy.

I know there's significance in his use of the word Daddy , but I don't understand it. All I know is that it suffuses me with warmth and comfort, even if I'm not sure what to make of all of this.

Of any of this.

"Like this?" I ask, biting my bottom lip.

"Exactly like this," Gabriel says, leaning down.

I watch, uncomprehending, as he kisses the sensitive skin of my hole.

And I yelp, my entire body flushing with embarrassment.

“You... you can’t!” I protest, pulling at his shoulders.

Gabriel smiles up at me. “I’m the Daddy here. Trust me to make you feel good, little lamb.”

He leans back down, his tongue wet and warm against the rim of my hole, and I shudder from humiliation and strange pleasure alike.

I want to tell him to stop.

I want him to give me more.

“It’s dirty,” I say weakly, but I spread my legs wider, completely contradicting my words.

“I just bathed you,” Gabriel points out before going in to suck on the sensitive skin again.

I cover my face with my hands. I can’t believe he’s doing this. I can’t believe I’m enjoying it.

My erection bounces against my stomach, smearing drops of precum.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

When I'm completely desperate, my writhing only curbed by Gabriel's hands on my thighs, Gabriel says, "I'm going to put a finger in now."

My lips part, but nothing comes out. A finger can't possibly be worse than his tongue, but it's every bit as alluring in the most dangerous, sinful way. I wanted this. I asked for this.

I still want this.

"Okay," I whisper.

Gabriel opens the bottle of lube and pours some onto his fingers. I watch in trepidation and desire as that slicked-up finger approaches my hole.

Even though he told me he was doing it, I still startle when the cold lube touches my hole.

"Shh. I've got you, boy," Gabriel says gently.

For reasons I don't completely understand, I trust him. I nod, and the light touch of his finger turns into something more, something that makes my hole stretch around it as he slowly pushes it inside.

I bite my lip.

The stretch doesn't hurt. It feels good .

My breathing picks up, coming in short, uneven huffs. I feel so ashamed for how much I want this now, how my cock only gets harder as his finger gets deeper inside of me.

I whine in disappointment when he pulls the finger out, and Gabriel smiles.

“Getting more lube. I’ll stretch you properly before I give you Daddy’s cock.”

If his finger feels this intense, I can’t even imagine what his cock will feel like inside of me. Will it be too much?

If it’s only once, if this is the only time we can be together, then I should feel it all, shouldn’t I?

He’s not letting you go.

My mind bounces back and forth between only one night and always , and I can’t decide which is true, which is real .

If it’s only one night, I could still repent. Penance could wash away one night.

But if I keep coming back, over and over, my soul is forever damned.

Gabriel gets two fingers inside me, slick from all the lube. The pleasure overrides the burn of the stretch, and I close my eyes, sinking into the sensation.

Then he touches somewhere inside of me that makes the pleasure slam into me. It overwhelms me, all breath freezing in my lungs. My mind is empty, nothing but pure bliss. I cry out, arching into his touch?—

And my cock spurts all across my stomach and my chest.

Mortification is almost as strong as the ecstasy that races through me, and my hand flies to my mouth to cover it. The knowledge that I climaxed from a touch inside of me is dizzying, almost more than I can handle, but I understand why men lie with other men.

“I’m sorry!” I say, and how absolutely dumb is it to apologize for coming too early to the Devil or an Angel or... or...

My Daddy.

My face is completely red with humiliation, and I feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes.

Gabriel looks up with a soft smile. “No worries, little lamb. I’m happy you can come from having your prostate played with. That’s going to give us so many fun options.” He kisses the inside of my thigh again, while his fingers are still slowly thrusting in and out of me.

It really doesn’t matter to him.

When he adds another finger, slowly and carefully, I make another strangled sound. I want it, want him . How many fingers does he need to work inside of me to prepare me for more? For him?

I haven’t even had him inside of me yet, and already I’m sure this is a sin worth falling for.

I should be oversensitive, desperate to let my cock rest, yet I spread my legs wider for him.

“Please,” I beg. “Please, I need you.”

Gabriel smiles at me expectantly. “I need you...?”

I don’t understand what he wants at first. When I finally get it, my face heats up even more. I’ll be hotter than the depths of Hell with how embarrassed I am.

“I need you... Daddy ,” I whisper.

The word alone has my cock twitching again, despite how spent I am. Gabriel groans though, and he removes his fingers. I watch as he gets up and strokes his cock a few times, coating it with lube.

“I’m going to fill you up with my seed, little lamb,” Gabriel promises. “I’m going to mark you, make you mine.”

I can’t be his, but I want to be.

Why can’t I choose? Why can’t this be something I can accept or deny?

I lick my lips, wondering how he tastes. Sin? Something more?

It doesn’t matter, though. I’m going to feel something else, and tasting him will have to wait.

He lines his cock up with the hole he’s spent so long loosening up, readying me to take him, and I bite my lip as he starts to slowly push inside. It takes him several seconds to get inside, and when he does, I cry out again. I clutch the sheets harder, my eyes wide as he pauses inside of me.

I’m so... full .

I’ve never felt like this before.

It isn't just how large his cock is, how it's rubbing up against that same spot that had made me come in three seconds.

It's how warm he is, how immediate it feels.

It's how intimate this is.

I meet Gabriel's eyes. Dark brown with flecks of gold, and they suddenly seem so kind to me, even though I know he's a killer who seeks out those he deems worthy of punishment.

"Ready for me to start moving, boy?" Gabriel asks as he leans in. His lips brush against mine, and I wrap my arms around his back to keep him in place.

"Please... please stay close. Daddy." I don't know why using the word makes me feel so aroused.

"I will," he promises.

I search his expression for signs that he's being honest, and I see nothing but sincerity there. I nod, biting my bottom lip. The stretch isn't painful, and the discomfort is ebbing into something even better than his fingers had been.

I cling to him as he murmurs, "I'm going to move."

Nodding, I close my eyes, giving myself over to it, to him.

If I thought the sensation of his fingers was intense, it's nothing compared to feeling his cock thrusting in and out of me. It's thicker, longer, and every single thrust presses against my prostate and makes pleasure zing up my spine.

My mouth opens in breathless moans.

I wrap my legs around his waist, like a wanton whore, and instinctively pull him back as soon as he pulls out.

I claw at his back, too, scratching and digging in to force him closer.

“My lamb, my boy,” Gabriel murmurs, bending in close to kiss my open mouth.

I keep raking my fingers down his back. I don’t know why I’m doing it. I don’t want to hurt him.

Then the first scent of copper hits the air, and my vision goes blurry with delirium.

Oh .

That’s why.

Gabriel slows and takes my wrist. I watch as he lifts my fingers to his mouth.

There’s blood under my nails.

And he simply licks it off, groaning deeply as he does.

“You like that, boy?” Gabriel asks, his eyes fixed on me. “My blood is yours, little lamb. Take all that you want.”

Before I can stop myself, I bring my hand up to my lips, and I suck on one of my fingers. The metallic taste explodes over my tongue, and a full-body shudder runs through me.

Is this the taste of sin or salvation?

I'd thought I couldn't possibly get hard again, but my cock is trying.

"You're testing my patience," Gabriel says as he thrusts in again. "I was going to be sweet and gentle with you, lamb. But you show me this, the fire underneath those innocent eyes? Maybe you aren't a lamb after all. Maybe you're a wolf."

A wolf.

No, I'm not a wolf.

But I think he might be right that I'm not a lamb either.

"You're the wolf," I tell him, but I lick another finger clean before tentatively returning my hands to his back. I feel the blood now, slick and slippery. I hadn't thought my nails were that sharp, but I've done enough damage to where I should be worried he might get angry at me.

But he'd told me to take all I want, and I trust what he says even though I shouldn't.

I scratch him again, and Gabriel only moans, thrusting harder into me. I shudder in turn, and it becomes an addictive interplay. Every scratch makes him move faster, harder, which makes my nails rake sharper down his back. I smell the blood, I taste it?—

And Gabriel kisses it off my lips as his heat floods me.

It's the lava of hell, filling me up and burning my innocence and purity away.

There's no time for regret, not here, not now.

There's only room for us .

Gabriel takes my cock in his hand and starts stroking it. I didn't even realize I was completely hard again. I still feel oversensitized from my last orgasm, but it's so good too. I thrust into his hand, chasing a second release.

"Come on, boy," Gabriel murmurs. "Come for Daddy."

My breath catches, and I know it won't be long before I'm spilling into his hand, just as I had all over my own chest what feels like mere moments ago.

This time when my climax takes me, the sound I make is more like a desperate wail.

Gabriel releases my cock and presses closer, stifling my wail with his mouth. I cry into him, clutching his blood-slicked back harder even as his cock softens and slips out of me.

"Beautiful," Gabriel murmurs when my cries subside. "My perfect little lamb."

In the wake of so much pleasure, I can only cling to him for a moment before my limbs go boneless and I collapse against the bed.

I'm not sure what to say, too afraid that anything I might utter will shatter this perfect moment, so I don't say anything at all.

Instead, I only gaze up at him, then I reach up with one bloody hand to touch his cheek.

It smears crimson across it, and I wonder how many times his face has gotten touched by blood as he kills.

He smiles at me, blood and all.

With a sinking pit in my stomach, I realize my mistake.

I gave the Devil the key to my soul.

And I don't know if I want it back.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GAbriel

Me

I have a new boy.

I text Dominick, then I glance at Levi, who's fast asleep in my bed. I smile. My cheeks hurt from how much I've been smiling.

Ichabod has curled up against Levi's chest, and the two of them look absolutely adorable.

After a few seconds, my phone buzzes with a response.

Dom

Pics or it didn't happen.

I take a quick photo of Levi, fast asleep with an adorable little smear of blood on his cheek.

I don't send it to Dom though. This is only for me. My precious lamb, who gave me his first time and thrived under it. My back still twinges from the scratches, and I sigh happily.

I'm less happy when Levi turns and I can see the scars on his back.

Penance.

That must be how Zachariah keeps his victims complacent. If they disobey him, they get whipped. And Levi has borne the brunt of that ire, for whatever stupid reasons were sold to him.

There's also the problem of the basement.

Please don't turn off the light, Levi had begged before we'd gone to sleep.

Maybe what I need to do is lock Zachariah into a dark room. I'll tie him up with barbed wire, so every time he tries to move, he'll cut himself. And in the dark, he won't know if I'm lurking just behind him, or in front of him.

He won't know where the next cut will come from.

He won't see when I gouge his eye out.

I'm going to make him suffer.

I pet Ichabod briefly, and he stretches his paws before rolling onto his back to show me his belly. I stroke that too, but I know that Ichabod would gladly let me pet him for hours. I pick him up and set him on the floor.

"Later, Ichabod. I've got to take care of my lamb first," I tell him in a hushed whisper.

Ichabod meows and jumps back onto the bed. He tries to go back to his previous spot, but I slide over so I can take Levi into my arms.

Levi stirs, and he turns so he can look at me with bleary eyes. "Hi," he whispers

hoarsely. He licks his lips, and I wouldn't be surprised if he's still chasing the taste of blood.

"Hello." I kiss his lips gently, and my lamb, my boy, opens up for me beautifully.

He wraps an arm around my back. I flex my shoulders for him so he can scratch open the newly formed scabs?—

But he freezes and pulls back.

"What is it?" I ask, brushing his hair away from his forehead. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no," he says. "But you are."

I chuckle and kiss his forehead. "This is nothing. I told you, you can have whatever you want from me. I believe in providing my boy with what he needs."

His lips part, then seal back into a line. He pulls back, away from me, and I look at him in confusion.

"Why are you calling me that?" he whispers. "The boy, the... the Daddy?" He shivers like he's cold, and I try to pull him back, but he refuses to move closer to me again.

I sigh and take his hand into mine, expecting him to snatch it back, but he only tenses.

"I call you my lamb, my boy, because I want to take care of you. I can see it in your eyes. You yearn for it, Levi. You yearn for me. That day when you sucked that man's blood from your fingers, I knew we were made for each other."

Levi stares at me, and I realize that the desire I'd seen the night before has turned into fear. "We're not," he says, his voice wobbling. "Last night was a mistake."

I frown. “It wasn’t. You wanted me. You asked for me.” I reach out to stroke his cheek, and he flinches away from my touch. Anger flashes through me—not at him, but at Zachariah and whatever bullshit he spewed to make Levi deny himself like this. “Call me Daddy again,” I order. “Say it. Feel it.”

Levi shakes his head. “It’s... it’s perverse. Sick. Wrong.” He licks his lips, and I imagine him tasting my blood again. He scrambles back, away from me, and I tighten my hold on his hand before he can escape.

“Why?” I demand. “It makes you feel good. Say it, little lamb. Say it.”

“It doesn’t!” he protests, but I know he’s lying. He squirms, trying to pull his hand away. “Let go of me. You promised me one night. It’s been one night.”

He’s panicking.

I should’ve predicted this.

“It isn’t one night,” I say sternly. “I’m your Daddy now, little lamb. I know what you need.”

His eyes widen and he shakes his head. “You don’t! You don’t know me!”

But I do. I’ve watched him every chance I could. I know he’s the only one who leaves that apartment building regularly. I’ve seen how he stops to dig his fingers into his back whenever he passes by Zachariah’s unit. I’ve tasted the blood on Levi’s lips.

And I have his marks all over my back.

“What you want is discipline,” I say, yanking Levi closer.

“I don’t—” he begins, struggling against me. “I don’t want your discipline. Only Father Zachariah can discipline me. He knows what I need to... to save my soul.”

I remember my conversation with Dom, where he said I wasn’t a caretaking Daddy. He’s wrong though.

I’ll show Levi that it’s safe to act out and be scared. When he needs it, I’ll give him the punishment he craves.

And there is no fucking way I’m going to let Zachariah take that role from me.

“Oh, little lamb,” I murmur. I pull Levi over my lap, pressing firmly against his back to keep him in place. “You crave pain. I’ll give you pain.”

Levi fights me, but it’s weak at best. “I don’t want pain.”

No, he wants blood.

I imagine taking my knife to him, literally cutting my mark into his skin, and my cock threatens to harden.

It isn’t safe to do any of that while he’s struggling like this though. Someday, he’ll trust me enough that I can give him everything he desires.

I stroke his bare ass. “Daddy’s going to spank you, little lamb. You don’t need to worry about anything but the pain I give you.”

“I don’t want it,” he whispers, but I can feel the way his cock has started to respond to the thought, firming against my leg.

“You can lie to yourself, little lamb, but you can’t lie to me.” I press my finger

between his ass cheeks, against the sore rim of his hole.

Levi gasps and instinctively raises his ass for me. When he realizes what he's done, he shakes his head and says, "Stop!"

It's such a weak protest that I smile. "Is there a number you like, little lamb? Or should I keep going until you cry?"

"Don't," he begs so prettily. "I don't need discipline. I need penance."

I feel another flash of anger toward Zachariah, and I know I'm going to kill him before the month is out.

It's so clear in my mind that it settles the anger.

I smile down at Levi. "I won't get mad when you cry. I accept every part of you, lamb."

Then I bring my hand down against his bare ass, harder than I would normally for a first-time partner.

I'm not worried about going too far.

I'm more worried about not giving him enough.

His every cry for penance is a cry for pain, a cry for something I can give him more lovingly than anything Zachariah can offer.

The sound he makes is choked, but he lifts his ass in the air, silently pleading for more.

I spank him again, and his pale skin blooms in red.

Levi sobs and shifts forward, his cock rubbing against my thigh. He still struggles, but another spank has his body settle deeper.

“I hate you,” Levi whispers.

The words stab through me, but I know he doesn’t mean them. Spankings are when boys are allowed to act out.

I hit his ass again, and again, and with each blow Levi’s body stills, then strains into my palm more.

His cock grows harder too, and I don’t say anything as he subtly frots against my thigh in between each strike.

“There you go,” I whisper. “Just feel it, little lamb. Enjoy it. Daddy will take care of everything.”

I lose track of how many times I’ve hit him when I finally hear it: Levi’s soft sobs.

I settle my hand on his reddened ass, only now noticing how much my palm stings. I stroke the deep red of his ass cheeks and push in gently, drawing a moan out of him.

“My beautiful lamb,” I murmur. “Do you feel better now?”

Levi snuffles. For a long moment, I think he isn’t going to reply, but he finally whispers back, “Y-yes, Daddy.” He squirms, and his erection continues to grind against my thigh.

I help lift him upright and let him settle into my lap. His face is red and splotchy with

tears, and he's so beautiful like this.

I've never seen anyone as beautiful as Levi.

"Give Daddy a hug, little lamb," I whisper.

He hesitates, but then he wraps his arms around me. He buries his face against my neck, and I pull him closer so that he can feel safe and warm in my embrace.

It does mean I can feel his insistent erection against my stomach. I kiss the top of his head and stroke his back gently.

"Do you want Daddy to give you pleasure now?" I ask, squeezing his thigh.

"I haven't earned it. I haven't earned anything good," he says, resting his cheek against my shoulder. "That wasn't penance at all."

