



Hunting Gianna (Stalkers in the Woods #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: It was just supposed to be a hike.

Gianna

A blown tire and a thunderstorm left me stranded. I found a cabin and met Knox, who offered shelter for the night.

But when I woke up, something felt off. My body ached, my mind was foggy.

I knew I had to leave.

Then I heard his voice—Run, little bird.

And so... I ran.

Knox

Gianna was always meant to be mine.

I watched her, took what I needed, and now I don't want to let her go. She wants to run, wants to leave, but that's just because she doesn't know what she wants.

She can't escape what she doesn't understand

She is in my sights, and I have no intention of letting her go.

Tropes:

Strangers to lovers

Masked

Chasing

Hidden desire

Dark fantasy

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Prologue

Knox

Three Months Ago...

I crouch at the edge of the tree line, lens focused on the curvy little snack as she flits around her campsite.

Gorgeous. She's alone, just like she was last time, tight top riding up as she unrolls the tent and hammers in stakes, not even a whisper of a clue that I'm watching.

Didn't expect her to show up today. But since nature delivered, I'm not one to refuse. My pulse is steady. My pulse is quick.

I'm only supposed to be here to check on Kairo's setup, his cam obsession with Harbor, because the sick fuck likes to record him hunting her. Creed was supposed to do it, but he's covering my ass with the investors meeting I didn't feel like going to.

So, I'm here, setting up some new fancy as fuck hunting cams while Creed does my job trying to secure a new silent partner.

Kairo is trying to expand the energy label into stupid markets like cars.

Shit's already oversaturated, but when Kairo actually shows up, he's damn good at negotiating the terms he wants.

Slade went back to Africa. “Just checking on the employees.” He had said. Yeah. Right.

Movement catches my eye and it snaps me out of my rapidly souring mood.

She bends, her shorts riding up just under her ass, close, so close to exposing her pussy.

Her dark hair sways over tan shoulders, muscles flexing, fingers twisting rope with deft precision.

As she stands, she stretches, her arms high above her head before they swing down and she claps, moving on to the next stake.

I adjust the focus on my binoculars, zoom in on her lips.

She's singing to herself, teeth grazing her bottom lip, biting it just right.

I stare too long. Forget to blink. I've seen her here before, mostly in passing, but something's different now. She's got this... confidence thing she didn't have before.

It both confuses and arouses me. No one has ever caught my attention like this. I don't date. I don't fuck around. I'm no stranger to one-night stands, but no one has stirred this sense of need like this.

I pretend this girl is just a time-waster, something sweet to pass the hours until it becomes dark and I can tell Creed it's too late to finish the set-up today.

Just a curiosity, that's all. But there's a raw freedom in her steps, and my curiosity burns.

I'm betting she'd have the same wild streak in bed. I'll find out. Already know. Her ass is perfect, round and tight above long legs, ending in wide set hips. She's got curves, but she's not shy about them.

I like that.

It's not like me to get distracted. They call me when they want things done.

Fast. Efficient. I'm the finisher, the one who goes after something and doesn't let go till it's complete.

I'm not the one with time to kill. With endless days to waste watching.

And yet I stand here, training my lens on the way she arches her back.

Knowing there are better things for me to do.

Knowing the scent of her is what I'll want the most.

I'll get back to my real work later, once I've played this out.

The sun slides across the sky, and I'm still here, ignoring the buzzing in my pocket that's most likely Kairo, asking why the fuck the feeds are still dark.

He won't shut up. He won't let it go, and I love every minute of making him wait. He's become quite the little fuck since he hooked up with Harbor.

Missing our guy's nights to 'stay in with his little writer.'

Disgusting.

She starts putting a fire together, kindling, a match, low, slow breaths, stoking the ember into a little flame before piling on the logs. Her eyes find the sky as she sinks onto a log and a slow smile stretches over her lips.

Plump lips. Perfectly pink lips. Ones I want wrapped around my cock.

That pulse, that snap of interest, turns into a long, slow boil, a constant buzz in the back of my skull. I want her. The thought strikes through me and I don't know how I feel about it.

All I know is that I want to feel the beat of her heart through her neck and see if her skin tastes as sweet as it looks.

A snap decision and now I know what I'm going to do. Tomorrow I'll finish the feeds, and then I'm going to watch this pretty little thing for a couple of days before I make her mine.

She needs a name, and I know just who to ask for it.

I send a picture to Noah, expect a quick reply.

Minutes pass. Hours. Just as I'm ready to burn down the world, my phone buzzes. He says some stupid shit and he's close to losing his head if he keeps with the attitude.

Then finally, the file. Gianna Valentina.

28. Cruise ship waitress. Delicious . He says she was at the retreat before.

Five years ago, and that he gave her permission to tent because she prefers 'the real deal'.

Gianna Valentina. The name is a fine wine rolling across my tongue.

When she finally crawls into her tent, when the last light fades, I don't move. I don't blink. I stay until I know she's asleep, and then I head to the cabin, her body still burned into my brain, the gold of her skin still flashing against my eyes.

She thought she'd come here to get away from it all.

She's about to find out exactly what she ran into.

Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I ignore Creed's texts and go to our group chat. The boys are sharing photos of their latest conquests, but I don't give a fuck. I tell them I'm using the cabin and not to come here and then shut my phone off before the questions can begin.

Now it's time to prepare for the arrival of my little bird.

Present

I've watched her for the last three months.

She was away on her cruise, with that idiot boyfriend of hers who didn't know his head from his ass.

The same one who shacked up with the bar tender every chance he got.

Gianna didn't know, though I'm sure she suspected.

It wasn't hard to convince Creed to hack the cameras on the ship.

All he wanted in exchange was for me to beat some fuck half to death.

Apparently the guy scratched his Maserati and laughed about it.

So, I beat this guy, snapped the pictures and off Creed went with that psychotic little mind of his. I swear to God if he'd been a half decent guy, he'd have made a good detective.

But we aren't the good guys here.

I knew the minute the ship docked and she was back home. I also knew the minute she decided to go camping... to come here. All thanks to my basic knowledge in wireless cams. Amazing what you can figure out with the fucking internet these days.

Win-win.

We were a cohesive unit of unhinged loyalists.

We mostly stayed to ourselves, but there were times where we needed each other and as much as we sometimes hated one another, we always pulled through.

Brother's code. The stars aligned and I didn't have to attend the board meeting for the acquisition of Kairo's new venture, something about merging with the largest powerhouse on the green energy movement.

I wouldn't have gone anyway, but it turns out Kairo's new girl wants to be more involved and I want to be less.

Besides, knowing Gianna was here would have driven me insane. Knowing she was on a ship at sea for the last three months was fucking hard enough, but now that she was back, I'd make my move.

Especially not with my girl in my sights and the knowledge that not far from where

she set up camp, a group of assholes has set up their tents.

Something to watch... just in case they think they can talk to what's mine.

The forest around me is sharp and bright in the early morning sun.

Too loud with all the birds waking up the whole damn place.

But it doesn't matter. They don't matter.

I'm tuned to one sound only, her whistling as she walks away from her tent, towards the cliffs. Steady breath, a tracker's calm, though my pulse feels like a roar inside my chest. I leave the cover of trees, the moss squishing beneath my feet.

Just a peek . Her tent flap hangs open, an invitation.

I place the carved bird beside it and savor the small thrill of leaving my mark on her world.

I retreat to the trees and wait for her to notice.

The little bird was part of a project I'd been working on. Wood carving has always fascinated me and this was my first one. A sparrow. Watching her was like watching birds overhead.

Free.

Enthralling.

And so... she becomes the object of my ruminations. My little bird. Seems only fitting she gets to have a token of my appreciation.

Hours pass and I'm getting pissed. She should have been back by now, the little wanderer.

She's testing my patience without even knowing it, the thought making me shift and tense my jaw, listening for her careless steps.

My finger caresses the edge of the knife I use to carve; wood shavings still caught in the creases.

A warning from deep inside whispers that this won't be enough, this watching and waiting, but not for long.

I catch that thought and put it back where it belongs.

Under control. Her obliviousness will serve me just fine.

When I finally hear her, leaves crunching and then the soft scrape of her boots against the rocks, it's like the pressure in my chest lets up for the first time since I laid that small claim beside her tent.

A dangerous little rush. The carved sparrow waits at her doorstep, a token of the patience I won't hold forever.

I raise the binoculars, pulling her into focus.

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She's still in those tiny shorts, that tight top, hair tied up and a long strand falling against the curve of her cheek.

She's panting. Her breath like small, feral pants after a hard fuck.

I want to run my tongue along the shine of sweat glistening on her neck.

She pauses at the edge of the site and pushes a loose curl back behind her ear, like she can feel the heat of my gaze, the raw press of it from all the way across the trees.

But then she grins, just a flicker across those perfect lips, and it hits me that she isn't being careful.

She isn't looking around. She's looking right through me.

And when she finally reaches her tent, the real delicious thing hits me.

She doesn't see it. Walks right past my offering without even a glance. I didn't think I'd want her this much, this fast. But I feel it now, more than I want to. As loud as this forest around me and I smile at her blind fucking stupidity.

She's perfect. And she doesn't have a clue.

My pocket buzzes and it's Kairo, telling me to reset the feeds because the connection is wavering. I growl, looking at my girl one more time before starting up towards his cabin to finish connecting the cams to each other.

I drank myself into a stupor, watching the shitty trail cams. 32CX is the one that is trained on her section. It's so grainy, I can hardly see anything, but I watch anyway. The whiskey hits harder and harder and there's not a chance in hell that tonight will be the one where I make my move.

Kairo was right... we definitely need better satellite connection. I'll give myself access to the ones I just finished upgrading. He'd be pissed, but I truly give no fucks. I don't care bout seeing Harbor, or his tiny dick for that matter. I just want to see her.

I breathe it in, this second hand intimacy, as I watch her start her fire, doing a little dance as it roars to life.

Her outline spread like some invitation I haven't RSVP'd yet. I should feel repulsed. Watching wasn't my thing, but...

I don't. Grabbing a photo I took, my eyes roam her body.

I set a photo down, take it up again. Gianna's perfect mouth.

The soft lines of her legs folded beneath her as she sits by the fire.

A closer shot, sweat beading in the dip of her collarbone.

I don't want to stop. Watching her this way, it makes my skin feel tight.

Makes it hum with an anticipation that I could almost mistake for tenderness.

Mine.

The image is as real as the scent of her clothes. It fucks with my head more than it should.

She's made it easy. So damn easy to catch her this way, slipping up on her without even trying. Didn't she learn anything before coming out here? You'd think a girl would pick up some survival skills after going camping alone so often. Instead, she's oblivious to all of it. To me.

I sketch the letters out beside a photograph.

Loose. Clumsy. Ready to leave pinned to her tent.

Unfurling in the empty margins like an artist at work.

I've seen it all—her carelessness. Both in her life and when she camps.

I have pages and pages dedicated to studying her.

Memorizing her. But what is more fascinating than the idiot who dumped her, is the way she seems so oblivious to safety out here.

How she leaves the camp unattended for hours.

Fails to store her food. Leaves her damn tent flap open even when she's gone for the whole day.

She's acting like she wants this. To be caught.

I put those words down too, little traps just waiting to be sprung.

They make me want her more. They make me want her now.

And there she is, the cam catching my attention again.

Dancing by the fire. Not even worrying about it.

A snap of envy hits me for that kind of freedom, and then it's gone.

She takes off the too-tight tank, wipes her face with it, leaves it crumpled on the ground like a small flag.

Her big, perky tits are bouncing as she sways her hips, a big grin splitting her face.

She's dirty and careless. I'm hard. This whole game is beneath me, but it feels better than it should.

How fucking naive is she?

It wasn't a lie when I told the others to stay away.

I don't plan on letting anyone else ever see her like this.

My cheeks flush and my cock is leaking and all this pent-up fucking energy has no where to go. So I shut off the feeds, slam the rest of the bottle and force myself to sleep. Tomorrow, I'm leaving her one of the stones in my collection and the photograph I took of her.

Tomorrow, she will either come to her senses and leave... or she will become part of my world.

I arrive before dawn, watch the world wake up with her in it.

Her tent unzips and it's like she unwraps herself, stretching into the morning.

A breath of air. The rise of her ribs. I want to press my teeth into that vulnerable skin and claim her now, but this isn't hunger. This is a slow feeding. A steady gorging. I set the next trap, a long, smooth stone, perfect for river skipping, right in her path, putting the photo right underneath. Surely she will see this. An unnatural hidden in the perfectly pristine forest . She steps over it, as careless and fucking perfect as ever. This time, it's even sweeter.

Gianna, a bite of fruit left out to take, a heart left out to hunt.