My hatred for Zachariah Carpenter only grows, and I stoke that flame. I look forward to the day when I carve him up and present his heart to Levi as a gift.

"You have earned whatever I say you do," I say. "You want somebody to judge you, but God will never give you an answer. I can." I pet the back of Levi's head, giving him what comfort I can.

"You aren't a holy man," he whispers. "You can't give answers on His behalf."

"But I'll give you my answers." I stroke down to Levi's ass and squeeze. "You can take penance in my arms."

He squirms and gasps, but he continues to cling to me despite the pain — or maybe he clings to me because of it.

His cock is smearing precum across my stomach, leaking steadily, and my own cock is equally hard as I gaze at his face.

I gently brush at the tears in the corners of his eyes, bringing my fingers to my lips to taste the salt of them.

Levi shivers, his eyes searching mine.

I kiss him again, then reach for the lube lying next to my pillow. I hand the bottle to Levi. “Get my cock slick, little lamb, so you can ride me.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

“Ride you?” he repeats, brows furrowing. He fumbles with the cap, then tentatively pours some into his hand. He has to shift back so he can more easily get to my cock, and the cool lube slides over it as he starts to run his hand along it. “Like this?”

I groan at the little kitten touches of his hand. He’s never held another man’s cock before. This is his first time doing it, and his inexperience only ramps up my arousal.

“Exactly like that,” I say, kissing his cheek. “You can stroke me as you would yourself.”

Nodding, Levi bites his bottom lip before starting to do just that, his grasp tentative as his hand brings me to full erection.

My cock is throbbing with the need to bury myself inside of his tight hole. I know he has to be sore from the night before, but he wants this as badly as I do.

“Can you get your hole slick for me, too, or do you want me to do it?” I ask him.

His cheeks flush crimson. “Please?”

I smile and take the lube from him. He wraps his arms around me again, pressing his cheek to my shoulder. His hands land on the claw marks he’d left last night, and I moan at the sensation.

“Lift your hips up for me, little lamb,” I say as I pour lube onto my fingers.

He obeys, though he winces when I stroke one finger along his hole.

“If it’s too much—” I begin.

Shaking his head, Levi interrupts me, “It’s not.”

I get two fingers inside him immediately, and he sinks onto them, making the angle more awkward. I don’t mind, though, adjusting my hand so I can get my fingers in deeper. He jolts against me when I hit his prostate, and I smile.

“Are you ready for me?” I kiss his shoulder. “You’ll have full control of how fast and deep we go.”

His gaze finds mine again, and while I don’t like the uncertainty in his gaze, he doesn’t tell me to stop. Instead, he nods again. I help him shift so that the head of my cock is poised at his hole.

He moans as he starts to lower himself onto me, though from the pained sound he makes, he must go too far too fast. I grip his hips, holding him steady, and he gives me a grateful look.

“There you go,” I say.

He lifts his head, and I see he still has tears in his eyes. From the spanking, or something else?

Either way, I kiss them away.

Those tears are mine, too.

I release my tight grasp on his hips, allowing him to start to sink down onto me, and he bites his lip. He doesn’t try to stop, though, this time continuing to let gravity take him until I’m fully inside of him.

“Oh.” Levi’s breathing speeds up. “That’s... more than yesterday.”

“Yes,” I agree. “You’ve taken every last inch of me, little lamb.”

“It’s...” He falters. “It’s good. I’m sore, but it’s good.”

I grip his thighs—and they’re so warm, from his body heat, from the spanking, from the passion between us—and urge him up. “My beautiful lamb.”

“Daddy,” he whispers, and warmth races through me at the word tumbling from his lips. He shivers as he starts to sink down again. I help him, and he rises and settles down again, slowly fucking his own ass with my cock.

It’s slower than last night, but the pleasure is almost more intense. My lamb is taking what he needs from me. I’ll give him everything he has ever dared to desire, every secret want that was only a small whisper in his imagination.

I help him lift up and down, groaning when his nails rake down my back once more. I’ll bear his scars for him.

Moments of pleasure pass, with each of us taking and giving in turn, and he’s the first to spill. He shudders as his cum spills out over my stomach, and it’s all I can do not to immediately follow.

I thrust up into him only a few more times before it all overwhelms me, and my cum floods his ass as I come. I lean forward, kissing his shoulder, nipping it, tasting his skin and basking in the afterglow of my climax.

When I look up, expecting to see him flushed from ecstasy, I instead see the tears streaming in full force again.

“Why are you crying?” I ask, reaching up with a sticky hand to wipe the tears away.

“I don’t... This is fake. How can it be penance, if it feels good?” Levi asks. He scrambles off my lap, but I stop him before he can leave the bed entirely.

“Because it’s relief. It’s absolution. I’m giving you permission, lamb, to forgive yourself for whatever you think you’ve done wrong.

” I wonder if there are others I’ll need to kill.

Is it only Zachariah who destroys my lamb’s enjoyment of life, or does he have sycophants whose murder I will delight in?

“What I think I’ve done wrong?” he repeats, sounding baffled. He lets out a weak laugh. “What I know I’ve done wrong. I sinned last night, over and over. Sex is supposed to be... it’s not about carnal desire. It’s meant for people who... who love each other.”

I almost tell him that I do love him, that of course this was all about love.

But it’s too soon. I’ll scare him more with those words than with the spanking.

“It can be about whatever we want it to be,” I tell him. “There is no wrong way to have sex, if you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Unless it’s between men,” he says bleakly. “I asked to experience the sin of Sodom, but I didn’t understand how tainted it would make my soul.”

I could argue with him. I could tell him that Zachariah likely wears mixed fabrics and eats shrimp, along with a host of other sins, but he wouldn’t listen.

Instead of that, I kiss him again. “Does this feel like sin, little lamb?”

Levi laughs humorlessly. “Yes.” He pauses, then adds in a softer voice, “But it feels good.”

“Then it’s not wrong,” I answer.

I remember other debates, ones that turned sour and had yelling, but those people don’t matter anymore.

The only person who matters is Levi.

I kiss his lips, inhale his air, and I know it within my soul.

Levi is the world.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

There's an unfamiliar weight around my waist, an unfamiliar heat at my back, and I tense the second I wake enough to remember where I am.

Who I'm with.

I slept with the Devil, and his blood still lingers beneath my nails.

I more than slept with him. I took pleasure from his body and allowed him to take pleasure from mine in turn, and it was wrong.

My heart pounds, and the need to get out from beneath the arm draped over my stomach gets more and more urgent until the idea of staying there is panic-inducing. I slip free of his embrace, and while he stirs, he doesn't fully wake.

I hold my breath as soon as I've gotten out of bed, watching him.

Part of me aches to slide back under the covers and linger within the sphere of his warmth, but I know better.

I've already sinned to the point where I'm not sure even Father Zachariah can absolve me of the consequences of my actions.

What have I done?

I blink back tears, quickly grabbing my clothes and fleeing to the other room to get

dressed. My ass is sore from the spanking, but it isn't a sharp pain the way the whippings are. It's spread out, warm, and makes me feel something I don't want to admit.

Because whatever that feeling is, it isn't guilt.

Something brushes against my ankles, and I yelp before I realize it's Gabriel's cat. Ichabod trills at me, the sound surprising me, and I whisper, "Shh." I can't have him making noise and waking Gabriel up.

I get dressed, looking down at my hands. They're still covered in blood. I can't leave like this, but every second I linger is another second in which Gabriel might wake up and stop me from going home.

I hurry to the kitchen to scrub my hands, and I mourn the loss of the blood as the stain on my skin fades until there's no sign of it. I can still see it under my fingernails, but I have to get out of here.

Drying my hands on a cloth, I turn, only to see Ichabod sitting in the doorway. It sends a shiver through me. I don't mind cats, but this one seems to see me.

I squeeze past him, as though he's taking up so much more space than he is, then carefully head to the door. After I put my shoes on, I quietly slip out of the apartment, and I don't breathe fully until the door closes behind me.

Then I flee, hurrying down the hallway and out of the building.

I try not to think about the fact that Gabriel could follow me at any given point; he knows where I live, and he knows how to get to me.

I have to hope that he'll finally take the hint and leave me alone, but I know better.

He's going to dog my heels until he finds a new obsession...

And the idea of him finding a new obsession hurts somehow, strangely, like a stab to the heart. It makes no sense, obviously. I don't want him focused on me. I don't want the constant temptation I'd given into only hours earlier.

I can't handle it.

I can't handle what I could become.

I'm already a sinner — everyone is — but it feels worse right now.

I'll need to confess to Father Zachariah.

I don't know if I can.

I'm not sure if it's late at night or extremely early in the morning. All I know is that I need to get home, and I'm not entirely positive how I'm going to make that happen. I have no idea where I am. I have very little money. The streets aren't exactly quiet, but they aren't bustling, either.

I take a deep breath, trying to gather myself. God will provide a way home. He always provides.

I've never been out in the city this late at night. I thought the darkness would press in on me, but New Bristol's sinful nightlife keeps the streets illuminated.

I am surprisingly grateful for that.

Wherever Gabriel took me, though, it's a nicer part of the city than I usually walk in. The storefronts I walk past are for luxury brands, and the cars that go by look shiny

and new.

I'm tempted to hail a cab, but I have only a few dollars in my pocket, nowhere near enough to pay for the fare.

A bus stop up ahead has an old, faded map on display next to the large advertising screen. I can't make out much, but I do learn that I'm near the finance district.

I think it's too late — too early? — for the buses to be running, which means I'll have to continue by foot.

That's across the bridge from home. It'll take me at least two hours to walk home, I realize with dismay. And that's only if I don't get lost.

I look back towards Gabriel's luxury condo building, and once again I'm tempted to return to the warmth of his bed.

I shake the feeling off and start walking south. I just need to follow this road to the bridge. I can do that.

Maybe there's a payphone somewhere so I can call Father Zachariah—but of course the city removed its payphones years ago. Would a bar that's still open at this hour allow me to use their phone?

I walk past a bar that's still open, and I hear the rowdy sounds of drunk people. A man and a woman stumble out the door, laughing and pawing at each other.

I'm not sure what to think.

Only a few weeks earlier, I'd have scorned them, but now I'm afraid to judge.

Jesus wouldn't have judged them.

He'd walked among the downtrodden and encouraged others to empathize with them.

I'm no Jesus, but I can do better than others.

Father Zachariah would judge.

What does that mean for them, for me?

Discomfort gnaws at me, and I avert my eyes in shame.

I keep walking, and my feet begin to ache. I know if I stop, though, it'll be impossible to keep walking. I'll lose the small bit of momentum that I have.

I don't know how long it takes me to reach the bridge, but I breathe a sigh of relief when I reach it. It didn't seem so long and imposing in the car—what little I can remember of the ride—but now it stretches out across the river, seemingly endless. Cars still zip by despite the late hour.

When I'm on the other side, I need to... I need to...

But I won't know where to go once I'm there, either. I'll need to find another map or landmark or ask for directions. I'll need to call Father Zachariah to pick me up and admit to him what happened and explain why I'm wandering the night like this.

I'll need to tell him about the blood underneath my nails.

I sob and wrap my arms around myself.

"Rough night?" a rough, feminine voice asks.

My head jerks up, and I look up at her. My tears make it difficult to see her clearly. “I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I wasn’t trying to disturb you.”

She’s a young woman, with pale skin and black hair pulled back into two braids. She’s wearing a short, tight shirt that barely covers her top, and her shorts don’t even go midway down her thighs.

Between her fingers is a cigarette.

“Disturb me?” The woman looks around. “I was just enjoying the view.” She points to a nearby railing. “Have you ever seen the city reflected on the river at night? It’s pretty neat.”

I shake my head, wiping at my eyes. I’m reluctant to stand beside her. What sins has she inflicted upon herself? Will she taint me by proxy?

Or am I already beyond salvation?

I go to her and peer out at the river, wrinkling my nose as the stench of cigarette smoke fills my nostrils. “It’s pretty,” I say.

And it is, though I can’t properly appreciate it as my mind drifts to Gabriel.

None of us are free from sin.

I judge and judge, but now I’m one who deserves all of this in turn.

“Do you have a phone?” I ask her.

She gives me a strange look. “Yeah.”

I hesitate, then venture. “Could I maybe use it? Just to make a quick call.”

“What happened to your phone?” she asks, her hand going to her pocket.

The question takes me aback. “My phone?” I repeat, only to remember that everyone I see carries one. “I lost it.”

“Lost it? Where?” she asks, her voice even more suspicious now.

I bite my lip. “I don’t have one,” I finally say. “And I’m lost.”

In so many ways, I’m lost, and I don’t know how I’m going to find my way home again.

Her expression softens. “You don’t have a phone at all? Damn. I can call 9-1-1? Although that’s if you trust the cops. Last time I dealt with them, I got a nasty strip search.” She gives me a once over. “They probably won’t fondle you as much as they did me.”

I shiver, shaking my head quickly. “No!” I say. “No. No cops.”

Father Zachariah says they’re all corrupt.

“I only want to go home.” I feel like a small child all over again, desperate to go home but not sure what awaits me there.

What if Eve told Father Zachariah about what happened? She has to be worried by now. I would tell him if she went missing. I would be trying to help, even if it would be...

Misguided.

“Okay. What’s the number?” she asks. “I’ll call for you.”

I hesitate. I can understand her not wanting to hand a stranger her phone, and I can’t even imagine how disheveled and out of place I must look right now.

I think there’s still blood under my fingernails, too. I’d had to wash my hands in a hurry, and I hadn’t been able to scrub them completely clean.

Or am I imagining it?

I give her the number, and she enters it into her phone and presses the call button.

It rings, but no one answers. She lets it ring eight times before finally tapping at the button to end it.

My heart has already dropped into my stomach, and I realize I am well and truly lost with no way to get home that I know of.

“Thanks,” I say, though my voice sounds hollow.

“Anybody else you want me to try calling?” she asks. “Lots of people have their phones set to Do Not Disturb in the evenings. It probably didn’t even ring on their end.”

I shake my head. “I don’t have anyone else.” My mind strays to Gabriel, but I wouldn’t call him even if I had his number.

Would I?

After the way I’d bailed on him...

I don't know.

He'd seemed so adamant about wanting to keep me, but I could've shaken him off.

I don't know what to think about that possibility.

Do I want him to chase me?

"That sucks." The woman puts her phone back in her pocket and looks out over the river. "Guess I'm kind of the same. I wouldn't be out here if I had people to call."

I look at her again, frowning. "Is... something wrong?" I find myself asking before I can stop myself.

"Eh. What isn't wrong?" She smiles at me.

"I've been homeless for about three months now.

Got kicked out after my boyfriend found out I'd been raped.

He accused me of cheating on him." She laughs bitterly.

"He said I must have led the other guy on. Of course, when I went to the cops to report the crime, they told me there was no proof anything happened. And that's when the groping happened.

Thanks for not making me call the cops."

I stare at her, my brain having a difficult time parsing the words. "That's horrible." I can't think of anything else to say, anything that would make this even remotely better.

I'm not sure if Father Zachariah would urge me to invite her to the compound to speak to him or if he'd consider her soul too stained to bother with, and the thought bothers me. No one is beyond redemption.

Even me? I'm suddenly not sure.

The woman takes another drag of her cigarette.

"Yeah, it is." She blows a ring of smoke out.

"I read that some hotshot CFO disappeared. The guy who raped all those other women. And I keep wishing that would happen to my rapist, too. Due process? What a joke. The only people who benefit are rich white guys."

Disappeared.

I'm suddenly very, very cold.

"Do you think he would've deserved it if he'd died?" I ask, my voice hoarse. "If someone had killed him?"

If Gabriel had killed him.

She laughs. "That'd be divine justice, wouldn't it? I mean, I should say I'm against murder or whatever, but I'm not going to cry if a rich asshole gets killed."

Divine justice.

An angel in disguise.

I shiver, staring back out at the river below us. "Some people would think he

deserved it,” I say. “I don’t know what to think.”

I don’t know why I said that. I don’t know why she’s confided in me, either. Maybe she sees me as a kindred spirit.

Maybe I am, fallen as I am now.

“I can’t tell you what to think,” the woman answers. “But I say: why waste your time worrying about that guy? There’s plenty more rich white douchebags where he came from. I hear they’ve got cloning facilities out in California where they churn them out.”

My head jerks up, and I stare at her. That... What? I realize she’s only joking, but it still threw me enough to where I fall silent for several moments.

If law enforcement doesn’t help the people of the city, who does? The world is corrupt, morally bankrupt, and even this stranger who doesn’t know God understands that.

“Okay. Well, if you’re sure you don’t know anyone else to call, I’m gonna find somewhere to hole up for the night.

” The woman pushes away from the railing.

“If you need a place too, the stairs over there, they lead under the bridge. It’s an okay spot, but lots of people sleep there so don’t flash any valuables around. ”

I should invite her back home.

Why am I even hesitating?

“Do you believe in God?” I blurt out.

The woman gives me a crooked smile. “God? I mean, if he exists, he’s getting off on my suffering, so fuck him.”

The words make me physically recoil. “God has a plan for all of us,” I say, my cheeks flushing hot. I start to speak again, but her smile has vanished. “Never mind. Thank you for letting me use your phone, and for the offer. I... I’ll find my way home.”

Somehow.

“Sure. Word of advice? Look less lost while you’re walking the streets. If you don’t, you’ll attract the kinds of strangers who will do cavity searches looking for spare change.” She waves and walks off.

I have no idea what she means.

I don’t think I want to know.

I look bleakly out over my surroundings. I don’t know what to do.

God will provide.

He has to.

“Help me,” I whisper, and I should be praying to God, but I know.

I’m praying to Gabriel.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GABRIEL

It's light outside when Ichabod wakes me with his loud purring directly in front of my face, kneading my chest with his paws.

That's his way of waking me up and demanding food. I groan and roll away from him?—

And immediately notice the problem.

There's nobody else in the bed with me. I sit up and look at the spot Levi had been in last night.

Completely empty. A glance around the room reveals that his clothes are gone too.

“Levi?” I call out. “Little lamb?”

No response.

Maybe he got dressed and is sitting with coffee in the living room.

Except there's no smell of coffee, and when I go out there, still completely naked, I'm met with an empty living room.

I stand, staring, completely dumbfounded.

He'd agreed to stay. He'd said that, right? He wanted me, he wanted what I offered

him. He wanted me to take care of him.

No, he needs me to take care of him.

And here's more proof. A rational person wouldn't have left in the middle of the night, especially not when the alternative to this luxury is a shitty apartment in a rundown part of the city.

Ichabod rubs his head against my feet, reminding me that he still needs to be fed.

I glance at the automatic feeder, which still has plenty of dry food in it.

"Spoiled," I grumble out of habit as I get the can of wet food and serve it to him. He immediately buries his nose in the food bowl.

I notice my wallet sitting out on the kitchen counter. When I open it, all my credit cards are still there, and none of the cash has been taken.

Levi left without taking anything? My worry ratchets up. If he'd taken money, I would at least know that he could make it back to that apartment. But without cash and no phone, how far could he even have gotten?

I go back to my bedroom to pull on clothes as fast as I can. I probably need a shower, but I don't have time for that.

Once I'm dressed, I call Dom.

He picks up after the second ring. "This had better be the biggest emergency of your life," Dom growls. "I had a long fucking day yesterday?—"

"I lost my lamb," I say, then quickly correct myself, "The boy I had with me last

night. Levi. He left. I need to find him.”

There’s a long silence on the other end. “Wait. You hooked up with somebody and he left? He did a walk of shame on you?” He starts laughing. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

My vision grows hazy with fury, and I wonder if anybody would miss Dom. If I carved him up and left his corpse in a ditch, or bury it in the woods... Just another dead cop. Who cares?

But while the police in New Bristol never seem to care about protecting the innocent, they go all out in protecting and avenging their own.

I can’t afford the hassle.

“It’s not funny,” I snarl at him. “He had no money and no phone. He doesn’t know the area.”

“Whoa. Chill,” Dom says, no longer laughing. “Hate to break it to you, Gabe, but some guy voluntarily leaving your bedroom isn’t a crime.”

Yes, it is , I think, but I have enough sense not to say that out loud.

“I know. But I’m worried about him. He’s... innocent. Naive. The city won’t treat him right.”

The only one who can treat him right is me. He’s mine.

Dom sighs loudly. “Okay, if you’re hung up on him, figure out where he might have gone and go there? I’m not at work right now, and I won’t go into work right now. I deserve at least another five hours of sleep. But if you don’t find him by the time my

shift starts, I'll try to help."

That's as much as I'll get out of him.

He's useless. He'd deserve to be cut apart, piece by piece, while he screams and begs for forgiveness. I'd teach him exactly how insignificant he is in comparison to Levi.

But I still need him as a friend.

He's the only person I can currently call a friend.

"Okay. Thank you," I say reluctantly. "I'm going to go look for him."

He can't have gotten far, right? But if he was trying to get back to Zachariah's apartment building, he'd have to go south.

I flip my phone over to the pictures of Levi I've taken. Some are from when I was surveilling his apartment, and a few are from last night while he was asleep.

He's so beautiful. He's so good.

Everybody will want to tear him apart.

Well, they can't have him. He's mine.

If anybody touched him last night, I'm going to cut them apart, bone by bone. They'll feel every single moment of their sins before they die.

I might need to buy more bone saws.

I waffle for a moment—too long, too long—before deciding I'm better off searching

by car. Even with the morning traffic, I'll be faster by car than on foot, and I need a way to restrain Levi and keep him with me once I do find him.

The obvious choice is to search the roads to his apartment building. I set my phone up to show me the camera feeds in his apartment, then I start driving.

At the first light, I scroll back through the feeds just to be sure Levi didn't make it back yet. I notice his sister entering and exiting the apartment multiple times. That's more often in one evening than she'd done in most of the past week.

Ten minutes ago, she'd gone into Zachariah's apartment.

I don't think Levi is home yet.

A car honks behind me, reminding me to keep driving. I step on the gas, for all the good that does me.

I need to call in sick to work. I'll tell them I'm working from home. It's not like it makes much of a difference. Day trading can be done anywhere, and if some client doesn't earn an extra fifty thousand dollars today, who cares?

My eyes scan the sidewalks, hoping to find some sign of Levi, but it's the usual crowd of men in business suits, women in expensive dresses, and the couriers zipping past them. Levi would stand out among them.

I get frustrated when I reach the bridge. I'd hoped to find Levi before I crossed the bridge. I need to decide if I want to expand my search here or try closer to his apartment.

In the end, traffic decides that for me. There's no quick way to redirect myself, so I continue onto the bridge. The morning traffic is slow but steady, everybody crawling

along at fifteen miles per hour. I glance at my phone again, but there's no more movement in the apartment halls.

I growl in frustration, and I imagine how I'm going to gut Zachariah when I reach the apartment, never mind whether Levi is there or not.

I'll do it in that basement of his, the one that had Levi so scared.

And then, as the clouds part to let in a bit more sunlight, I spot Levi walking on the sidewalk of the bridge.

My heart beats faster and my mouth goes dry.

My lamb.

I pull my car into the sliver of a shoulder the bridge has and park, quickly hitting the off switch. I jump out, slamming the car door behind me, and jog the short distance to Levi.

Cars start honking, but I don't care.

"Little lamb!" I shout as I close the gap between us. "Levi!"

Levi stops in his tracks and turns to face me, his arms coming protectively against his chest. I don't know what to make of his expression, but I can see him swallow hard as he looks at me. "Gabriel," he whispered. "You came."

He looks completely disheveled, his hair pointing in every direction, his clothes wrinkled and filthy. He doesn't come toward me, so I close the distance between us instead.

“Of course I came,” I say, pulling him into my arms. “You scared me, little lamb.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he says. His entire body is trembling, and I rub my hand along his back.

“Did anyone touch you?” I demand, feeling for new injuries.

The only thing I can feel are the scars he still bears from Zachariah’s “penance.”

“No,” he says quickly. “No, everyone was really nice.”

Everyone .

“Who is everyone?” I ask. I have to raise my voice because of all the damn honking.

“The people under the—” he begins, only to shake his head. “Never mind. I’m fine. I got lost, that’s all.”

Of course he did. He’s still innocent, still in need of my protection and care.

“Well, I’ve found you.” I smile at him. “Let’s go home. You need another shower. I’ll pamper you. I’m sure Ichabod wants to cuddle with you, too.”

“I can’t go home with you,” Levi says, not smiling back at me. “Eve is going to be frantic.”

I think back to how often she’d been going in and out of the apartment in the surveillance footage.

“She won’t even notice,” I say. “She’s busy with Zachariah, I’m sure.”

Levi recoils from me, but his eyes narrow. “Of course she’ll notice. I’m never gone like this. She worries if I’m gone for a few hours.”

“She doesn’t worry when you’ve been whipped bloody,” I say harshly.

There are people yelling in the background now, the ever-present noise of New Bristol.

“You don’t know anything about her,” he says, every bit as fiercely. “You don’t know anything about me .”

I meet his gaze. “I know that you are too good for this world, Levi. I know you’ve been taken advantage of all your life. I know that you’re being abused. I know that you’re afraid of the dark.”

“I’m not being taken advantage of or abused!” he retorts, his voice raising in volume. We’re attracting more attention from people on the bridge, who are slowing down to look at the spectacle. He takes a step back, away from me. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m not.” I grab his wrist. “Zachariah Carpenter is a con man, Levi. He went by the name Joshua Baker before. I have a paper trail of several other names he used. He had a cult out near Calamity City fifteen years ago. It looks like he decided to run the same scam again.”

He tries to pull away from me, but I only tighten my grasp on his wrist. “That isn’t true. You’re trying to make me doubt, and it isn’t going to work.”

“If he’s such a great man, why do all of you live in poverty while he has all the luxuries?” I ask. “Why does he have several wives? Not legal wives, of course. Polygamy is illegal in this state. What does God say about breaking the law like that?”

“You don’t know anything about what God says,” he retorts. For once, he doesn’t seem to have a bible verse at the ready. “You act like you do, but you don’t understand.”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

I think back to all the mornings I'd had to read the bible, to all the times the ruler came down on my hand for quoting the scripture wrong.

I remember thinking how funny it would be if I broke the ruler over their hands, and how I'd make them quote scripture while I cut them open.

"I understand more than enough," I say hoarsely. "I understand that bad people will say anything to justify their actions."

The honking gets even louder, and somebody yells, "If you don't move your fucking car, I will ram it over the side of the bridge, motherfucker!"

I ignore the commotion. "No man can claim to be a prophet, Levi." I raise his hand to kiss the knuckles. He shudders. "Come back with me. It's impossible to think here."

He nibbles on his bottom lip, and his eyes are wary as they take me in. "No," he says. "He's not a bad man. He doesn't go around murdering people."

I reach out and place my hand on Levi's hip. "But he whips you bloody. He locks you in a basement." I lean in closer. "What did you see in the dark, Levi?"

Levi jerks back, away from me, and for the first time, I see anger in his eyes.

"You don't understand. It's penance . You don't have faith.

You don't understand that sometimes you need to be punished for what you've done.

” He meets my eyes. “You punish other people for what you even think they’ve done all the time, don’t you? ”

I carve them up; I make them beg for release.

I make sure they can’t ever touch the innocent lambs of this world ever again.

And I drink in the scent of their foul blood, and feel the glee and arousal fill me.

I’m not one of the good people of this world.

I shouldn’t even be touching Levi.

But he’s mine, and I won’t let him go back to Zachariah Carpenter.

“We can debate philosophy at home,” I say, grabbing Levi’s wrist. “Ichabod will meow in agreement while I make breakfast for you. You must be starving.”

Levi pulls back more insistently. “I’m not. I just want to get home.”

Home is with me.

Home isn’t with someone who harms him.

“I’ll take you,” I lie with a smile. “Let’s get to my car?—”

I freeze when I realize somebody is approaching us. I pull Levi against my chest—he gasps and tries to push away—and make sure to keep myself angled toward the newcomer.

He’s wearing an NBP uniform and a deep scowl.

“Sir, is this your vehicle?” he asks, pointing to my black luxury sedan.

“Yes,” I answer. “I’ll be on my way now.” I relax my hold on Levi. “Let’s go, little lamb.”

Levi takes the opportunity to break free from my grasp, and before I can stop him, he bolts past the cop and through the crowd.

“Levi!” I shout, rushing to follow.

But the cop gets in my way, deep scowl creasing his thick brows. “You’ve been blocking traffic for the past fifteen minutes. That’s not just a traffic citation. You have to come down to the station with me.”

I glare at him. “Because of traffic? You’ll cause an even longer traffic jam if my car sits there.”

The cop scoffs loudly. “You rich bastards think the rules don’t apply to you. License and registration, right now.”

Levi is getting away though. Levi will somehow return to Zachariah Carpenter, and he’ll be tortured and broken, and I can’t let that happen.

My hand goes down to my jeans pocket, where I’ve got a small pocketknife.

I could easily stab the cop and carve him up and throw his body into the river below. He’ll show up again bloated and fed on, face near unrecognizable.

Except for all the witnesses around us. I see some people with their cameras out, ready to film.

I grit my teeth. “Fine.” I walk over to my car and pull out the registration from the glove compartment. I hand both it and my driver’s license to the cop, my nose flaring while the cop looks over both of them.

“Gabriel Abrams,” the cop reads. “What do you do, Gabe?”

“I work in finance,” I say carefully. “And who are you? I want to see your badge number.”

That sets the cop on edge. That’s fine. I don’t care if he hates me.

“Officer Pete O’Connor.” He holds up his badge, too fast for me to make out a number. I guess that means he doesn’t particularly want to be held accountable for his actions either.

“I’ll drive down to the station and pay the fine this afternoon.” What are a few hundred or thousand dollars to me?

Officer O’Connor narrows his eyes at me. “No. Up against the car, hands behind your back.”

I’d be surprised, but I know what the cops in New Bristol are like.

The only truly shocking thing is that he’d go after me . I’m not the usual kind of person the cops like to harass.

I try to look past the crowd to see where Levi disappeared to, but he’s well and truly out of my sight.

Growing impatient with me, O’Connor grabs me and slams my body against my car. He yanks my arms back and snaps handcuffs around my wrists. “I fucking told you

what to do, you little?—”

I tune out his words and breathe deeply to remain calm.

O’Connor can enjoy his petty revenge against me for now. Even the kick he levels at my knees doesn’t faze me.

After all, I’m going to do worse for him for coming between me and my lamb.

Not today, not tomorrow.

But sometime when he least expects it, I’m going to give him his worst nightmare.

I smile as he forces me into the back of his patrol car.

Maybe I can show Levi the insides of O’Connor’s body and let Levi taste his blood.

He’d like that.

LEVI

The bus that takes me home costs two dollars and fifteen cents. I had three dollars in my pocket, and I have to deal with the annoyed glare from the bus driver while I stick the bills into the machine.

Everybody else has an electronic fare card. There's a fare card at home, one we share between all of us for whenever somebody needs to go outside our neighborhood. I haven't done that often.

I don't know why I'm thinking about that now.

Maybe it's because I don't want to think about the pounding in my chest, or how sweaty I got running away from the devil.

I shuffle toward the back of the bus, and I find a single empty seat next to a young woman wearing large earphones. Her music is audible through the device, a steady thump thump thump that doesn't resemble any of the music we listen to at home.

Home .

My back already aches in anticipation, though the idea of telling Father Zachariah is far less appealing than the penance I know will follow.

Maybe I don't need him to dole it out.

Maybe I can pray and seek it on my own.

The bus ride back to the apartment complex seems to both take forever and be over in an instant, and as I exit it, I look quickly around for signs of Gabriel.

Nothing.

I don't expect him to be here, not after the commotion he'd made by leaving his car parked in the middle of traffic, but part of me almost wishes he was.

Almost.

I'd prayed for him, but when he'd come, I'd panicked.

And what he'd said about Father Zachariah... No. I hadn't been able to stay.

I let myself into the building, eschewing the elevator and trudging up the stairs. My hands shake as I unlock the door to the apartment, and I call out for Eve. It's early in the morning, but she doesn't answer me. The door to her bedroom is open, and her bed has been neatly made.

I frown, but it leaves me open to repent before she gets back and asks questions.

My hands shake as I open the bottom drawer of my dresser, moving my clothes until I find the flogger I keep hidden there.

Its presence is one of the biggest sources of my shame.

I know that I should go straight to Father Zachariah and beg him to hear my sins, but I can't.

If I told him I'd laid down with another man, he would do more than require me to take penance. He would kick me out, and I would deserve it. But I can't leave Eve

here without me.

What if Gabriel was right? What if Father Zachariah isn't who I think he is, what I think he is?

I swallow down those thoughts, and I pull the flogger out of the drawer. I toss it onto my bed and remove my shirt, closing the door to my bedroom before I circle back around to grab the handle of the flogger.

The leather is rough, obviously cheap, but my decision to duck into one of New Bristol's seedy sex shops had been on an impulse. I'd needed punishment then too, but I'd been too ashamed to tell Father Zachariah then, like right now.

I brace myself.

The first lash over my shoulder is far too light to do more than sting. The tails of the flogger caress my skin, but they don't break it.

It always takes me a few moments to find the courage to swing with real strength.

Two more light lashes. They're mere taps, nothing like what Father Zachariah metes out.

I close my eyes and strike much harder.

The tails land on my shoulder blade with enough force to make pain blossom. I stifle a groan and swing the flogger again, the leather hitting almost the exact same spot. This time, the stinging pain lingers, radiating out from that spot.

A bead of sweat trickles down my forehead.

I switch arms and hit myself again. The leather curls around my shoulder as it lands, and I open my mouth to breathe. I have to keep my voice down. I can't let anyone hear.

I swing again, and again, each lash harder than the last. Small groans escape my lips, and my chest grows slick with sweat.