How does she not see what she's asking for? How does she not know that I'm out here, my desire for her growing sharp enough to taste? It fills my mouth, slicks my skin, curls me around her.

Another day, another obsession.

Once I make my move, she might fight. Leave me some pretty battle scars, but she won't escape.

Because she will come to understand that when it clicks, it clicks. Much like the closing of handcuffs, or the snap of a trap. There is no mistaking the moment your prey realizes that there is no way out.

I lower the binoculars as she heads out for another hike, and force the impatience down, feel it gnaw at my insides. She'll know it then, her freedom is mine to construct. Like an architect. My possession.

My chest tightens around the thought, and I walk faster.

I circle her camp while she's gone, letting the need build, feeling my control splinter and crack.

I want this to hurt. I want it to hurt me.

Her shirt is where she left it, and I bring it to my face, breathing her into me.

As close as I can get without forcing her beneath me, and not nearly close enough.

I should have made my move this morning.

Should have pinned her down and swallowed her whole.

My body betrays me. My thoughts betray me.

I can't stop this delicious tension, the one stretching and coiling, testing its limits before it breaks.

Like I'm testing myself. Making sure she's worth the effort. Making sure I am, as well. Leaning in, I grab a pair of her underwear. Lace. Black. Some skimpy little thing that she has no use for unless it's to wear for me.

Her smell. Her sweat. I know them now.

I want to see how loud she screams.

And then I want to swallow her whole as she comes around my cock.

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Chapter One

Gianna

The duffel is heavier than I remember, straps digging into my shoulders, but I keep a fast pace.

Maybe I'll beat my own record. Maybe I'll prove to myself I'm not as weak as the bastard said.

Breaths burn as I hike up the ridge, sweat dripping down my back and heart pumping a fierce, steady rhythm.

My hair whips against my cheeks as I push through the trees.

Nothing is holding me back. Not today. I find the clearing and dump the load, triumphant and gasping.

My pack is lighter without his shit weighing me down.

I drop to my knees, lungs bursting, and throw my head back, welcoming the sharp bite of mountain air.

Finally . Away from all of it. I trace the path with my eyes, feeling the distance in my muscles, the clean ache of escape.

Two months ago, my life felt like one of those traumatic comedy movies.

A list of mediocrities disguised as exotic adventures.

Heartbreak on the high seas. Fuck that. I'm on dry land now.

And the only thing I'm diving into is me.

It wasn't supposed to end that way, with me swallowing a bitter pill along with his last limp kiss.

I'd rather be seasick for a year than hear those words again.

He thought he was such a prize. But I know better.

His final insult wasn't the first blow. He didn't just suck in bed.

He sucked the fucking life out of me. One soul-sucking night at a time.

"Gianna," he said, with that sad puppy dog face, like I was going to beg him to stay.

"Gianna, you're just not adventurous enough.

" No shit, Sherlock. You're dumping me for the bartender with tits the size of Florida? That part went unsaid.

Joke's on him, because I'm off that love boat for good.

I turn slow circles in the clearing, letting the sun warm me and melt all his lies away.

Solitude stretches in front of me, wide as the sky and just as sweet.

The wind catches my hair and spins it out behind me.

A long white cloud settles against the edge of a bright blue horizon.

Even if this was the same camp spot, I hardly recognized it at first. I'm not the same girl who was here before.

I've been moving, moving, moving for so long.

Hundreds of people breathing down my neck.

Breathing my air. Crowded into cabins, onto dance floors.

I should have my own fucking set of gills.

But here, there's space enough to feel like I might grow my own wings instead.

I slip out of my sweatshirt and wrap it around the bulging duffel bag, laying claim to the whole damn place. A breeze carries the fresh scent of pine and moss. Birds sing above me. Hello, sky. Hello, mountains. Hello, sanity.

God, I miss being out here.

Once I've marked my territory, I get to work. A girl can't survive on fresh air and freedom alone. I'm smart enough to know that much. I may not be "good enough in bed," but at least I know how to pitch a fucking tent. Which is more than I can say for that sad sack of skin.

God, what did I even see in him?

I give the sleeping mat a few good whacks to settle the air in it. The roll makes a satisfying puff as it pops open on the ground. The long branches I gather scratch my arms, and my hands sting with the freedom of splinters. I drop them in a pile, all

ready for a fire and all mine.

Time is mine, too. Finally. I kick off my shoes, feel the soft forest floor beneath me. The duffel is practically empty now. There's enough food and enough space, and I'm finally enough for myself.

The tent rises as I start working, things slowly coming together.

Like magic. I watch the rippling fabric catch in the breeze before I stake it down, arms burning with the good kind of fire, the kind that reminds me what this is.

What I am. Free. I flip the empty duffel into the tent, pop my rainbow chip granola bar into my mouth and savor the taste of adventure as I wander back for the rest of my things.

The sun is a lazy golden orb behind the ridgeline, catching at the tips of trees like they might go up in flame. It's the perfect time of day to be a bird. And this bird is finally getting some fresh fucking air.

I set the duffel down just outside the trees, watching the last light flash across the sky.

The same light from the same sun that hits the deck of his stupid ship.

But it shines brighter up here, better. I wrap my arms around myself, snug as a cocoon.

Tomorrow I'll stop ruminating and move the fuck on.

Tomorrow, I'll start a fire. Tomorrow, I'll start everything.

A mountain breeze kicks up, fluttering my empty bag, fluttering my heart, and I let it

all blow me away.

The fire crackles, a conspiratorial whisper, and I swear it's talking to me.

Just me. About time something did. I draw closer, my knees tucked to my chest, sketchbook a fragile shield against the wilderness.

It takes exactly twelve strokes of the pencil to bring the trees back to life.

Fourteen more to cage in the sky. A quick line, a heavy smudge, and the landscape is mine again.

But I still don't feel alone. My eyes keep returning to the trees.

The same way his always went back to the waitresses.

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's the same.

I press the pencil harder, let the sky grow darker on the page.

Let it push out everything else. Snap. Snap.

Two strokes and they aren't pencil marks.

I laugh at myself. Almost like it's funny. Almost like I believe it. The crack of a twig turns into the snap of the lead, and my hand smudges the sky black. My grip was always too tight. No wonder I can't hold on to anything.

My art, like my life, seems to be slipping.

But I won't let it. I clutch the sketchbook like an amulet. Tighter, tighter. This is my

life, mine alone, and I don't have to share it with anyone. Not even an imaginary fucking woodland creature.

If something is out there, it better be a fucking werewolf coming to make me the princess of his pack, 'cause I am done with fuck boys.