My arms grow tired too, but I keep going, feverish with a need I don't know how to satisfy.

My cock is hard and throbbing.

I pause to press my hand against it through my trousers.

I remember how Gabriel had cupped me gently.

My little lamb , he'd whispered.

"Daddy," I say as I swing the flogger once more.

This is wrong.

This isn't what penance is meant to be.

But my body grows hotter and hotter with arousal as I keep whipping myself, and instead of God or Father Zachariah, I hear Gabriel egging me on, telling me what a good boy I am, what a perfect lamb I am.

I groan as the next lash comes down hard on my shoulder, and I realize that somewhere along the way, I've started to bleed. Maybe it's from opening up other wounds, or maybe it's from the cheap leather of this flogger cutting into my skin. I

don't know, and I don't care.

I keep going until my arm hurts too much to continue, then I let the flogger drop to the floor as I sink down to my knees.

I don't feel purified.

I feel more tainted than ever.

It doesn't stop me from reaching down into my pants and fondling myself beneath my clothes. I'm about to unfasten my pants when I hear the front door open and close, and I yank my hand back out like I've been caught doing something truly terrible.

I haven't.

I've only nearly been caught dealing with the aftermath of something that can't be forgiven.

I grab the flogger and shove it into the bottom drawer of my dresser, closing it right as the knock sounds on my door.

"Levi?" Eve calls out.

I grab my shirt, my back screaming as I pull it over my head. I know it won't be long before it becomes wet with my blood, but I have to try to get Eve to leave me alone so I can tend to my wounds in private.

I open the door to my room, wincing, but I paint a smile onto my lips as I look at her. "Hi," I say feebly, not knowing what else to say to my sister.

Eve looks at me with wide eyes. "Where have you been? What happened to you?"

She gets into my space and wraps her arms around me before I can react. I cry out when her hands land on my open wounds.

“Levi?” Eve recoils from me, looking down at her hands.

There’s a faint smudge of red on her fingers.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly.

I’m not.

I’m so far from fine.

“You’re bleeding,” she says, grabbing my shoulder and forcing me to turn. “Who did this to you? Did somebody attack you?”

I hiss in pain, shaking my head as she pulls my shirt up from the back. “No. No one attacked me.”

She wants an explanation. Maybe she even deserves one.

But I don’t know what to tell her.

Blood trickles down my back, no longer being soaked up by my shirt, and I grimace. She’s going to know that I did this to myself.

She’s going to want to know why.

“Levi!” Eve meets my gaze as I turn back around to face her, and the concern makes the guilt bubble under my skin.

“I’ve been worried sick about you. You were gone for two days, and Father Zachariah said there was an outsider who’d taken you...

I almost went out and walked the streets to find you.

We were going to call the police today!”

I swallow hard. Father Zachariah was going to call the police?

I shouldn’t have gone with Gabriel, not even for an afternoon, not even for a night.

Especially not for a night.

“I got lost,” I tell her. It’s not a lie, but it feels like one. “I spent the night under... Well, that doesn’t matter.” I try to smile. “I’m back now.”

“It doesn’t matter?” Eve repeats. “Of course it matters! You’re filthy and bloody and, and...”

Tainted .

“I’m going to shower,” I say, as though that’s going to make the situation any better. “Just please...” I can’t believe I’m about to ask this of her, but I can’t think of what else to say or do. “Please don’t tell Father Zachariah. I’ll talk to him later.”

After I come up with a plausible story.

When did I start lying so much, both to myself and to others?

Eve doesn’t say anything for a while, and I shift uncomfortably.

Finally, her lips part, and a simple, quiet, “Okay,” escapes.

I should be relieved, but the guilt continues to gnaw at me. “Thank you,” I say. I force a smile. “Give me ten minutes.”

I squeeze her shoulder on my way past her, grabbing clothes to put on after my shower.

Once inside the bathroom, I turn the water on and stare at myself in the mirror.

She’s right; I really am filthy. Spending the night under the bridge hadn’t been a good idea, but I’d been so afraid of getting even more lost in the dark that it had felt like the only thing to do.

It had allowed me to see the world differently, too, though now I’m not sure if that’s actually a good thing.

For a few minutes, I had walked among the people I’ve scorned for so long, and I feel more empathy for them than I thought possible.

I should’ve invited them back here, where Father Zachariah could help them.

Why hadn’t I?

I get under the cold water, the temperature feeling like a shock to my system, and I start to scrub myself clean. I’m careful with my back, but the water pounding down on it has me biting back a sound of pain.

My cock has gone flaccid, and I’m grateful for that, at least.

By the time I get out of the shower, my teeth are chattering from the cold water, and I

dry off thoroughly.

It leaves smears of blood on the towel, but there's nothing I can do about it by myself.

I leave my shirt off, only dressing from the waist down, then I toss the dirty clothes and towel into the hamper.

I open the door to the bathroom, only to freeze when I realize I can hear two voices.

Two.

And one of them belongs to Father Zachariah.

The betrayal that washes over me is acute, and I consider closing the door again and locking myself away. It's too late now, though; they've gone silent, and I grab my shirt and put it on despite the way it clings to my damp and bloody skin.

I step into the living room, avoiding looking at Eve. "Father Zachariah," I whisper.

"Levi," Father Zachariah says, and his voice is thick with disappointment. "Eve tells me you bathed in sin."

I don't look at her.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

I don't dare show the hurt and confusion and every other emotion that taunts me in the wake of what she's done.

"I'm sorry, Father Zachariah," I manage to get out around the lump in my throat. "I needed time to think."

"You should have come to me immediately." Father Zachariah glances at Eve. "Go visit Ruth, Eve. Levi and I need to have a private conversation."

Eve purses her lips, looking between us, then nods. "Yes, Father Zachariah." She gets up but pauses at the door. "I did this for your own good, Levi."

For my own good?

I stare at her as she leaves and quietly closes the door behind herself. Does she really think this was for my own good? How?

Why does she get to make that decision for me?

I turn my attention back to Father Zachariah, unfamiliar anger simmering beneath the surface. This was my confession to make, not hers.

A small voice in the back of my mind whispers that maybe, just maybe, I shouldn't have come back after all.

"You left with that man," Father Zachariah says, and what gentleness he had in his eyes before is gone now. "Where did you go? What did you do?"

I should tell him the truth.

He's the man who holds the keys to my faith, but that faith has been shaken.

I don't want to tell him anything.

I can't tell him the sins I actually committed. "I let myself be persuaded to doubt," I say quietly. "But then I walked the streets among the people. They need help, Father Zachariah. I spent the days in prayer, then returned home."

"Who needs help?" Father Zachariah asks, his brow creasing. "But if you spent your time in prayer, that's good. You'll still need to do penance, of course, to wash the filth of the city from your soul, but returning home was the right thing to do."

It's too soon to feel relieved. He believes me, and I wonder what other hooks the Devil has set into my soul to where I can lie so easily.

"The homeless, the sick, the sinful," I tell him hoarsely. "They doubt, and they have nothing."

Why hadn't I tried to talk them into returning here with me, to be a part of Father Zachariah's flock?

"Forget them," Father Zachariah says harshly. "If they truly believed, God would have provided for them. That they now suffer is divine punishment."

I stare at him, and it's hard to speak as I whisper, "'Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" The words are rough, difficult to get out. Who am I to use Jesus's teachings against his prophet?

"Don't quote scripture at me," Father Zachariah spits out. "You don't know the

meaning of the words. ‘ And I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity .’ Those are God’s words. The only thing you need to do is listen to me.”

God’s words or Jesus’s.

Punishment or mercy.

Empathy or damnation for the wicked.

I don’t know which path to follow.

“I do listen,” I protest.

That’s the problem. I listen, and I learn, and now I’m starting to see where one departs from the other. Scripture should not be used to counter scripture, should it?

Father Zachariah shakes his head. “You’re being impudent. Whatever you think you learned, forget it. I am the word of God.”

I’m not sure he is.

Maybe Gabriel’s claws have dug into me too deeply, making me doubt, making me question.

“Yes, Father Zachariah,” I whisper, bowing my head.

His eyes narrow at me. “You need penance to remind you of your place here.”

I just took penance.

I'm not sure my back can handle much more.

He's not going to accept that as an excuse, though, especially not after I had the audacity to quote scripture at him.

Maybe I don't belong here after all.

Maybe I really have lost my way.

Maybe I do belong with someone like Gabriel.

"Yes, Father Zachariah," I repeat.

He nods. "Good. Follow me."

I follow obediently, out my apartment door and down the hall.

But we don't stop at Apartment 302. Father Zachariah walks right past the door and toward the stairs.

My blood freezes in my veins.

Father Zachariah notices my hesitation. "Well? Don't dawdle."

I try to speak, but no words will form. I take a step forward, but it's like I'm trudging through quicksand. "Please, Father Zachariah," I say. I don't even know what I'm pleading for — or against.

"You need this," Father Zachariah says. He motions down the stairs. "A full day of prayer will cleanse you and remind you of your faith."

My mouth is dry, and while I try to wet my lips with my tongue, it does nothing. “Please,” I whimper. “I can... I can pray up here.”

I don’t want to go downstairs.

I don’t want to be plunged into darkness, where my prayers go from pleas for salvation to pleas to escape this.

I can’t escape the bitter irony that the answer to my prayers for help might have come in the form of an avenging angel.

An angel I ran away from instead of allowing to help me.

“You will pray where I tell you to pray,” Father Zachariah says sharply. “This back talk is exactly why you need to spend time alone with your prayers.”

“I need my copy of the Bible. I need to reread the verses,” I say, my voice wobbling. If I get to read, I can have the light. It might be sparse — flickering and threatening to die at any moment — but it would be something.

I need it.

Father Zachariah’s expression remains stern. “We’ll see.” He waits, staring, and I know what he wants me to do.

I clench my fists, and after another breath, I start down the stairs.

Down to the main floor, and I glance around helplessly, hoping for somebody to save me. But there’s nobody. None of the others even crack open their doors when we pass.

I stop short of the basement door.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, coming so very quickly, as I try to calm myself down. It's only a basement. There's nothing down there.

Nothing but darkness, nothing but silence, nothing but my own personal gateway to Hell.

I try to choke out another plea, but the words die in my throat as terror grips it and holds it tight. I can't go down there.

I can't .

Father Zachariah pushes the door open. "Go down, Levi," he orders sharply.

I whimper and shake my head, but that's a mistake.

Father Zachariah growls and grabs my arm, and he pulls me down the stairs with him. I almost trip, and a laugh bubbles up.

How ironic it would be if we both fell into Hell together.

When we reach the bottom, Father Zachariah pushes me toward the lone chair lying on its side by the boiler.

The lightbulb flickers above us, reminding me of how it had gone out two days ago. The long shadow of the chair stretches out, its spindly arms reaching into the depths of the darkness.

"Right the chair and kneel against it," Father Zachariah orders.

With hands that won't stop shaking, I pick the chair up, steadying it.

I slowly get to my knees in front of it, facing it, and I croak out, "My Bible? Please?"

I need the comfort of the familiar pages, the familiar verses. I need to remind myself of the benevolent as well as the opposite.

I need a reprieve from the fear.

"I'll send somebody to bring it later." Father Zachariah waits until I'm in position.

I watch as he takes my wrist and snaps a metal cuff around it, the kind police use on criminals. I flinch as it clicks into place, staring down at the cool metal in a daze. He snaps the other side around the wooden bar of the back of the chair.

When he reaches for my other hand, I pull it away automatically.

"Levi!" Father Zachariah barks. "Hand into position."

"Father Zachariah," I plead, "I don't need the... the cuffs."

"Considering you ran off? Yes, you do," Father Zachariah says. "You will stay here and pray, and remember that the only voice you need to listen to is mine."

I want to protest that I do listen to him — that that's part of the problem — but he's not listening to me .

With a choked sob, I extend my other hand to him, letting him secure my wrist against one of the wooden bars so I'm locked into that position.

I should be used to it by now.

It's far from the first time he's instructed me to kneel like this.

But it is the first time he's locked me into place.

"This is for your own protection," Father Zachariah says. He presses his hand against my wounded back, making me bite back a cry of pain, and leans down to kiss the top of my head. "You know that I love you, child, as I love all my flock."

He's said those words before, too.

I believed them, too.

But there's no love here.

"Yes, Father Zachariah," I whisper.

He pushes into my back, making me whimper in pain, before righting himself. "Pray for your soul, Levi. Pray that God cleanses you of the stain you brought upon yourself. And pray that He forgives you for all the transgressions, for all the sins you've partaken in of late."

Tears roll down my cheeks.

Father Zachariah walks away, back toward the stairs.

Every step creaks as he makes his way back up.

And when he's at the top, he flips the light switch.

I'm plunged into darkness as the door closes and the last sliver of light goes with it.

Then I'm alone.

No one is coming to save me — not God, not the Devil, not an avenging angel.

My breathing comes in short gasps, and I think I'm going to hyperventilate if I don't calm down soon. I don't think I can, though. I don't think I can do anything but panic as I kneel here in the dark, in the pit of Hell where even angels would be afraid.

If they'd be frightened, what hope is there for me?

I pray anyway.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GAbriEL

Dom stares at me through the bars of the jail cell. Anybody else would be intimidated, but a steely gaze isn't going to scare me.

I sit up straighter on the uncomfortable cot and stare right back.

"I should let you spend another day in here," Dom says with a shake of his head.

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

"My boy was walking all alone on the bridge," I say calmly.

I have to stay calm, because if I let Dom or anyone else know how murderous I'm feeling, I won't get out of here easily. They've already kept me locked up overnight. The police department has even denied me a phone call to my lawyer.

I'll sue the department, of course, but my real revenge will come with more agony. I'd spent my night daydreaming about how I'd rend the flesh from all their bones, listening to their screams and begging.

O'Connor will get the worst of it. I'd imagined him pleading for forgiveness. I'll cut his tongue out first so he can only scream incoherently, then pluck out his eyes one by one.

Levi will cling to my side and sigh happily at the beautiful carnage.

"Your boy..." Dom lets out an exasperated sigh. "The one who voluntarily left your

condo? So you tracked him down. But he didn't stick around."

"He was scared. The traffic cop intimidated him," I say, clenching my fists. "I need to find him again. He's probably going back to the cult?"

"Cult?" Dom interrupts. "What are you talking about?"

"Zachariah Carpenter? Joshua Baker?" Impatience threatens to make me snap at him. "He's running a cult here. My boy is being tortured by that fucker. And since none of you are doing anything about it, I have to save him myself!"

My voice is ragged.

Loud.

I'm losing control.

Dom's lips thin in disapproval. "It's not that we're doing nothing. And you aren't law enforcement, Gabe. If you're really concerned, I'll send somebody to the address to check it out."

"So you can do nothing again?" I demand. "Just let me pay my bail, Dom. I'll throw in extra for you if you get me out right now. I'm the only one who can save Levi."

"Just for that, I'm tempted to let you rot even longer," Dom grouses. "The shock I felt when I heard you'd been arrested yesterday, Jesus."

Did he know about this yesterday? Was he letting me sit here to teach me a lesson? I glare at him, and Dom recoils and takes a step back.

"If you're the reason my lamb suffers for even one extra minute—" I threaten. "I

won't forgive you."

Dom shakes his head. "Christ. You know, people at the club warn others about you sometimes. I always thought they misunderstood you, but I'm starting to think they were right.

" He holds up a set of keys. "I'm going to release you.

Go pay your fucking fine, and be damn glad the department isn't actually going to press those traffic obstruction charges.

And remember that you've got a shit-ton of money, but the NBPD isn't without power. "

I get up and cross the few steps to the cell gate. I wait impatiently while Dom unlocks the door and opens it up.

I try to walk past Dom, but he grabs my arm. "Hey. I'm doing this for you as a friend. But you're not convincing me that it's a good idea."

The only thing stopping me from punching him is the knowledge that Levi is in trouble. I know he is. A man like Zachariah Carpenter won't let a beautiful lamb like Levi get away with wandering away from the flock.

"I'm just worried," I say, forcing my voice to be mild. "He's being taken advantage of."

Dom lets go of me and shakes his head again. "Fine. But if the boy rejects you, let it go. I'll investigate that guy, but we gotta do it through legal channels."

"Okay. Thank you." The words feel bitter on my tongue, but it wouldn't be smart to

piss off my contact in the force.

I hurry to the front desk to pay whatever stupid fine they want. The clerk seems to think it's a large number, but it's barely a fraction of what I make in a month.

Only once I've paid does she hand me my phone. I have multiple missed calls and texts from work, and I send a text explaining that a family emergency came up as I walk out of the building.

My car is in an impound lot somewhere, and there's no time to go pick it up. I hail a cab and have the driver drop me off four blocks away from the apartment.

Closer would be better, but depending on what I end up doing, I want fewer witnesses regarding my whereabouts.

The apartment building is still dirty and innocuous. The door is locked, but it's easy enough to use the key I'd cloned to get inside. I take the stairs up two at a time to the third floor and pound on Levi's door.

"Levi! Open up!" I shout, not caring who might hear.

I keep pounding on the door until, finally, it opens a crack. The chain is on the door, and a petite woman peeks out. Levi's sister.

"Who are you?" she hisses. "Go away. This place isn't for you."

"I want to see Levi," I say, pushing against the door. "Tell me where he is."

She shakes her head. "No. If you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police."

That makes me grin. "Yeah? With your cell phone? Or the landline you don't have?"

Her eyes widen, and she tries to slam the door shut but I get my foot between the door and the frame.

“Tell me where your brother is right now, or so help me, the entire building is going down,” I threaten. “I’ll send you all to the depths of Hell, and the only company you’ll have is the screams of the fallen souls you condemn.”

The sister’s lip wiggles, and she shakes her head. “I don’t... He’s probably still taking penance.”

Penance .

My lip curls in disgust. “With Zachariah?” I look over my shoulder toward Apartment 302.

“No. In the... in the dark room,” she says softly. “But God’s light will keep him safe from all demons. Including you .”

That small hint of defiance makes me laugh. “I’m the one who’s going to save him from all of you.”

The dark room, though.

I remember Levi’s panic attack, the one that led me to taking him home with me.

I go back to the stairs and rush down, not caring that the sister will go tattle on Zachariah about all of this. Let him try to stop me. I’ll claim it was self-defense.

I stop short at the basement door.

It’s locked with a heavy padlock to prevent anyone from opening it.

Rage has me pounding on the door, despite how useless the action is.

Fuck.

“I’m coming, Levi,” I shout, pulling out my wallet so I can get the lockpicks I have hidden inside.

Everybody thinks padlocks are near impassible, but the truth is, there is no unpickable lock. This one takes me less than five minutes to undo. I hear footsteps upstairs, but nobody comes down to confront me.

I toss the unlocked padlock to the side and open the door, hitting the light switch for the flimsy bulb.

“Levi!” I shout as I barrel down the stairs.

The dank stench is still heavy in the air, and as I get to the base of the stairs, I recognize another acrid smell.

My boy has pissed himself.

He lifts his head, and I see the tracks of tears on his only half-present expression.

He looks like he’s been through hell.

I approach him, bending down to scoop him into my arms, only to notice that he’s cuffed to the chair.

I let out a frustrated growl and grip the top of the chair. “Keep still,” I say.

Levi says nothing.

I kick the bar holding the cuffs as hard as I can. Two kicks, and it snaps. The handcuffs slide free.

“My boy,” I whisper, taking Levi’s hands and kissing them both gently. “I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

Levi blinks blearily up at me, and the usual fire in his eyes is missing. He looks lost, distant, but he whispers, “You came. To my God, I called; my cry came to his ears. ” He lets out a choked laugh. “Maybe you really are an angel in disguise.”

“Oh, my lamb,” I say, and the rage I feel for Zachariah boils over. It’s raging hot, a hatred in my veins that I haven’t felt this strongly in a long time.

Not since I left the people who called themselves my family.

I put my arms around his body and lift him up bridal style. Levi clings to me, burying his head against my shoulder.

“I’m filthy,” he says through soft sobs.

It’s true. His jeans are damp, and they smell, but I don’t give a fuck. I kiss the side of his head.

“We’ll get you cleaned up,” I say gently. “You’re my boy, Levi. I’ll take good care of you.”

“Is this what it means for you to be my Daddy?” he asks, sniffing. I can see him trying to gather himself — trying, and failing, and he buries his face against my chest.

“Yes,” I say. “A Daddy cares for his boy. He makes sure he gets everything he needs. He... he loves him and cherishes him.”

Can a person like me feel love?

I don't know, but I do know that I will never, ever let him out of my sight again.

I carry Levi up the stairs, each step creaking under our weight. Levi trembles in my arms and clings even tighter to me.

Zachariah Carpenter and Levi's sister are both standing at the top of the stairs.

"Let go of him, now," Zachariah says.

I look from him to the sister. Her face is pale, her eyes wide.

"I will not allow you to abuse him any longer," I say harshly. "You're going down, Zachariah, Joshua, whatever name you go by. I will not allow your wicked deeds to go unpunished."

Levi doesn't look at him. His fingers tighten on my shirt as he clings to me. He's turned to me for salvation, for hope, and the anger within me flares as I stare at the con man who's brought such pain to my little lamb.

"Levi," the sister says. "That man is the Devil. Get away from him. Come back to us."

I bare my teeth at her. "The Devil? The Devil is your precious Zachariah. 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves .'"

"He's—" Levi begins, but one glance at Zachariah's furious face halts his words in their tracks. His trembling only gets worse.

“Levi is mine,” I say to them. “You can no longer beat him down. You cannot break his beautiful soul. And mark my words, Joshua. When I’m through with you, you will wish it had been God’s vengeance rained down upon you.”

Levi is whispering something, but I can’t make out the words beyond a plea for mercy .

Zachariah has done nothing to deserve mercy. Not even my lamb can convince me to spare this man’s life.

“Get out of here,” Zachariah spits. “And Levi? Know that you aren’t welcome here. We cast you out. To Hell with you.”

The sister turns to stare at Zachariah in shock. “What? No! Levi isn’t?—”

I ignore them and walk out of the building. Their petty squabbling means nothing to me.

The important part is Levi.

I kiss the side of his head again. “Can you stand, my lamb? I need to call a cab for us.”

“I’m... I’m filthy. I need...” He blinks several times, but it doesn’t stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks. “Eve? Eve, come with us,” he pleads, squirming in my arms.

I set him down, and while he leans heavily against me, he stays upright. He needs water, and food, and the sort of care this con man can never provide for my boy.

I look back at the apartment building door. Zachariah and Eve are still arguing on the

other side of the glass door.

Eve looks at us. She sees Levi reaching out for her, but instead of coming out to meet us, she averts her gaze and goes to the stairs.

“Eve!” Levi cries out. He takes a step toward the building, but I take his arm firmly in my hand.

“You need to be taken care of,” I say gently. “Eve has made her choice. She could have pulled you out of that Hell at any time, but she chose not to.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s doing,” Levi says desperately. “She doesn’t understand.”

But my lamb finally does.

I use the rideshare app to call a car, and I hold Levi close to me while he sobs against my chest.

“It’s all right, little lamb. I’ve got you,” I say, kissing the top of his head.

His shirt feels sticky, and I recognize the scent of blood underneath the urine. More penance.

“I’ll take such good care of you,” I promise.

“But Eve,” he whispers. He doesn’t fight me, though, instead clinging tightly to me. “She can’t stay there. I have to take care of her.”

“We’ll come back for her,” I lie smoothly. “But it’s like airplane oxygen masks. You need to save yourself first before you can save others.”

I don't think he believes me, not really, but he nods right as the black sedan pulls up in front of us.

I lead him to the car, opening the back door for him. With one last glance behind him at the building, he lets me help him inside.

"Gabriel?" the driver asks.

I nod and follow Levi inside.

The driver inhales sharply. "Uh, what the fuck is that smell?"

Levi recoils and tries to get out again, but I block his path.

"There's a two-hundred-dollar tip in it for you if you drive us to where we need to go without any further commentary," I say to the driver.

The driver glances at me with a grimace, but he nods.

"Gabriel," Levi whispers, and the shame in his expression makes me want to turn around and rip Zachariah limb from limb for making him look so despondent. "Maybe I should?—"

Whatever he's about to say about going back, I don't want to hear it. I kiss him instead, hard and fierce. "No, you shouldn't," I tell him. "I'm going to take care of you now."

"But I have nothing," he says, swallowing hard. "Not even..." His voice catches on a sob. "Not even clean clothes."

"I have clothes. You'll never have to want for anything ever again." I pull him

against me, giving him the warmth I know he needs.

The warmth I need.

My desire to violently tear Zachariah apart is still there, still strong, but for once, another emotion supersedes the violence.

The desire to take care of somebody.

Levi will always come first.

But I know my lamb.

He wants the same things I do.

I kiss his lips gently and smile at him. "I'm going to make you so happy, Levi."

He exhales slowly, but he nods. "I know, Daddy."

My smile widens. "My beautiful lamb."

I will give him the world.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

The cat doesn't care what I smell like. He rubs against my filthy jeans and mrows at us when we walk past him without stopping to pet.

"Later, Ichabod," Gabriel says, then stops. He looks at the empty food bowl and curses. "You didn't get food last night. Shit. And you must be starving too, Levi."

I am, but I don't want to be a bother. I'm more interested in getting clean, too, and in getting water. I'm parched, and I'm not sure I could keep food down even if I wanted to eat.

"Can I have a shower first?" I ask.

I pissed myself like a child, and the constant reminder of it is making me more and more ashamed.

"Yes," Gabriel says immediately. "Ichabod can wait another few minutes." He takes my hand again, completely ignoring the way the cuff dangles from my wrist. "A nice hot shower."

I look up at him, nodding. My cheeks are still burning, and the constant pressure on my wrists from the cuffs only reminds me over and over again of their presence, of how they got there, of what had happened leading up to it.

I should never have left Gabriel's. I should've stayed where someone wanted to take care of me.

I don't know what Father Zachariah wanted from me. He says he wanted to save my soul, but I don't believe him. Not anymore.

Gabriel tugs at my hand, and I realize he's been trying to get my attention. He leads me through his bedroom to the bathroom, turning the shower on.

"Is there a way to get these off?" I ask, lifting my hand.

I don't know how much longer I can stand them.

"Yes. These are flimsy," Gabriel says. He pulls something out of his pocket, a long pin of some sort, and after a few seconds of fumbling with the cuff, he has it unlocked.

That's all it took to free me.

More tears threaten to spill down my cheeks.

Gabriel lifts my other hand to undo that cuff too.

I sniffle and inhale quickly to stop myself from crying pathetically. "How... how do you know how to do that?"

He kisses the reddened skin of my wrist. "I thought it would be a good idea to learn. So I did. I'll teach you, too."

"I'd like that," I say even though it's not something I should want to learn. But I want to learn this.

I want to learn everything he wants to teach me.

I shed the clothes I'm wearing, fresh waves of shame washing over me as the soiled pants and underwear fall heavily to the floor, but there's no judgement in his expression as he helps me out of my shirt.

I turn to get into the shower, and Gabriel looks at me with more warmth and desire in his eyes than I thought possible.

Desire, despite the fact that I'm filthy and gross.

"I'm going to feed Ichabod, and then I'll be back," Gabriel says. "Just get yourself warmed up, little lamb. I'll wash you and take care of you."

He lingers in the doorway of the bathroom for a few moments before jogging out.

I hiss in a breath as the hot water pummels my injured back, but I'm used to this. I'm used to worse, really, and this is nothing in comparison to some of the other penance I've taken.

It feels like it is despite it all.

I start to scrub myself clean, not wanting to wait for Gabriel to return. The need to get clean is nearly overwhelming.

It doesn't take long for Gabriel to return. He immediately sheds his clothing, and I carefully keep my eyes locked on the tiles of the shower floor so I don't look at his naked body.

Even though he wants me to look, surely.

He steps into the shower with me, closing the glass door. The stall is large enough that the two of us fit easily.

Has he had other men in here, or am I the first?

“Levi. Here, let me get your... back.” Gabriel hisses sharply when he sees the state of my back. “He did this to you? Then left you there, in the dark?”

I whimper at the sharp tone and quickly shake my head. “N-no. I did it to myself. Penance,” I whisper.

For what I’d done with him.

For sleeping with a man I’ve been so sure is the Devil but has instead turned out to be my savior.

I’m sure of that now. I’ve been going back and forth about whether he’s the Devil or an angel, but I know now what he really is.

My protector.

“To yourself?” Gabriel places his hands on my shoulders, and I shudder when I feel his lips on the back of my neck. “Do you crave it?” he asks. “The pain? Because I can give you pain, Levi. But when I give it to you, it won’t cut you up. It will be beautiful, and it will set you free.”

I think of the spanking, of the way I’d felt when it had been over. It had been too pleasurable to feel like penance. It had been beautiful.

“I want it. I need it,” I tell him, uttering words I’ve never dared even think, let alone say aloud.

I need you .

Gabriel groans and forces me to turn around, pressing his lips against mine in a harsh, rough kiss. I wrap my arms around his back and lean into it, ignoring the pain that flares up as the warm water pelts onto my wounds.

“You need to heal first,” Gabriel says against my lips. “But I’ll give you everything you crave, boy. That’s my promise to you.”

“And what about you?” I ask, kissing him lightly, carefully. “What can I give you , Daddy?”

I have nothing. Nothing of my own, nothing to offer.

Nothing at all.

Gabriel smiles at me, and my breath catches.

Not the Devil at all, but truly an angel.

“Let me care for you,” he says gently. “That’s enough. Be my boy, and let me teach you everything.”

“What will you teach me?” I ask. There’s so much I want to know, so much I want to learn.

There’s so much, too, that I want to forget.

“Whatever you want to know.” Gabriel kisses my jaw, then reaches for the washcloth and soap.

I watch as he lathers up the cloth, and I shiver when he begins running it up and down my body.

I want to protest that I've already washed myself, but I remember what he said.

He wants to take care of me.

I want to be taken care of.

What's wrong with this, then? Why would God allow us to meet, if not so that we can give each other what we need?

I close my eyes, letting myself luxuriate in the feeling of being taken care of. This isn't like when Eve tends to my wounds. This goes beyond that, intimate in a way I've only felt with Gabriel, and when I open my eyes, he's watching me.

I exhale slowly. I have to worry about this — worry about myself — and for the first time in so many years, I realize that what I want is within reach. It isn't hidden beneath scripture that's meant to terrify. It's right in front of me.

"My beautiful lamb," Gabriel whispers as he scrubs my cock. He's gentle, and the washcloth is soft, and the care he takes along with the stimulation has me groaning.

Small little shocks of pleasure travel up my spine, and I instinctively thrust into his hand.

He's simply washing the urine away, I tell myself, but when I meet Gabriel's eyes, it's clear he knows exactly what he's doing.

My face flares up with embarrassment despite myself.

"Do you want the pleasure, Levi?" Gabriel asks softly.

I shiver at both his tone and the implications of his words. I want the pleasure. Surely

I've repented enough, if only to commit the same sins again.

"Yes," I whisper, the word barely audible over the sound of the shower. My back aches, and it's an exquisite counterpoint to the pleasure of his hand so close to my cock.

Gabriel drops the cloth and strokes my cock with his bare hand. The soap makes it slick, and he keeps his touches light.

I groan. "Do it properly?"

He smiles and kisses my cheek. "Do it properly... what?"

I don't understand what he means at first. His gaze is expectant, and I try to figure out what's missing.

When I do, my cheeks get even hotter. "Do it properly... Daddy. Please."

Gabriel beams at me and tightens his hold on my cock. "What a lovely lamb you are. So good for Daddy."

I thrust into his hand again, trying to feel more of that pleasure. He lets me slowly fuck into his hand, but it's not what I really want. I don't know how to ask for it, though, to get more. "Don't... Don't you want more, too?" I finally ask.

"All I want is to make you feel good," Gabriel says, despite his own cock already standing at attention. He leans in to kiss me again while continuing to stroke me.

"I do feel good," I say against his lips. I want something different, something more, but I don't know how to ask for it. I reach down, grasping his cock in my hand, and squeeze it lightly.

I'm blushing again, embarrassed about how inexperienced I am. Even last time I'd only briefly touched him to get him slicked up for... for... for penetrating me, for sodomizing me.

But it had felt so good.

Gabriel groans and covers my hand with his, egging me on. "Just like that, little lamb."

I nod, biting my bottom lip. I'm more concerned with his pleasure than my own. As good as it feels, I want him to feel the same way I feel right now.

I want to thank him for rescuing me.

Even though my back and knees ache and exhaustion threatens to settle in, I want this.

I need this.

I need him.

I need my Daddy.

I start to stroke him faster, hand encircling his hard cock, and I'm rewarded with another groan from him. I kiss him again, emboldened by the sounds he's making.

"So perfect, my lamb," Gabriel murmurs, kissing me harder and guiding my hand. He squeezes, and I tighten my grasp. The head of his cock peeks out from my fist, glistening and leaking .

Fascinated, I rub my thumb over the slit and smear the seed. Gabriel groans louder,

thrusting into my hand.

I could make him come. It would be in my power to do it.

It feels strange, that I'm thinking of it as power , but it is a power of a sort.

Giving my Daddy pleasure.

I renew my movements, and I feel it every time his cock twitches. I look up at him, hoping to see him in the throes of passion.

Gabriel's eyes are on me, full of something unfamiliar.

Not just desire, not something simple and carnal.

It goes beyond that, into something I lack the words to describe.

Before I can determine it, he groans once more, and this time, he spills all over my hand. I watch in fascination as it coats my hand before swirling down into the drain.

His face is rapturous, like he's seen something holy.

Like we've just done something holy together.

"My beautiful boy," Gabriel says before he kisses me again.

I groan against his lips, pressing my torso against his and ignoring the twinge of pain in my back. My cock drags against his thigh, and I automatically thrust against him for more friction.