The night air shifts, crackling with warmth, dancing with the occasional spark from the fire.

And then I'm right back at it, this time capturing the delicate curve of an unfurling leaf, the sweep of trees caught in the golden glow of my triumph. Another branch snaps, closer this time. Maybe there's something out there. Maybe it thinks I don't see it yet.

Maybe it's right.

I shift my focus back to the drawing, back to me.

The blank spaces fill in, and my chest feels less hollow. There's something about these lines, these perfect pencil lines, that bring more than a drawing to life. It's a delicate sketch of sanity. Maybe not what I left behind, but a better version. My hand is steady.

The sun sinks lower, catching its own reflection in the pool of my water bottle, and the stars, too, are caught before they scatter.

I'm in the middle of something wonderful and I know it.

I inhale so deeply I almost tip backwards and land in the fire.

It glows against my skin, orange-red in the early dusk, and I feel it spread, slow and

unashamed.

Maybe I won't last a couple weeks out here.

Maybe I won't even last the night. But I can say this much already, I am more than adventurous enough.

The long shadows of trees finally lose their grip on me, on my tentative little slice of wilderness, as they melt into blackness. It's just me now, my breath, and the rise of smoke into a perfect deep blue sky.

The light seeps away, inch by inch, almost as if it regrets letting go.

If I didn't know better, I'd think the whole mountain was folding itself around me.

Instead, I fold my arms over my knees and watch the fire dip and swoon with the night air, breathing right along with it.

The thought should have me reaching for a phone.

For a drink. But there's no signal here, and I'm in control.

No captain at the wheel, just me and the way my skin shivers with pleasure at the thought of an empty horizon.

I stay like this until my eyes feel heavy, until the pencil slips from my fingers and lands on the soft earth. Then I get to work on something just as important as art.

I eat for the first time in hours. Really eat.

Setting up my grate and boiling some water, the pasta is poured in and away we go.

I watch the flames rise to meet my offering, and the fire accepts it with a gentle sigh.

It doesn't take long to cook, and God is it delicious.

Each bite dissolves in my mouth, and I am back to the time before him.

The ones before him, even. I savor the sweet disintegration, brushing sauce from my lips and my lap, thinking maybe this will feed more than hunger.

Maybe this will feed the empty spaces, too.

This is the kind of luxury I forgot existed. Being in the middle of the world and in the middle of nowhere, all at once. Like nothing else matters, not the past or the future, not the words he said or the words he didn't say. The present is enough. I want to taste it all.

The wind picks up again, wrapping the smells of campfire and pine into something far sweeter than an escape.

The smell of victory. And maybe that smell, that dark and earthy mystery, is why I start to believe I'm not alone again.

I put down my guard along with my dinner and start hearing things I shouldn't. Little sighs and snaps and whispers.

This is the land of snapping twigs, not snapping assholes. I laugh at myself again, and I laugh at the mountain's own desperate need for company.

But the longer I listen, the more the laughter catches. In my ears, my throat. Maybe this is exactly the kind of adventure I didn't have in me. Or the kind he didn't have in him.

I'll never know.

But I do know this much. I want to draw another picture. I want to draw it now. Something big and urgent. Something with teeth.

Maybe I'll save it for morning, when my eyes can see what my heart already does.

The fire dies, slow and warm, like the best kind of love. And the pencil feels solid again in my hand, a simple line between me and all of it.

By the time my picture forms, I'm exhausted, so I head into my tent and zip it shut, settling on my bed, grateful that I spent the extra money on one of those heavy duty sleeping bags.

Closing my eyes, I sigh.

Snap.

My eyes snap open and I wonder what's out there. What's been watching me.

A bear, maybe? Good thing I brought spray. Nothing is going to stop me from enjoying my time alone out here. Nothing.

A giggle escapes me. Of course there's wildlife out here. I'm just curious if it's the kind I have to be concerned about. By morning, I'll have my wild theories. And I'll be laughing at those, too.

It's just that I don't want to die.

But maybe I do want to know what it feels like.

Maybe that makes me crazy. But here's what it doesn't make me: afraid.

Another sound from the woods. A hitch in the wind. It should be a wolf that terrifies me, but no. It's something else. It's the fact I would literally rather be eaten by a Goddamn bear than to ever go back to that low-effort prick.

I say the words I was too ashamed to say out loud before. Say them in the dark, like they belong to someone else. Say them and mean them.

I deserve better.

I believe it. I believe it's possible to find better, but at this point my heart is jaded. I stayed when I should have walked, and fuck if that doesn't speak volumes about me as a person.

I deserve better.

There are no white flags to fly, no ghosts to scare, just the lonely march of my own stupid breath as the noise fades and I drift into sleep.

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Chapter Two

Knox

Her breath. Her body. Her sighs, the only sounds I need to hear.

The entire forest falls away until it's just her and me and the way she turns in her sleep, dreaming of things that don't include me.

Yet. I move silent, even the air not daring to shift around me, even the night holding its breath as I push forward, each step leaving my heart pounding faster.

Her tent is close. Then closer. Close enough to taste.

The only thing keeping me out is the thin fabric that I want to tear open with my teeth.

She doesn't even know how close I am. How close she is to being taken.

That reckless oblivion is what brought me here, what brings me closer still.

Each step is a punishment and a reward. I see the sleeping bag pushed down, her skin catching in the moonlight.

A shimmer of sweat where her shoulder meets her neck.

I'm hardly breathing now, her breath the only sound.

Slow and even. As slow and even as my careful approach.

Mine .

I fight against the need to break that rhythm as I stare through the small window at her perfect body. The owl calls in the distance, but it's her soft sounds that hold me here.

It should bother me, this close range, how perfect she looks spread below me, just one flimsy wall between us. Instead, it bothers me that it doesn't. That I don't just rip through that final barrier and claim what I've already made mine.

I stare until she almost stops being real.

She turns in her sleep. I flinch. The tension, coils tight, unrelenting, it knows no relief as she turns again, her hand finding a place beneath the pillow, an unintentional twitch as she sighs and says something low and unintelligible.

As good as saying my name, the way it calls to the darkness in me to spread myself across her lips.

Her hair fans across her eyes. I want to brush it back, just a stray strand that has loosened and curved along her cheek like a perfect fucking decoration.

But I don't. I clench my hand. Then I unclench it and run my fingers along the fabric of the tent, feeling it like I would feel her, feeling her underneath it, not even a breath away.

The mesh window separates us, small enough to keep me out, big enough to let me watch. She's a rare sight, her lips parted and skin bare, trusting her safety to the night. Fucking hell. This woman has me undone just at the sight of her. The sight I've

wanted since the moment she arrived. My sight.

I hold the tent frame and run my fingers over the corded braid holding the pole in, something to distract from the distraction, something to hold me together when nothing else can.

How easy to reach in. To be in. To be in her without resistance. I imagine that it's true, that I finally make my move and let her sleep through the taking. That it's as easy as the way she breathes and the way her breaths match mine until they're one in the same.

One in the same, that's the trick of it.

But this is one part I want awake. I want her to feel it, to fight it, to understand it. I want to fuck her until she can't breathe and she wakes up with my cock buried inside her. Her hips will roll, even as her mind struggles to catch up to the fact that I devoured her soul.

The desperate longing turns into something just as desperate.

Something not as soft, something that I push away but can't let go.

Her chest rises, falls, in sync with mine.

She is unaware of how I match her rhythm, how even my pounding heart finds a way to get in tune, gets in tune without trying. Even in sleep she trains me.

Gianna. My little bird.

This is closer than I should get. I should have been in the cabin.

Not watching her shift against the tight confines of the sleeping bag.

Not seeing how the space wraps around her as tight as the warmth of her breath and raw desire wrap around me.

My breath catches in my throat as she moves again, a subtle twist, her arm sneaking out and bringing the bag back with it.

She turns and tucks it tight beneath her chin, hiding the body I want to swallow, hiding but not enough.

The heaviness in my chest mirrors the heaviness of my body. I want her. The thought lands on me and I need her, the longer it stays. Want her so much that I feel it all the way down, fisting my hand around myself, holding tight until it hurts.

I could go now, slip back through the trees and pretend that it's enough to have gotten this far. But I know the lie before I can even tell it.

Another twitch, a murmur, another restless shift.

This is the part where I close the distance.

This is the part where I close the deal.

I shake my head at how close I am to doing it.

She doesn't see me but I'm here, the idea both soothes and wounds.

I could wake her up, shake her out of her blissful fucking dreams, teach her the sharp truth about this wild place.

I could take her with force and make her crave it.

I could and I won't.

It's too good this way, a game.

I'm playing and she's not. The rules are simple.

I will win, because I'm the only one who holds all the cards.

The tension pulls me forward, pulls me in, pulling my control until it's like a breaking fucking thread.

I dig my nails into my palm and squeeze my cock before I come just from the way I imagine her wrapped around me.

Holding, waiting, bleeding energy into the earth while it bleeds into me.

Wanting it now, wanting to see her fight and make her mine.

I keep my eyes steady on the curve of her neck. If I look too long, if I look away, I won't leave. I have to leave. I have to make her see me.

I have to wait. I need to be sure that she's the one.

The beginning and the end.

I close my eyes.

Then open them.

I'm still here. So is she. She is everything I need and more than I thought I'd want. I don't look away and I don't look too close, waiting for the distance to come on its own, waiting for me to allow it, for me to find some way to break this knot before it chokes me.

The last shred of sense is gone before the rest. It's only my stubbornness, only that rarest fucking moment of clarity, that makes me loosen the knot and makes me wait.

Tomorrow. Or the next day. This is my promise, little bird.

One deep breath and I finally pull back. It's the kind of deep breath I haven't taken since I first found her. A breath that's not the same as hers.

Mine is raspy, rough around the edges. Shaky.

I retreat with clenched hands, with sharp lungs.

Each step away from her burns, until the cold mountain air forces me to look at how far I haven't gone.

I circle the camp, knowing how easy it is to stay and watch over her, but I can't.

I have to go. Away from this little bird.

But I also know how easy it will be to return, to do this right, to turn the tight, dizzy knot into a clean, straight line, drawn as thin as her fucking breath, as thin as mine.

The control isn't like I thought it would be.

But it is. It's not enough until it's all that's left. She can have this night alone, watching from a distance, from up close, from every fucking angle. When it clicks,

she'll know it, know how it happens.

I hold the patience of a Saint. Each second a sacrifice and each second a gift.

I am above her, looking down. I am beside her, looking in.

I am everywhere she hasn't imagined, everywhere she has.

The way her breath moves her ribs and the way her chest moves mine—these are what keep me, what bind me, what draw me to this single fucking point in the center of the world.

A beautiful girl named Gianna, sleeping and mine. And mine. And fucking mine.

It aches. But it's a good kind of ache. I can stand it. It makes me harder. Makes me want it more. Makes me push every ounce of patience to its breaking point, to its snapping point.

She's still sleeping as I slip from her view. Pain sits in my chest as I walk away, but I do it anyway. I walk in wide, impatient circles, tracking the long path from her body to her car, to her escape. The escape she won't make.

There is no escaping me.

I get to her car and lay beneath it searching. Much like I want to be back at her camp. In her tent. Under her. Looking into her fucking soul. Looking in to her whole world, the world I'll have the moment I give in and make her understand. She's mine. She's so fucking mine.

Wrapping my hands around the ignition wire, I draw my knife and it cuts fast, cutting right through. Right through me. The smooth, solid wire of my own restraint, making

me tremble with its sudden clean edges. My breath thick and my head light.

I watch it dangle, and I heard it snap with the snick of an easy cut.

That single moment, a delicious moment, the way she will come to me and be caught and be perfect and be scared.

That single fucking moment stretched forever.

It gets me out from under the car and into my jeans.

Wiping her off, wiping the desire off, wiping every bit of control back into my tightest fucking skin.

The car won't start. She will panic, find the cabin... and walk right into the mouth of the man who won't stop until she's breathing his name.

I disappear into the trees, the tightness across my chest, the tension in my muscles lifting when I realize...

This little bird is about to experience what it feels like to sing from inside a pretty little cage, constructed just for her.

It's enough to make me say it, this beautifully wicked plan. It's enough to make me chuckle as I take the long way back.

It's enough to hold me and it's enough to make her break.

She'll come to me.

When it's time.

All I need to do is wait.

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Chapter Three

Gianna

A wall of black clouds rips across the horizon, threatening to swallow the sky.

This is not something I saw coming. It's too dangerous to stay now.

I work the last stubborn stake out of the ground, laughing in the face of my own scattered fears.

Independence tastes better than I imagined.

Fat drops begin to splatter the hard-packed earth.

The tent almost takes flight before I wrestle it down.