As soon as I realize what I'm doing, I force myself to stop, the shame and

embarrassment flooding my veins... but at the same time, I know Gabriel isn't judging me.

He wants all of this as much as I do.

Gabriel breaks our kiss and nuzzles my temple.

"The day I met you, I knew you were special," he says.

I want to protest that I'm not, but before I can, Gabriel does something unbelievable.

He lowers himself to his knees in front of me. I watch, uncomprehending, as he leans forward and presses his lips to the top of my foot.

"The day I met you, maybe I did see God," Gabriel whispers.

My mouth is dry, and I lick my lips, trying to gather myself. This feels so right, like it couldn't possibly be anything but perfect.

I feel free.

I reach down, tentatively running my fingers through his wet hair. "And I met my savior," I say hoarsely. "I prayed, and you came for me."

Gabriel kisses my other foot, then begins kissing up my leg. He nuzzles my cock, giving it a teasing lick along the shaft, and I shudder.

"My perfect little lamb," he says as he kisses the head of my cock.

It's even more intense this time than the last as he slowly sucks it inside his mouth, and I have to grab for the wall to keep myself steady. I watch him as he takes me

deeper and deeper, as he swallows me down to the root and makes me cry out in pleasure.

“Daddy,” I whisper.

I don’t need a Father. I never have.

I’ve always needed a Daddy.

Gabriel places his hands on my hips to keep me in place as he continues to suck me. I watch in fascination, with lust , as my cock disappears into his mouth. When our eyes meet, he winks at me, and that makes laughter bubble out.

It feels so good.

It feels so right .

And the guilt that had been whirling around inside me? It’s gone, washed down the drain with all the filth that had been clinging to me.

All that is left is Gabriel, guiding me, teaching me.

Showing me that pleasure isn’t the fruit of sin.

I tilt my head back as I get closer and closer to the edge, soft keening sounds escaping me, and he lightly runs his teeth along my cock.

The taste of pain is enough to send me over, and I cry out as I jerk and spill into his mouth.

He doesn’t back off, drinking down every drop of my release, and even when I’m so

oversensitive it aches, he keeps licking and sucking.

“Wait,” I croak out. “It’s so... It’s too...”

Gabriel pulls away and kisses my softening cock. “I’ll take every last drop of you. It’s all mine.”

I shiver. “Yours,” I agree, my bottom teeth dragging against my lip. What else belongs to him?

Do I belong to him?

I want to.

I want somebody, finally, to care about me .

And Gabriel always shows up right when I need him—even when I didn’t know I needed him.

I start to bend down, my knees aching, but Gabriel stops me.

“Shh, little lamb. Let’s finish washing up. Then I’ll bandage you and take care of you.”

Tears prickle at the corners of my eyes. Even Eve never stopped me from doing things after I’d taken penance.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “For coming for me. For taking care of me. For saving me.”

Gabriel stands and kisses the top of my head. “Anything for you, my lamb.”

I hug him fiercely, not wanting to let go.

In the wake of my climax, I feel sated. Nothing feels important except this.

Except him.

Because right now? He truly is everything.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GABrIEL

When I get home from work, my lamb is sitting on the couch, eating yogurt and watching TV. Ichabod has curled up on his side, enjoying the occasional pets.

I take my suit jacket off and lay it on the kitchen table, along with my tie and briefcase.

“What are you watching?” I ask as I walk over.

Levi startles at my question, sitting up and scaring Ichabod off the couch. “Oh. Um. A sermon. I didn’t know pastors had TV channels.”

I didn’t know my TV package came with a Bible channel, but I shouldn’t be surprised. I sit down next to Levi and stretch my arm out. He immediately fits himself against me, snuggling close.

“How was work?” Levi asks. “Did they get mad at you for missing so many days?”

I’d taken five days off in total, and I’d heard a lot of complaining from the people who had to cover for me. A few clients had sent angry emails too, demanding to know where I was and threatening to take their business to somebody else.

I have never cared less about their opinions.

“It was fine,” I say to Levi. “A few ruffled feathers, but nothing more.” I give him a quick kiss, then ask, “How is your back?”

“Better,” he reassures me. “I barely even feel it.”

I give him a stern look. “Is that the truth? Don’t strain yourself before you’re fully healed, or you’ll get...”

Even more scars.

His back will never be smooth and unblemished.

The simmering hatred for Zachariah Carpenter bubbles up again, familiar and almost comforting.

“I did it to myself,” he says.

That doesn’t help.

Levi must realize that from my expression, and he nibbles on his bottom lip. “It’s really okay, Daddy,” he says.

“It isn’t,” I argue. “Either way, you need to heal.”

I turn my attention to the TV, and my lip curls in disgust as the televangelist goes on about the sins of the modern world and God’s righteous fury.

“Do you think he’s wrong?” Levi asks after several moments of listening to his rant. “I’m not sure what I believe anymore.”

“I think if he truly wanted to help people, he wouldn’t be taking money from them,” I say, not bothering to hide my disdain. “Men and women like him, they preach loudly, demand tithes, and then live in their luxury mansions while the people who need them most starve and suffer.”

Levi exhales slowly. “Father Zachariah lives like we do,” he says quietly. “He makes sure we all have food and necessities, and he doesn’t take more than his fair share.” He pauses, then adds uncertainly, “At least, I don’t think so. He always seems to live simply.”

I snort in disbelief. “He owns the entire building. That’s more money than most people have. And the watch he wears is worth several thousand dollars.”

Levi blinks at me. “Why would he need a watch that expensive?” His eyes narrow at me. “You thought I did. The one you bought me wasn’t cheap either.”

I smile at him. “I want to give you nice things. You deserve them.” I lean in to kiss him briefly. “I don’t care about spending money for luxuries. I only care when people like him pretend to be righteous while stealing from their very flock.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” he asks abruptly. “For believing him, I mean.”

I shake my head. “No. Men like Zachariah, men like...” I bite my lip and say, “like the one on TV, they take advantage of those who are better than them.”

Levi scoffs. “I’m not better than he is.”

I touch his chin, tilting his head so he has no choice but to meet my eyes. “But you are, little lamb.”

He smiles, but I can tell it’s forced. “How do you know so much about these things? You know as much as I do.”

My breath hitches, and I want to deflect, I want to hide, but who, if not my lamb, deserves to hear the truth?

“My parents,” I say quietly. “They preached, like that man on TV is preaching. They spoke the words from the Bible and made me perform with them in front of crowds. I had to pretend I was sick or injured, then become miraculously cured during their little plays in front of hundreds of people.”

“But didn’t people catch on?” he asks, frowning. “If you pretended to be sick again and again?”

“We took turns, my brother and me. My mother would dye our hair or make us wear wigs. A few times, she had me dress up as a little girl.” I clench my fists. “And when we weren’t touring, we were forced to memorize scripture. If we did it wrong...” I look down at my hands.

There’s a faint scar near the lower knuckles from where the ruler had cut into me harder than usual.

“There were punishments,” I say. “But none as severe as what Zachariah did to you.”

Levi averts his eyes. “It was nothing more than I deserved,” he says.

“You did not deserve it!” I shout vehemently. “The only people who deserve punishment are those who would hurt the innocent!”

He jumps, his eyes going wide. “Gabriel—” he begins, only to cut himself off. He shakes his head, withdrawing from me a few inches. “You don’t understand. If I didn’t deserve it, if it was all for nothing, I...” He falters again. “I need to believe that I deserved it.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You were tortured and hurt because of that man’s sadism. He took pleasure in hurting you. I know that much.”

Because I know what it feels like, to see another person suffering and get off on it.

The darkness inside of me that has dogged my steps since childhood.

The only way I can control it is to direct where it goes.

I won't hurt an innocent person like Levi.

But Zachariah Carpenter is far from innocent.

"Then that makes me weak," Levi replies quietly. "That makes me stupid. I should've seen it. I should've taken Eve and left. But I didn't have anywhere to go. I didn't have anyone to turn to." He meets my eyes, though there are tears welling up in his. "Until you."

The mention of his sister has me seething again, but I know better than to suggest she is no better than Zachariah.

She was the one who'd told Zachariah about Levi's transgressions, though.

She was the one who stood there and demanded he stay with the man who had tortured him.

When Levi told me how afraid he was of the dark, I'd gone out to buy nightlights for every single outlet in my condo. I would never force him to stay scared and hurt.

Levi needs comfort and nurturing.

"I will always be there for you," I promise. "Your sister has made her choice, though. We can't save everyone."

No, I never save anyone.

I only avenge them after they've been hurt.

Levi is the first I've saved.

"If he's so terrible, and what he's doing is so terrible, why can't we help them?" Levi asks. "You..." His voice falters again. "You've punished bad people. If he's a bad person, why does he get to act free of consequences?"

Now I smile at him. "Oh, my lamb. I was never going to let him go unpunished." I cup his chin in my hands and kiss him gently. "But caring for you will always come first."

His expression is troubled as he searches my gaze. "What are you going to do to him?"

Carve him up.

Pull out his insides.

Make him scream and beg.

"Whatever he deserves," I say, because I don't want to scare my lamb. "He will never hurt anyone ever again."

"He used to hurt our mom," Levi says abruptly. "She left. She was there one night, then the next morning, we woke up, and she was gone."

It's the first piece of information about him that he's given me.

“Your mother? Were you born into the cult?” But as soon as I ask, I know it doesn’t make sense. Zachariah was operating out of Calamity City fifteen years ago, and he’d been in jail for two years after that. Levi is young, but he isn’t that young.

“Cult,” Levi repeats. “It’s not a—” But he knows better.

He has to, because he cuts himself off again.

“No. It was like eight years ago. We weren’t doing so great.

We didn’t eat half the time. Mom couldn’t get a job, not with the two of us.

And one day, there he was, and she said it was divine intervention.

We moved in, and she eventually became one of his wives. ”

I wait for him to continue, and he manages a tight smile.

“She hated it,” he admits. “She regretted it. She tried not to show it, but she was chafing.” He shrugs, but the gesture is far from casual. “I guess she couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“So she abandoned you?” I ask. “She left you and your sister with that man who continued to abuse you?”

“It wasn’t abuse!” he bursts out fiercely. “She thought it was best for us, or she wouldn’t have left us there!”

“No!” I grip his arms. “Your mother brought you into that cult, then when it becomes too much for her, she leaves? She knew what he was doing, and she didn’t care enough to take you with her!”

He struggles against me, but I don't release him. "What was she supposed to do with us? She already could barely take care of herself. She thought she was doing the right thing."

Levi is lying to himself.

Over and over, he lies to protect those who have hurt him.

It makes me want to destroy them even more.

"How old were you when she left?" I ask. My fingers dig into his flesh.

He squirms. "You're hurting me."

I force myself to release him. He immediately slides away from me, leaving a large, empty space between us on the couch.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But how old were you?"

At first, I don't think he's going to answer. The silence stretches out between us like a vast chasm.

"Sixteen," he finally says, and while he's trying to smile, he fails. "Eve was fourteen."

Far too young to be left with a man like Zachariah Carpenter.

"If she'd taken you with her, you could have gotten a job," I point out in a soft voice. "It would have been hard, but you weren't helpless anymore. Between the two—three of you, it would have been possible."

“She thought we were safe, I guess,” Levi says, but he sounds less convinced. More uncertain. Before I can speak, he quietly goes on, “But I guess she should’ve known that we weren’t if she didn’t feel like she was.”

“Zachariah probably went harder on both of you after she left,” I say. “To punish you for your mother’s crime.”

Levi’s expression goes blank. “He never touches Eve,” he says.

I frown. “Never?”

“No. Because she’s... she’s going to be his wife.” Levi swallows hard. “He always praises her piety.”

I stare at him, and I say, “So first he fucked your mother, and now he’s going for your sister? A woman who must be less than half his age?”

Levi’s expression stays neutral. “It’s an honor.” I’m about to lose my temper when he adds, “Or maybe it isn’t. I don’t know, Gabriel. Daddy. It’s what she wants.”

Maybe it’s what she deserves, after how she turned on Levi.

I turn my attention back to the TV. “Then we can leave it at that.”

Levi follows my gaze to the TV, where the pastor is continuing to rant. “But I don’t want to abandon her.” He swallows hard. “She doesn’t deserve to have that happen twice.”

“Will she want to leave?” I ask seriously. “She seemed even more dedicated than you.”

“I’ll have to convince her,” he says. “I don’t know how. But she’ll have to see the truth.” He looks at me, then scoots closer to me again. “Do you think I can?”

I open my arms for him, and he seems relieved by the gesture. He slides into the space and rests his head against my chest.

I’m sure the only times he’s had disagreements with others, they always ended badly for him.

“I’ll help you, if that’s what you want,” I say, although I would rather throw Eve into a pit and keep Levi entirely to myself.

Part of me is aware that Eve is as much a victim as Levi, but my emotions don’t care. She hurt Levi, and I want to destroy her for it.

There’s no need to scare Levi with the depths of my emotions.

I kiss his cheek. “If we need to tear Eve out of there kicking and screaming, we will.”

Levi nods. “I’ll get her to listen,” he promises. “But then... Where will she go? What will she do?” He bites his lip. “What am I going to do?”

“You’ll be with me,” I say earnestly. “And I can afford to get Eve her own apartment.”

I’ll get her a small one, far outside of the city, where there is no chance she can bother me and Levi.

“But what am I going to do?” he presses. “When you’re working, when you’re out with friends?”

Nothing. Stay safe here, in my condo, where none of the wretches of the world can touch him.

That attitude has gotten me in trouble before.

I smile as best I can. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” he says slowly. “I guess it’s time to figure that out, isn’t it?” He huffs out a small, self-deprecating laugh. “Something other than watching preachers on TV and reading the Bible.”

“I will support whatever you choose,” I say.

As long as I can keep watching him. As long as I always know where he is.

I’ll keep him safe.

And the first step to that is getting rid of Zachariah Carpenter.

“We can retrieve Eve tomorrow evening,” I say. “I just need to pick up a few supplies.”

Zachariah will not survive to the weekend.

Levi looks at me, his eyes searching mine, then he slowly nods.

He knows what’s coming, and he’s not trying to protect Zachariah.

Good.

I’ll make sure that con man never hurts him ever again.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

LEVI

It's late at night, with only a sliver of the moon visible. There are no stars in the sky, but there never are here in the city. The light pollution hides them.

Despite the late hour, there are still a few pedestrians on the streets. The people who live in this neighborhood aren't well off, and the only way to get around is by walking.

Gabriel had made us take the bus, pay in cash, and get dropped off two stops away from the apartment building. He'd also made me wear a large hoodie, so different from my usual button-up shirt. He's dressed down too, and he's wearing a green baseball cap with a logo on it.

"Keep your head down at all times," Gabriel says as we make our way to the apartment building.

Those don't sound like the words of a man with nothing to hide.

I thought we were coming here to get Eve, to convince her that Father Zachariah doesn't mean the best for her, but I'm suddenly not so convinced that's all Gabriel has in mind.

"Daddy," I whisper, touching his arm as uncertainty begins to flood me. "She's going to listen. We don't need to..."

Need to what? Act as though we're going to kidnap her?

“We don’t need to give anyone extra ammunition. Showing up on the wrong camera would cause problems for us.”

Gabriel stops in front of the apartment building and tries the door. It’s locked, of course, but instead of turning away, Gabriel pulls a set of thin rods out of his wallet and works at the keyhole. This must be how he’d gotten inside all those past times.

I watch him, my mouth going dry. This all feels wrong.

But I need to save Eve, and if that means doing a few things that seem dodgy, I’ll do it. I square my shoulders, determined to get her out of this by whatever means necessary.

Gabriel pushes the door open. “We’ll go straight to her. If you can’t convince her...” He hefts up his backpack. It’s small and black, hard to see against his dark sweater.

I know there’s rope inside. I saw him putting the rope in there.

It also has a blindfold and cuffs and other things I don’t want to think about. We aren’t going to kidnap Eve that violently.

The first-floor landing is almost completely dark, except for a few small lights illuminating the floor. I instinctively go for the mailboxes but stop myself when I remember I don’t have my house keys on me, and that I’m not here for mail.

I look up the stairs, and everything seems so quiet . Everybody is asleep.

I’ve never been out here this late at night. I should be in my apartment too.

I should be safe from the dark instead of venturing into it.

“Avoid the third step there,” Gabriel says. “It creaks loudly. We don’t want to alert anyone.”

How does he know that? How often has he been here, to know about the creaky step?

I nod.

My gaze flicks in the direction of the basement door, and I press closer to Gabriel. I don’t want to think about that room, about what lies beyond. We’re here to talk to Eve and get her out. Nothing else matters.

Not even the dark and the way it makes my skin crawl, the way it threatens to make me panic as the fear claws at my insides.

I clutch the flashlight in my hands. Gabriel had told me not to use it unless I had to, and I’m just this shy of having to. “Daddy,” I whimper, my voice wobbling. “I need...”

Gabriel stops moving and immediately pulls me into his arms.

I breathe in his scent, and I hate that it isn’t the cologne he usually wears, but it’s still him, his warmth.