Shove it in my bag. Shove the worry down, too.

A crack of thunder echoes through the trees as I grab my gear and toss it together.

So I'm the fuck-up who can't stick it out in a storm? That's what he would say. But he's not here to watch me stumble. I'm my own goddamn audience now.

My grin stretches wider than the sky. The wind is ruthless and so am I, refusing to flinch as I haul things into a pile.

They can scatter all they want, and so can I.

I'll retreat to my car, sit in the warmth and dry off and then come back when it's clear. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

Strands of hair whip my face, tangling in my open mouth as I try to go faster, my fingers seizing as I work. The white clouds of morning morphing into something darker, meaner, almost supernatural in the way they draw themselves over my little speck of wilderness.

But the air is electric, surging with a pressure that wraps my chest tight and lets me know just how small I am out here. Just how dangerous this could get if I wait too long. This type of storm isn't one you fuck around with.

I collapse the poles and almost collapse with them.

The wind catches me as I pack, trying to throw my shit around, but I go faster.

All that wide-open space from before shrinks with the coming storm. Shrinks like the tent when I stuff it, wet and stubborn, into my backpack.

I'm not weak, and I'm not staying to prove anything to him or the impending shit storm about to unleash holy hell down on me.

Finally, I've got most of my shit stuffed in my pack and I'm moving.

I break the treeline just as the sky cracks open and swallows me whole.

Trying to keep my feet steady, I march over the mud quickly forming.

There, just up ahead. My car. A soft sigh escapes me as I break into a jog.

My fingers don't want to work as I grab my keys and fight with the lock.

Click. The door unlocks and I press the button to open the trunk.

I toss my pack, then slide into the driver's seat, every inch of me trembling. I made it. I think I made it.

I want to laugh. I want to cry. I want to pound the steering wheel and give the sky the finger.

Instead, I just hold the keys in my damp hand, hold them with so much relief that I don't feel the water pooling on the seat or the way my hair sticks to the window as I lean back, let the tension unwind, let my body tell me that I actually made it.

Damn, just in time too. Lightning cracks across the sky, narrowly missing the tops of the trees.

Cold seeps in and I need heat. I need warmth. I need to dry off before the chill sets in. Pushing the key into the ignition, I turn it.

A grinding sound cuts my breath..

One more time.

I turn the key and it groans again, mocking me, forcing out any last hope that was left. Then it's quiet. The storm and me. Nothing else. Nothing else except this wet, awful feeling. I hear it in my head now, grinding even though the key is still. Failure. I can't stay out here in this fucking car.

The temperature drops, cutting through my wet clothes. My skin burns with a sudden, violent, hopeless cold. I have to get somewhere warm and dry. Who the fuck knows

how long this storm will last?

But I don't want to move. It's terrifying out there.

The longer I sit, the harder it gets. Harder and clearer and undeniable.

A cold rush of dread that will drown me before it freezes me if I wait too long.

My breath fogs the windshield, a blur of wet uncertainty, and it's more than I can handle.

More than I can let in. I shove the door open with all my strength, fighting against the fear of being out here, as I grab the door frame and haul myself into the rain.

I don't have much left, but I know what I do have. A body that works and a body that will stop working if I don't find proper shelter.

Pine Ridge Retreat. It can't be far, and I can't be this far gone. Maybe I'm wrong about that too. But maybe not. Maybe not, and that's why I keep running. I need to try.

My body moves without my mind, taking me deeper into a darkness that leaves me guessing.

There should be a trail but I don't see it. I can barely see three fucking feet in front of me. Mud pulls at my feet, trying to pull me into the earth. Almost as if it's resisting my intrusion on its private moment of rage.

Lost.

My boots slip and so does my mind, my perfectly weak and human mind, until there

is only the raw fucking truth left. If I can't find Pine Ridge, I need to find ranger station, or some kind of shelter. and fast.

And that's why I let all the fear slip away. All of it except the hope, the pure goddamn hope that there is a dirt road waiting, one that will take me to where I need to be. The power of the mind. Manifesting safety. Yes, yes that's what I'm doing. Something will show and I'll get to safety .

The forest presses close around me, dark trees creaking as they fight the strength of the wind. The rain is heavy. It bruises my skin as it pelts me.

Each breath cuts my lungs as sharp as the wet branches cutting my face and I just keep running. One foot in front of the other. Maybe I'll die out here.

Thoughts keep racing through my mind and I don't know if I can handle it.

Things like this fear.

Things like this hope.

Somehow I'm staving off the concern that I still haven't found shelter, with the knowledge that I will. I just need to keep trying.

The rain's coming hard and heavy. Sheets of it blur my vision.

I don't care. I keep going, breath short and wild, mud up to my knees.

A rush, a break, I lose my footing, catch myself, palms raw and bloody as I crash onto the ground.

I push forward, desperate. Light flashes through the trees, cracking loudly against the

silence.

I inhale and swallow water instead of air, my lungs working overtime just to keep up. Fuck. I choke. Stumble again, my knees hitting the ground, rocks tearing at my skin.

The storm gets louder, wind screaming like a lost god, tree branches bashing against each other, as one cracks and falls in front of me, blocking my path. Fuck . Desperation seeps in. How long has it been?

Damn, this is taking forever. Even my endurance has limits, has limits and beyond, but I won't let this little storm be one of them. The need to push forward outweighs the exhaustion in my thighs.

I feel like I might float away.

Something flashes through the dark. A light. And it's not lightning.

My saving grace.

I keep going.

One more, one more step. I can taste it. The light doesn't lie. Fight through the burn, breathe. One... two...

I'm right there... so close, I can almost feel the heat from where I'm stumbling.

My legs tremble, and my vision blurs. Safety is just a few meters ahead, but my body refuses to cooperate.

It wants to collapse. I stumble, heart racing, breath tearing through my throat.

I'm almost there. It looms before me, dark and menacing, its edges smearing into the stormy backdrop.

I sway; each step feels like a hard-won prize, each one a promise that I can do this, that I can make it.

But my muscles betray me, refusing to keep moving.

My brain feels foggy, too heavy to think clearly.

My fingers are turning purple, my lips numb.

So... close... don't stop.

A shadow moves by the window and I can't tell if it's real.

Does someone live here? I'm too far gone to know if it's real or care about it anymore.

Suddenly, my legs give out beneath me, and I crawl the last few feet on trembling arms, eyes fluttering shut as everything closes in around me while the rain pours relentlessly down.

I collapse against the steps with an exhausted thud.

The door swings open, its edges sharp and bright against the darkness outside. Hands grip my shoulders gently but firmly; they draw me up and pull me inside. I'm too drained to feel anything else—too exhausted even for fear—as the warmth of the cabin envelops me.

Finally... I can rest.

Darkness eats at my consciousness and claims me as my body sinks into safety.

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Chapter Four

Knox

Her body is limp as I pull her in, the door slamming shut against the violence outside.

She passed right out, exhaustion etched into her skin.

Dark lashes brush pale skin, and she shivers slightly in her unconscious state.

Rain drenches her clothes, her hair, but I know what to do.

I've been waiting for this. I lay her by the fire, watch the glow of flames on her still, soft lips as I grab a towel and begin peeling her from her clothes.

The thought of this happening was a fevered fantasy, but her collapsing in front of me was even more perfect than I could have imagined. So perfectly fucking easy that I almost felt insulted. This little bird sure made my life easy.

Not that I'm complaining.

It's about time that the universe aligns and works in my favor.

She makes a soft sound in the back of her throat, almost a moan, as I strip her wet shirt off, then her sports bra.

Each layer removed, revealing pale skin, breath moving in small shallow bursts from

the rush of warmth.

I want to catch it with my mouth, to make it my own, but instead I hold back, the smallest act of restraint.

The fire builds fast, heat already warming her skin as I cradle her in my arms. Flickers of light catch the curve of her shoulder, the perfect bow of her lips, and I follow each shadow with my hands as I move them down, pulling the clinging clothes off, off, off.

Her shorts slide from her hips, the soft lines of her underwear a temptation I almost let win, but I leave them. For now

A single word calls in the back of my skull, relentless. Mine. Mine. Mine.

My fingers curl, my resolve tenses, my chest tightens, but I leave them on.

I am carving my own intention. I want her to know who I am as she feels me mark her. Claim her. Infect her.

Her nipples harden against the change in temperature and I can't stop staring, at the soft rise and fall of her chest, the sigh that follows. Her oblivion works on me, turning me into a fucking pile of mush. But it's not just oblivion this time. She came here. Sought shelter here.

My shirt is soaked, the knees of my jeans drenched, but I don't care.

I don't want to put her down. She is beauty wrapped in a sinfully delicious package and there's this urge inside me to actually get to know her.

That's the part that's both confusing and frustrating.

I could take her right now, bury myself inside her, leave marks on her skin.

My focus stays on her, a careful attention I haven't felt before.

More of her slips from the fabric, and I wrap the towel around her skin, before working it through her hair, let it soak the drops before letting it fall away, her breasts catching the dim light with their perfection.

My hands move over them, my breath is uneven, my restraint unsteady, but I stop myself from pinning her down and taking her now, how she is, fucking unaware.

I am more patient than I want to be.

And there's a moment. An awful, unbearable moment that feels like tenderness.

It hits me in the chest, a surprise, a crack, an indecent clarity that makes me see her as something besides prey. I move past it. I move fast. If I linger in the space between true want and desire, I might fall for her, and if I fall for her, there's nothing I won't do for her.

In my wildest imagination, I couldn't have conjured up this situation any better than it played out.

I don't understand the softness. But I don't have to.

Finally, she's dry. Her skin smooth and warm, her body still blissfully oblivious.

Her head lolls, but I hold her carefully.

That hike must have fucked her up for her to still be so unaware.

I get it though. She probably tried to escape the storm in her car and realized she was soaked and needed warmth.

Oops. She doesn't know, not a thing, as I finally lift her and pull my shirt off, tugging it over her head, finally clench my jaw at how beautiful she looks wrapped in me.

I pull her close again and put her on the couch, wrapping the blanket over her delicate shoulders, her curvy body that is so fucking mine I almost lose it.

The restraint, the small gift, almost a disappointment but it's too satisfying for that.

This tension is so thick, I might come just from the feeling of waiting.

Sitting across from her, I wait. No sense in freaking her the fuck out before she's even had a moment to acquaint herself with her new boyfriend.

The blanket slips from her, and I want to let it. I do let it. But then I don't. Then I fix it, put it back where it belongs, telling myself that I'll be the one to take it away again.

I touch her mouth with my fingers, trailing the perfect planes of her lips, aching to cover them with mine. I want to crush the line between us. I want it now. But I let it breathe, I let it take shape, knowing how sweet it will be to crush when the moment finally arrives.

She stirs again, almost an hour later, a slow soft stirring that makes my breath as shaky as the fucking fool I've let myself become. It's fucking ridiculous. Fawning over this woman. Someone I hadn't paid mind to before.

What a fool I'd been to sleep on this beauty. But perhaps it's not me that was the problem. She is different. She wears her smile differently. More... carefree.

She moves on the couch, her breath uneven, and I wait, breathing to match hers until it becomes my own. Then her eyes start to open. She's startled at first. She's confused, but I'm ready.

"You're safe," I say. My voice as steady as I knew it would be. "You're safe now."

She tenses, then relaxes. "Where am I?"

"You're inside." The hesitation in her body gives way, just a little. Just enough. "Your clothes were soaked. I was afraid you'd get hypothermia." Her mouth shapes a cautious smile, and the sweetness of it runs through me, addicting and immediate.

"I changed your clothes," I add, before the first sign of concern sets in. "It was the only way to get you warm again."

"Thank you," she says. It's soft, so soft, like she doesn't know whether I'm friend or foe.

"I thought..." A pause. A furrow of her brow that I'll remember. That I'll savor.

"Mhmm?"

Her lips purse and I'm mesmerized. "I thought I was going to freeze to death."

The delight she gives me feels too easy. Too free. "Not if I had anything to say about it." I move closer, but not too close. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

She nods, her eyes scanning the cabin, not quite focusing. "The storm," she says. "My car... I couldn't get it started. It was terrifying out there." She meets my gaze for the first time, and it lands on me with a dizzying force. "You saved me."

Yes. Yes, I fucking did.

Of course, I also almost killed her.

But who gives a fuck about semantics when it worked.

She's still disoriented, her words slow and tangled. "I was at the old campgrounds. No one knew I was there." I notice everything. How she swallows, how her lip catches between her teeth. "I thought I was going to die out there so I tried to get to my car. And then I tried to get to the lodge."

She has no idea.

"You're lucky I saw you collapse outside." My voice steady, my pulse not. "I'm the only one up here." I hold her gaze, let the weight of it settle between us. "Tea?" I offer. "It will warm you up." She nods, her face softening in a way that I want to destroy.