“Shh. I’ll guide you,” Gabriel says. “We can...” He trails off, and when I look up, I see him peering at the basement door.

I clutch him tighter. “What is it?”

“The padlock is back on,” he says. “Does Zachariah lock it when nobody is inside?”

“N-no,” I say, staring at the door as dread starts to filter in beside the fear. “Never.”

Who could be inside? Had someone spoken up for me, only to be locked away?

Or is it a coincidence?

Gabriel swears under his breath and steps away from me. I whimper, but Gabriel takes my hand before I can truly start panicking.

He walks us over to the basement door, and he rests his ear against it.

“I can’t hear anyone,” Gabriel says, “But that doesn’t mean anything.” He looks at me, and his eyes are so deep, so dark, that I can’t read what’s behind them. “We can ignore it,” he suggests. “We’re only here for—” He cuts himself off before he continues, “Eve. We’re here for Eve.”

I shake my head quickly. “We can’t leave someone in there,” I say, hating the desperate whine in my voice.

The idea of leaving anyone to suffer in the darkness is more than I can stand.

I want to get Eve out, but she’s at least safely upstairs.

If someone’s in here... “It’ll only take a minute, right? ”

“Yeah.” Gabriel gets to work on the padlock, and it doesn’t take him long at all to get it unlocked. He takes the lock and stuffs it into his pocket, then opens the door.

It’s absolutely pitch black down there.

“I can’t,” I whisper, my hand shaking so hard I almost drop the flashlight. “I can’t go down there.” I can barely handle standing up here staring down into the abyss, where someone might be waiting.

Waiting for salvation, waiting to pounce, waiting for something I can't and won't understand.

"You don't have to." Gabriel fumbles for the light switch, but nothing happens. He curses, then turns on his flashlight. "I'll be right back."

And with nothing but that flimsy light, he starts to descend into the dark.

Panic threatens to rise, threatens to overwhelm me. What if he trips and falls? What if the Devil is there to take him ? I want to call out and tell him never mind, to come back up, but the words won't escape me no matter how hard I try to get them out.

All I can do is wait while he investigates.

Every footstep on the creaking stairs is sharp, nails on chalkboard, grabbing his soul and dragging him down, down, down.

The creaking stops. The light of his flashlight disappears out of my view.

Then I hear him cursing.

"Levi! It's... it's your sister down here."

My heart crashes into my stomach, and I fumble with my flashlight as I take a step toward the basement stairs. The second I get close, though, I freeze.

I don't know if I can go down there.

Even to rescue Eve.

My fear threatens to overwhelm me, and it's all I can do not to crumble to the floor

and bury my face in my hands, to try to escape this by pretending it doesn't exist.

But she needs me.

I can't turn my back on her. I can't avoid helping her. I can't let my fear get the best of me.

So I think instead of how she got there, of who put her there, and I let the fear bleed into anger.

I shine the flashlight down the stairs, staring down at the great, dark chasm that it is, and I try to force myself to take even a single step down there. Only one step. If I can take a single step, I can go the rest of the way.

Except I do manage to take one step, then I have to stop because the fear overwhelms me all over again.

I think Gabriel is saying something, but I don't know what.

I only have the ping pong sensations of fear and anger, anger and fear, back and forth, over and over again as I rally then falter in equal measures.

"I can't," I whisper, and the self-loathing I feel drowns out all the rest.

Chains rattle, making me whimper in terror.

But right on the heels of that rattle are thick, stomping steps.

A loud creak.

I turn around, my mouth dry, as I watch Father Zachariah come down the stairs from

the second floor.

His eyes meet mine, and even in the dim light, I can see his lips thin. “Levi. I thought you were gone for good.”

“ Why ?” I demand, my voice cracking, as I ignore his words in favor of the more pressing question in my mind. “She’s innocent.”

Gabriel would claim I’m innocent, too, but I’ve sinned so grievously.

Eve hasn’t.

“She tried to argue against me,” Father Zachariah says. “She wanted to follow you and bring you back. I couldn’t allow your taint to spread to her soul.”

He takes another step closer to me, and I cling to the staircase railing. If I move, I’ll trip down the stairs.

“She doesn’t deserve this!” I say fiercely, surprising myself with my own vehemence.

No one does.

“She’s my sister, and I love her, and she loves me,” I tell him. “And we’re going to take her away from you so you can’t ever hurt her again.”

So he can’t ever hurt either of us again.

Father Zachariah’s expression gets meaner, uglier. “You can’t have her. She’s my wife. After all the money I wasted keeping you and your sister clothed and housed and fed, it’s the least she can do for me.”

My mouth drops open in shock. “The least she can...” I trail off, shaking my head. “That’s not how this works. You don’t get to claim her like that. We’ve done everything for you, everything you’ve ever asked.”

I glance down the stairs, and the dark threatens to swallow me whole as I stare into the void. Gabriel is down there with Eve. They’re going to be safe.

I’m going to be safe.

I only need to stall.

“Everybody here belongs to me,” Father Zachariah says, his voice growing louder. “You listen to me . My word is God’s! Now go upstairs and ready yourself for penance, boy.”

“No.” I spit the word with more venom than I’ve ever addressed anyone with. “I won’t. I won’t do it. Not for you. You’re a false prophet. You cast me out, and it’s the best thing you could’ve ever done for me.”

If he goes downstairs and sees Eve—or maybe worse, if Eve sees him—I know things will get bad. I need to lead him away from here.

I take the single step back onto the first-floor hall and snarl at him. “I’m going to report you. To... to the police.”

Zachariah’s eyes widen. “What would you report, boy? That you lived with me for free? That I nurtured you? Cared for you?”

“I think my back says otherwise,” I say, my voice steadier than I could’ve thought possible. “It’s not nurturing someone if you’re hurting them.”

Harming them.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

Gabriel had tried to explain the difference between what Zachariah had done and the spanking, but I hadn't understood until right now.

I take another few steps back, ignoring the rising panic that comes from both the dim light of the first floor and the fact that I'm defying the man I've spent the past eight years obeying.

I can see it in his eyes when he realizes the mistake he made. He lunges toward me, but I evade him. "You will keep your mouth shut," he hisses.

I shake my head and start running, Zachariah fast on my heels. For an old man, he's surprisingly fit. Maybe all the whipping keeps him in shape, I think hysterically.

"Where do you think you're going?" he shouts.

I spot Gabriel coming up the basement stairs. Eve is leaning against him, looking haggard. Her dress is soiled, and she can barely walk.

If Zachariah turns around, he'll see them.

"Away from you!" I shout. "I'll let the whole world know who you are, Zachariah Carpenter—or maybe Joshua Baker, or Gil Smith, or whatever other fucking name you've used!"

I can't believe I cursed.

It works though. Zachariah keeps coming for me, and I lunge through the front door.

He dashes after me.

The late hour means the streets are clear. I dash across the street, and Zachariah doesn't even hesitate while chasing me.

There's only one place I can think of to go.

I lead him toward the courtyard.

The same courtyard where I watched a man die, the one where I met my avenging angel.

I have to make sure Zachariah sees me shimmy my way between the buildings. He follows me, and I'm relieved beyond measure that he's so wound up he doesn't question where we're going.

Once the space opens up, I turn around and wait for him. The lighting here is worse than at the apartment. Every shadow claws at my ankles, threatening to swallow me up. I turn my flashlight to Zachariah, whose face is warped with anger.

"Looks like you're trapped," Zachariah says. "You'll have to beg and hope I'm merciful."

He isn't, though, and I'm well aware of that fact.

The thing is, I'm not sure I am either.

Not anymore.

My plan only led me this far, and now that he's away from Eve, I don't know what to do. If he attacks me physically, I have to be able to defend myself. I'm younger,

stronger, and I... I don't know what I'm doing.

My eyes flick past him, and I have to hope that my avenging angel — my Daddy — knows where to go to protect me once more.

“All these years,” Zachariah says, shaking his head. “You had a cushy life. You weren't working, you weren't tithing. I should have dumped you after your whore mother left me.”

“Don't you dare call her a whore,” I snap at him, my anger chasing away some of the fear. “She was too good for you.”

Was she too good for me and Eve, too? Was that why she left?

I don't need to be thinking about that right now, though. All I need to do is worry about stalling until Gabriel can arrive to save me.

Again.

But this time he won't find me helpless and sobbing, having pissed my pants from fear and desperation alike. This time, he'll find me standing tall.

Zachariah lunges for me, and instead of evading him, I grab his arm.

His eyes widen in surprise. He isn't used to anyone fighting back.

I shove him as hard as I can against the brick wall. He gasps and lets out a cry of pain as his head slams against the wall.

“You don't get to hurt me anymore!” I shout. I punch him in the stomach, but even though I want to hurt him, I slow myself at the last moment.

“Good,” a smooth, velvety voice says from behind me.

I turn around, and I see Gabriel standing there. He smiles at me, and it’s dark and terrifying and so, so beautiful.

Gabriel extends his hand to me. I look at it, at the small thing he’s holding out to me.

A knife.

“Make him bleed, my lamb,” Gabriel says. “Make him suffer, as you suffered.”

My hand is surprisingly steady as I take it from him. “Eve?” I ask, not recognizing the sound of my own voice. It’s harsh, distant, so unlike myself, but I don’t care.

If she’s not okay...

“She’s resting,” Gabriel says. He meets my eyes. “Her back was worse than yours.”

I stiffen, and my fingers clutch the knife more tightly. “You,” I say to Zachariah. “You hurt her. You hurt her !” I don’t understand how someone could ever hurt Eve, a gentle soul who only meant the best.

Maybe I was upset with her for getting him, but that doesn’t mean I love her any less. That doesn’t mean she deserves anything like this.

She only did what she was taught to do. What Zachariah pounded into our brains, through endless sermons and false penance and fear .

Because we were always afraid, weren’t we? We knew that disobedience would mean we’d be cast out on the streets once more, without food or money or any education.

He made us dependent on him.

He ruined us.

“I... I didn’t—” Zachariah shouts. “He’s lying! I barely even?—”

Gabriel closes in on us and wraps his hand around Zachariah’s throat. “No? Then why was her back covered in red? Why could she barely walk? Her mouth moved without words. That was a woman who had been tortured.”

Rage blinds me.

It’s one thing for him to have hurt me; it’s another entirely for him to have harmed her.

I pounce, and the knife slices along his bare arm.

Blood immediately wells up to the surface, and he cries out. I think he’s more startled than hurt, and that only enrages me more. I want to hurt him. I want to make him scream .

I hadn’t been there to protect her then, but I’ll protect her now.

I’ll make sure he never, ever hurts her — or anyone else — ever again.

“Gut him,” Gabriel commands, raising Zachariah’s shirt up. “Show him what sinners like him deserve.”

He’s worse than a sinner.

He’s a monster.

Maybe he's the Devil I've been afraid of all along, in the guise of a man of God.

The knife is surprisingly light in my hand, but the edge is keen as I stab him the first time.

And the second.

Blood spills from the wounds, and I realize he's screaming. It only spurs me on, and I stab him again.

And again.

"Shhh," Gabriel says, covering Zachariah's mouth. "You'll wake the neighbors."

The screams become muffled.

Tears are rolling down my cheeks, but I can't bring myself to stop. I drag the blade all the way up to Zachariah's rib cage, and then to the side. The scent of blood overwhelms everything else.

The red is on my hands, on my shirt. It splattered on Gabriel's clothes too.

All while Zachariah makes pathetic noises against Gabriel's hand. His eyes are filled with tears.

How often did I cry because of this man?

How many times did I sit in the dark, begging for forgiveness, wishing he'd chosen to whip me instead?

"This is what you deserve," I snarl at him. "Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth..."

wound for wound .” I look up at Gabriel, blinking several times to try to clear my vision. Blood drips steadily from the knife, and I stab Zachariah again.

He’s trying to scream, but Gabriel’s hand ensures that nothing but the smallest sounds escape.

I wish I could hear more.

“Beautiful,” Gabriel says, his voice rife with awe. “I knew you were the one for me, little lamb.”

I watch as Zachariah starts to slump, as Gabriel’s grip tightens on him. “Is that enough?” I ask him. “Will he...”

Will he descend to Hell, where he deserves to spend eternity after all he’s wrought upon others?

“It’s enough.” Gabriel lets go of Zachariah, and he falls to the ground, gasping and making incoherent sounds.

His arms twitch like he’s trying to move, but all I notice is the blood trickling out of him, and the gaping hole in his stomach.

It should make me nauseous.

I should be vomiting.

Gabriel places his bloody hands on my shoulders and kisses me soundly. I can taste Zachariah’s blood on his lips, and I moan into that flavor, the one I’ve always been fascinated by.

“You’re amazing,” Gabriel whispers. “My lamb, my wolf . You and me, together, will rid the world of the festering demons that plague it.”

“Demons like Father... Like Zachariah?” I ask, licking my lips. I should be repulsed by this, too, by the thought of dragging others down into the depths with me.

I’m not.

“Like him, and all others who would hurt the innocent,” Gabriel agrees.

I nod.

I think I like the idea of destroying those who would hurt others.

My erection, at least, says that I do.

I shiver. “We need to take care of... of the body,” I say, looking down at Zachariah. “And Eve.”

“I need to take care of you first, my lamb.” Gabriel kisses me again. “Tell me what you want, boy.”

“You,” I say, wrapping my arms around him. There’s so much I should be concerned about right now, but all I can think about is him — about giving and taking and losing myself in this moment. “Fuck me, Daddy.”

“Anything you desire.”

Those words reverberate through me.

Because of what they represent, because I know they’re the truth.

Gabriel really will give me everything I want and need.

And for once, I don't feel guilty about taking it.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

GABRIEL

I've always gotten a thrill from punishing those who deserve it. Their blood, their screams, the dying light of their eyes.

But I have never been this aroused from a mere gutting.

It's because of Levi.

It's watching my lamb take what the world owes him and fight for himself.

His cock is hard against my thigh, and I reach down with my bloody hand to squeeze it through his dark jeans.

He lets out a choked sound that quickly turns into a moan, and he thrusts his cock against my hand. As he grinds against me, I know he's been set free from the expectations that Zachariah had levied upon him.

"Daddy," he whimpers.

"My lamb," I answer. "I'll take you here, in the blood of this monster. I'll make you fly."

Any hesitation he might have shown before is gone, chased away by the high of taking a life for the first time. He nods, licking his lips again.

I kiss the blood from his lips, then urge him to lie down on the ground, just next to

the puddle of Zachariah Carpenter's blood. The man makes a gurgling sound, but what do I care about the dying gasps of a con man?

My Levi is here, waiting, wanting.

I set my backpack down next to Levi and pull the small packet of lube out of the front pocket.

"What's that?" Levi asks, tracking my movements.

I smile at him. "Lube. Because I don't want to hurt you."

He takes in a deep, shuddering breath. He reaches out, his fingers dipping into Zachariah's blood, and he traces them across my lips before kissing me again.

I run my tongue across his lips while I fumble to undo his jeans. He lifts his hips to help me, and I get his pants down as far as I can. I remove one shoe so I can get his leg out, but I don't bother with the other before I'm pushing his shirt up to leave bloody lip prints across his stomach.

He moans, running his fingers through my hair. "More," he pleads.

I let him push me down to his cock. I take the head of him into my mouth, giving small, teasing suckles that make my lamb shudder and lift his hips up. I smile around his cock, but I deny him more stimulation, content to focus only on the tip.

"Daddy!" he cries out, his hips jerking as he seeks to push himself deeper into my mouth. "I want... I want you inside me. I need it."

I pull off his cock. "Yes, you do." I open the packet of lube and squeeze it out onto my fingers so I can loosen him up. He spreads his legs for me, one of them sliding

over the puddle of blood. I see how Levi's cock gets even harder, and I know it's because of the blood.

My eyes meet his, and even in the dim light, I see that he's like me.

I can't believe how lucky I was to find my perfect lamb, here in this city that eats up innocence and spits out despair and cynicism.

He licks his lips again, and he lifts his ass in the air so I can more easily get to his hole. I slide first one finger into him, then a second, letting him adjust to the stretch. All the while, he encourages me with his soft moans and his desperate whimpers of Daddy .

I think Zachariah Carpenter is trying to say something, but his gurgle only spurs me on.

"Hold your legs open for me, boy," I order as I sit back.

Levi immediately reaches for his thighs, his bloody hands leaving smears on his skin.

I can't undo my fly fast enough. I get my pants and underwear down barely enough to get my cock out, and I stroke myself with the remainder of the lube.

"You're so beautiful," I tell Levi. "You beckon me with every movement, every glance, every sigh."

"You woke something up inside of me," he whispers. "Something I don't... I don't understand, but I want. I want it so much. I want you so much. Just like this." His head turns, and I can tell he's looking in the direction of the dying man. "Take me, Daddy."

I line my cock up against his hole and place my hands next to his on his thighs. I wait until he looks at me, until he's trembling and straining toward me, before I plunge inside.

He's so hot and tight, the lube barely making the slide easier. Levi cries out, his eyes fluttering shut, as he squeezes and tries to pull me closer.

Levi reaches for the blood and drags his hand through it, then grips his cock with it.

Arousal slams into me like never before, making me drive forward even harsher.

This must be what divinity is.

His noises become louder as he strokes himself, smearing his cock with crimson as he does. I can hear the way his breath hitches, the way he whines out a plea for more all over again, then he lets out another strangled sound as he comes.

I keep fucking him through it, watching his face and memorizing how it looks in the throes of our bloody passion. I feel my own orgasm climbing, waiting to release, but I don't want this moment to end yet.

I want to be here, with him, forever.

"You're mine," I growl, thrusting forward even harder. My fingers dig into his thighs, sure to leave bruises, enough to make him cry out and writhe. "My beautiful lamb, my wolf. Innocent, but not. Repressed, but unrestrained. All your contradictions belong to me."

"Yours," he whimpers, clinging to me. "Yours, Daddy."

I lean forward, bending him near in half, so I can kiss him. He grips my face, getting

cum and blood on me, but I don't care. Our devotion to each other will never be neat and tidy.

"Please, Daddy," Levy whispers. "Fill me up. Make me yours."

I groan loudly. How can I resist him? I pull back so I can thrust into him properly, faster and harder, and the pleasure floods my body.

Never have I ever felt so much for one person.

Never have I wanted to consume somebody like this.

Never have I loved anyone.

But Levi has given me everything.

I let out a long, low moan as I let go. My orgasm rushes through me, and I fill him, fill my boy. I claim him, as surely as he has claimed me.

"Daddy!" he wails with a shudder, leaning up to kiss me again. It's desperate, and needy, and I thrust my tongue past his lips. He opens readily, sharing the taste, sharing everything with me.

I linger there, inside of him as my tongue caresses his, as my cock begins to soften. He clutches me tight, needing me every bit as much as I need him.

I stay over him until my cock slips out. I'd love to be inside him forever. It's impractical—especially here, right now.

I sigh and slide to the side, pulling him against me.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him gently.

His eyes are heavy-lidded, and he’s breathing heavily. He snuggles up against me, heedless of the cold, cracked concrete beneath us and the corpse nearby. “Different,” he says after a long moment. “Like... like everything’s changed.”

“You’ve awakened to your true self,” I say, brushing hair from his eyes. “You’ll no longer be content to be one of the many downtrodden of the city.”

“No,” Levi says slowly. “I won’t. I’m not.

” He kisses me again, so lightly that I can barely feel his lips against mine, then murmurs, “I don’t know if I can be like you.

If I can punish people, if I can kill people.

But I—” He falters. “I want to see it. I want to know that people like Zachariah will never hurt anyone else again.”

I smile and cup his cheek. “I’ll teach you how it’s done. But if you don’t want to wield the blade again, that’s fine too. I’ll cut them up for you and let you taste their blood.”

He shivers. “Promise?”

“I told you, I’ll give you anything you desire.” I kiss his forehead gently.

Levi nods, then he looks at me with a small smile of his own. “You’re covered in blood,” he says. “I guess I am, too.”

“We’ll need to clean up here.” I reluctantly loosen my hold on him. “His body will

need to go. And we'll have to destroy evidence that we were here."

"I'll learn how to help," he promises. "But I think we made a huge mess." He pulls free of me and sits up, looking around. "I don't know how to clean up something like this at all."

"Just follow my lead," I say. I sit up and look around.

I'd picked this courtyard the first time because it's surprisingly well hidden.

Two of the buildings around us are empty, not in livable condition, and the other two have small businesses in them.

None of the windows that face the courtyard are ever used, and there's an overhang on one side that prevents getting a good view of this corner of the courtyard anyway.

I pull my pants up and zip up. "We'll clean up first. The dirty clothes have to go once we're done. I have clean ones for us in the bag."

Levi listens intently as I walk him through the cleanup process. He doesn't balk at getting his hands even dirtier first, which proves yet again that he was made for me.

It takes us under an hour to wrap Zachariah up in several layers of trash bags and destroy all other evidence on scene.

Once we've changed clothes, I start going through Zachariah's wallet. I find five different ID cards, as well as several hundred dollars in cash.

"He really was a con man," Levi says as he shines the flashlight on the IDs. He shakes his head and looks at me fiercely. "And now he can't ever take advantage of anyone else ever again. Not me, not... Eve!"

“Eve,” I repeat. Part of me wishes he’d forgotten about her, but I know it’s not in his nature to look away from his family.

Levi looks at me, his expression guarded. “Did you mean what you said?” he asks. “About helping her? She’s going to need it. I can’t turn my back on her, Daddy.”

“I know you can’t.” I stuff Zachariah’s wallet into my backpack. I’ll have to destroy it all later. “I’ll help her. But you have to be sure we can trust her. She knows we were here.”

I get my phone out and send a text to the contact I’ve labeled Office Management .

Me

One bag. Courtyard Hotel.

They’ll handle removing the body. I delete the text as soon as it’s sent.

Levi watches me. It’s not until I look back at him that he says, “I don’t know what she’ll do or say, not anymore.” He swallows hard. “But I can’t leave her behind. I can’t abandon her. And if we don’t come back at all, she’ll still know something’s wrong.”

“All right.” I extend my hand to him, and he takes it. The wet wipes we’d use to clean up have left his hands a bit dry and clammy, but that’s better than being covered in blood.

My phone tells me it’s past three a.m. now. The streets are empty, and we have no trouble getting to the apartment building.

We find Eve sitting on the first step leading up, hunched over herself.

I scowl. I'm pretty sure I told her to go back to her apartment.

Levi hurries over to her. "Eve! Eve, you're..." He notices the way she's holding herself, and his expression turns furious all over again. "He hurt you. He hurt you so badly."

Eve looks up, tears streaming down her face. "You're okay. I thought... You disappeared, and he went after you, and you were gone for so long..." she sobs. "I thought you were dead, Levi."

He leans down, starting to wrap his arms around her, but when she cries out in pain, he releases her at once.

"I'm sorry!" he says quickly. "I'm safe."

I'm safe, and you're safe, and I'm going to take care of you.

No one's ever going to hurt you ever again.

"He falters, missing a beat, but he goes on, "We're going to get out of here before he can come back."

I nod along. "Did anyone else come to check on you?"

Eve's eyes tear up even more. "No. Not even Ruth. I heard a few doors open and shut, but nobody came down."

Levi takes a deep breath, and he offers a hand to her. "Let's go get our things and get out of here. Fast."

There won't be anything fast if we have to help Eve up and down the stairs. I shake

my head. “Stay here, Eve. Levi and I will take care of it.”

She looks grateful about not having to walk, at least. Levi and I hurry up the stairs and to their apartment.

It’s as sparse as I imagined. No TV, no radio, even. There’s only a shelf with some books.

“I’ll grab my things,” Levi says, and I nod, heading into Eve’s bedroom.

I stuff as many of Eve’s clothes into a small suitcase she had under her bed.

I pause when I find a cardboard box that’s taped up. Curious, I cut the tape open with my keys.

Inside are birth certificates, a driver’s license for a woman who looks similar to Eve and Levi, and a small diary.

I hold up the birth certificate. It’s for an Evelyn Reed, born nineteen years ago.

The other one is for Logan Reed, born on the twenty-ninth of February, twenty-two years ago.

Logan, not Levi.

I wonder if he’d want to go back to that name.

I stuff the box in with the other things, then head out to the small living room. Levi is pacing back and forth, clutching a duffel bag.

“Are you done?” I ask. “Anything else we need, we can simply buy. Just don’t leave

any identifying information behind.”

Levi nods. “I have everything.” He stops in his tracks, then says, “Wait. I think Eve has some documents that we need.” He starts for her room, but I stop him.

“I already have them,” I say.

He tries to smile, but it’s obviously forced. “Oh.”

I glance at the door. We need to go, but I don’t want to leave this for later. “Do you remember your old name? Before Levi?”

His expression turns bleak. “Yes.” He doesn’t elaborate. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you want to be that person again?” I ask. “Do you want to be Logan?”

For several moments, he’s quiet. “I think... I don’t want to be Levi anymore.”

I go up to him and tilt his chin up. “You can be whoever you want to be, little lamb. As long as it’s at my side.”

He looks up at me, his eyes searching mine. “I don’t have anything,” he tells me.

“You have me,” I tell him steadily.

He smiles, for all that it’s strained. “And Eve.” He shakes his head. “Evelyn. She hates Eve.”

His smile falters.

“She’s going to need so much help. He... He poisoned her mind,” he says.

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise. “Together.”

He gets on his toes, and I lean down to give him the kiss he’s silently demanding.

When he pulls away, Levi says, “I love you, Daddy. So much. You... you saved me. You make me feel like I’m good, and right, and... and not tainted .”

My heart sings in my chest.

“I love you too, my lamb,” I answer, my smile so wide it strains my cheeks. “I never even knew I needed somebody so badly until I met you.”

There’s still so much to do tonight, but I have my lamb with me.

I’ll have him forever.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 9:41 am

“Police have offered a thousand-dollar reward to anyone who has credible information about Dave Kline, a conman who has used the names Joshua Baker and Zachariah Carpenter, among others. He is currently wanted for his involvement in a cult that abused women and children right here in New Bristol.”

I tilt my head at the TV screen in the corner of the store, trying to recognize Father Zachariah in the picture the news shows. He’s clean shaven there, a few years younger than he was when I knew him.

“Are you buying?” the bodega owner asks. “If not, get out of the line and let others pay.”

I blink, coming back to reality, and I nod. I set the potatoes down on the counter in front of me, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu. It hadn’t been at this exact bodega, but the similarities are enough to make that sensation tug at me.

“Yes.” I pull out my new credit card, the one linked to the account Gabriel had set up for me, and pay. It’s a small thing, and I know it isn’t really mine, but it feels like it is.

I take my receipt and hurry out, heading back to the small apartment Evelyn is living in.

It’s about thirty minutes from Gabriel’s, and I don’t think that the distance was accidental.

He doesn’t try to dissuade me from visiting her, and it’s still a nice place to live —

nicer than the apartment complex we'd been living in before — so I don't mind.

I knock on the door before letting myself in with my key, and I find her in the kitchen.

She's gone back to the familiar, defaulting to what she'd learned at her time in the complex.

Sometimes, I don't think she's going to move forward. Other times, she surprises me, like when she'd told me she'd gotten a job at the nearby soup kitchen.

Both of us want to help others, but our methods are vastly different. She wants to help, to heal.

I want to destroy.

"I saw Ruth on TV," I say as I set the potatoes down on the counter.

Evelyn snorts. "Again? She's been doing interviews every single month since the complex was 'discovered.'" She sneers lightly. "I think they pay her for the interviews. All of them feeding off of our suffering..."

Four months haven't been enough for her wounds to heal. At least, not the emotional ones.

"I guess it's better than getting tangled up in another cult," I say.

I know some of the others have fallen prey to other scams. There's always someone ready to take advantage of the vulnerable, and Zachariah kept all of us so isolated that there wasn't much we knew how to do beyond care for him and his needs .

No wonder Ruth is capitalizing on her experiences. She probably doesn't have many

more opportunities than we would have if Gabriel hadn't helped us.

Evelyn opens the bag of potatoes and starts washing a few. "I thought of reaching out to a few of the others. But I know they would blame me for destroying their good thing." Her hands close tightly around a potato. "They'd say it was my fault that Father Zachariah ran away."

I'm not sure if she believes the lie or if she's lying to herself, but as long as she doesn't go to the police and blame Gabriel — or me — for his disappearance, I can't bring myself to care. It's better for her to think that he ran off than to think that her brother is a murderer.

"He knew he was going to get caught," I say. "He knew I wasn't going to stand by and let him hurt you."

Evelyn sets the potatoes down and turns to look at me, a sad smile on her face. "Thank you, Lev—Logan. Sorry, I don't know why I keep slipping. You'd think I could remember my own brother's name."

Zachariah used to make us take penance every time we used our birth names, so it doesn't surprise me that both of us are having trouble getting used to reverting to them. But neither of us wants to be associated with who we were before.

"It's fine," I assure her. "We both have to remember who we were before."

Or come to terms with who we're becoming, whatever that may be.

Sometimes I still resent Evelyn for having ratted me out to Zachariah, but it was because of that punishment that I was finally able to see the light and accept Gabriel. And I know if our situations had been reversed, I probably would have done the same thing.

Zachariah had made it clear what the punishment for disobedience was.

I still sometimes expect Gabriel to cast me aside when I argue with him, but he only smiles and seems happy that I'm willing to give him my opinion.

I help Evelyn chop vegetables and put together a quick soup. "Have you given thought to what I said? About getting your GED with me?"

Evelyn ignores me, continuing to cook.

I wait, and finally she says, "I don't know if I can, Logan. Everybody will know that I'm so... dumb."

"Do you think I'm dumb?" I ask her pointedly. "Because I'm having to do the same thing. I've been taking all the practice tests, and there's a lot I don't know." I wrinkle my nose. "All the science."

"No! But you have Gabriel to help you, and I know you have tutors, and I'm just...

" Eve sets everything down and turns to look at me.

"I don't know how to do anything but cook and clean, all right?

I wasn't supposed to do more than that. And imagining doing more...

I realize how much of my life was a waste, and how I should have run earlier, and how I betrayed you for... nothing."

"I should've taken you and left when she did," I say.

I can't even call her our mother, not right now, not when I've become angry and bitter over the abandonment.

Gabriel has offered to track her down, but I know what would happen if he found her.

“Or when I turned eighteen. Or something. And I don’t know what I’m going to do, either. I was just an errand boy.”

Evelyn lets out a bitter laugh. “Some pair we are. But okay. Let’s just have a nice dinner.” She wipes at her eyes. “Does Gabriel want to join us? It’ll be another half hour before it’s done anyway.”

Gabriel still doesn’t like her, and I don’t particularly like putting them in the same room together. I shake my head. “No, he’s working late. But thank you.” I exhale slowly, then go to sit down at the kitchen table.

Evelyn tells me about what she’s been doing at the soup kitchen, and some gossip from the church she joined. I’m glad she can still find comfort in religion, but I can’t get myself to step inside a church.

Not only because I have a hard time listening to preachers without remembering Zachariah, but also because of how hypocritical I would feel doing so.

I distract Evelyn with pictures of Ichabod, and we have a pleasant dinner.

When I’m gearing up to leave, I get a text from Gabriel

Gabriel

I have a present for you.

My heartbeat picks up as I see the picture of a box, and I quickly say my goodbyes to Eve before setting out.

The bus ride back to Gabriel’s neighborhood feels like it takes forever. I’d try to

wheedle to find out what's in the box, but I have a feeling it's not something we'd want to discuss via text.

When I let myself in, Ichabod is there to rub against my ankles, and I smile down at the cat and give him a few scritchies behind his ear before finding Gabriel in the kitchen.

"What's in the box?" I ask after pecking him on the cheek.

"Open it," Gabriel says, wrapping his arms around me from behind. "I got it just for you."

I pluck the small jewelry box from the nearby dresser. It looks similar to the box the watch had been in, but he's already given that back to me. I raise an eyebrow, then lift the lid. On a piece of cushioned silk is a pinky finger, the end that should've been attached to the hand jaggedly cut.

He'd used the serrated blade, then, the one that truly makes his targets scream.

I wish I'd been there to hear it.

"Can you guess who it belonged to?" Gabriel asks, nuzzling my jaw.

I purse my lips, thinking through the case files he'd spread over the table the night before. "That's an easy one," I say. "It's Allan Porter, that serial rapist. But I thought we were going to take care of him together."

I can't stop the pout from entering my voice.

Gabriel smiles. "We are. I have him chained up in a dark, concrete room. I left him with a single candle before I locked up. He's waiting for us to come back and finish him off."

I hum, turning around so I can face him. I brush my lips against his, and while I know I'm only imagining the familiar taste of blood, I know it'll be reality soon enough. Allan Porter had thought he could get away with hurting others, but he hadn't counted on coming to Gabriel's attention.

Or mine.

"He's out in the bunker in the woods," Gabriel whispers. "We can take our time with him. We can make him scream."

I shiver, the thought going straight to my cock.

The symphony of screams, the taste of blood, the allure of violence, the exultation that follows another kill... All of it coalesces into something I can't get away from for long.

Why would I want to?

I don't know if I still believe in heaven or hell.

But I know that I believe in Gabriel's vision: a world where the evil get punished for their misdeeds. A world where people like me are avenged.

A world where blood and lust go hand in hand.

"Thank you, Daddy," I say, kissing him again. "I love you."

"I love you too, my lamb," Gabriel answers.

I press my head against his shoulder, breathing in his rich scent.

I'm so happy I took a detour that day.

I didn't know I needed a guardian angel, but he found me all the same.

Maybe I do believe in God.

But it's with Gabriel, in the blood of sinners, that I worship.

Every drop we take is a sacrifice to the Lord.

Every kiss is a prayer.

And every time Gabriel takes me, I touch heaven.