"Can I stay until the storm passes?"

I pretend to think about it, but I've thought about nothing else. "Of course." Her small sigh of relief is a gift, an unexpected pleasure that lands too sweet to bear.

Her hair falls in wet curls, and I follow the line of them as I move to the kitchen. Each step is its own pleasure, each distance is a distance that means nothing, that means more than everything.

I hold the sleeping pill between my fingers, my breath so calm and so calculated. My eyes tracing the outline of her mouth, the promise of her breath, the rise and fall of her chest.

I imagine her under me, limp and exposed and willing.

It feels better than it should.

The pill dissolves completely, and I'm already back at her side. I want to fuck her, but she's not ready and neither am I. All that her being awake is going to do is unleash the feral urges that I'm currently keeping under tight control.

Her hands wrap around the warmth, sipping slowly, steadily, until she meets my gaze and blushes. She's grateful.

"Who are you?"

"A friend. Names Knox. And you are?"

"Gianna."

I hear the fatigue in her voice, watch it tug her mouth.

"It's nice," she says, "being warm." Her eyes drift, the edge of a new panic fading, an unfinished "I should..." before she interrupts herself with a yawn, a yawn that makes me hard.

Again. "What did you...?" Her confusion, her sweetness.

Oh Gianna, you beautiful naive little bird. "What did you say your name was?"

"Don't worry about it now." I lay a hand on her shoulder.

Gentle. Possessive. "You should rest. Use my bed. You'll be more comfortable there.

” I nod toward the open door, where a big, heavy duvet lies, waiting to be wrapped up in her.

“I need to check the generator anyway.” She hesitates. “Go ahead. It’s all yours.”

It’s all fucking mine.

She makes it halfway across the room, then her steps falter, and I’m right there to catch her. She smiles, embarrassed, a sound like laughter catching in her throat.

"Sorry," she mumbles. "Must be more tired than I thought."

The slow blink of her eyes, the sleepy sag of her shoulders, the way she presses her lips together, all of it consumes me until I’m dizzy.

I help her to the bed, and her body gives out the moment she hits the soft comforter.

Her eyes are closed before I’ve even shut the door.

I wasn’t lying. I did need to check the generator. But I also need her to sleep because resisting her right now is tempting fate in ways she’s not ready to tempt.

Once I’m done, I’m going to finish carving a token for my little bird.

Hours later, I watch from the doorway, her body still, her breath moving in a slow, deep rhythm that works into me and breaks me down.

She lies on the bed, chest rising and falling in drugged, helpless sleep.

A step forward and then another. Closer.

Closer. The tension grows tight and electric, a pulse in every inch of me, a pulse that drives me until I am right there, finally letting myself reach down, pull the blanket back, watch her lay beneath me, the shirt riding up her thighs.

So soft, I hardly want to break her.

My pulse is a violent, impossible promise.

Her pulse is a sweet and silent relief. She doesn't know how hard it hits me.

She doesn't know how perfectly she trains me to want to be gentle.

To be anything but what I am. Anything the world says I am.

Her submission without trying. Her careless and beautiful vulnerability.

I could shake the bed, scream, roar, tear myself into fragments, and she'd still be like this, still this pristine, untouched thing that I have every intention of destroying.

Every breath, every drugged and dreamless breath, they run through me like a language I can't speak but finally understand. It drives me to take more than I can handle.

Her leg shifts in sleep, the faintest motion, the slightest suggestion of consent as her knees fall open, and it brings me closer, the need so strong that it's an illness, a sickness, a disease. But only for her.

The blanket is on the floor. My restraint is gone.

She is right here, under me, trusting and unaware, the smoothness of her forehead free of any worry or fear.

That's what I love the most. That's what I want to have.

She's the wildest animal of them all, trusting the wrong things, me most of all, and it only drives me closer, harder, fuller.

Her eyes shift under their lids. It gives me the tight feeling in my chest, the promise of it, the full fucking thrill of our first time being so quiet. So... gentle.

My hand brushes the soft curve of her thigh, up and up and up, the shirt coming with it, and I breathe her in, filling my lungs with the luxury of her, the luxury I'll never have enough of.

She is already mine but I take her again.

I will take her always. She doesn't see. Doesn't know. Doesn't move.

There is no air but hers. There is no breath that isn't an invasion of privacy in my body.

This is suffocating and I drown in it. Drown and surface. Drown and drink the length of her skin, my lips slow as I drag them down her body, too slow, slow and delicate, desperate enough that I'm sure she'll wake, slow enough that she doesn't.

A soft, unconscious moan escapes her. A noise she doesn't know she makes. A noise that runs a million miles through me and cuts a jagged path until I am exactly where I want to be, until it's enough to hold me in place and enough to move me.

A careful drag of my hand, of my body, then another, then more. More, more . My mouth, my tongue, my self-control, all of it tasting, holding, taking. Her nipple, tight between my lips as I suck and lick, drawing it into my mouth.

And yet, even as her bare pussy is on display, I don't touch. I want to, oh God, do I ever, but I don't. I toy with her tits, her nipples, running my hands between her thighs, but stopping short of the prize.

Because somewhere, somehow I realize...

Her pussy isn't the prize.

She is.

And even as that thought shocks me, I grab my cock out of my sweats and come all over those perfectly perky tits.

It'll be enough.

Until she wakes and smiles at me with that perfectly beautiful mouth that I need worshipping my cock.

"Sleep well, little bird." I whisper, pulling my pants back up and tucking myself in.
"Tomorrow, I make you mine."

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Chapter Five

Gianna

I wake slow. Disoriented. Naked beneath the heavy, soft weight of a blanket.

Everything hurts, especially my fucking pride.

My mind tries to make sense of where I am, but I don't have time to process as I look around.

The world tilts when I see a worn shirt stretched across my skin.

Who the hell? What the fuck? Rain. Thunder.

Falling. Shivering. Unaware. Collapsing.

Fragments start to form, shards too scattered to piece together.

The slow pulse of memory pushes through my skull, through my muscles.

My body aches and burns and pulses along with the rhythm of it.

My nipples feel raw under the thin fabric of this stranger's shirt. My skin tight, my thoughts tangled. How did I even get here? My mind is a bad dream, but I know I need to get the fuck up, and my body won't let me.

My limbs feel swollen, heavy and tired, dragging me down.

My breath comes slow and thick as I pull myself into a sitting position.

Damp strands of hair cling to my cheek, the back matted from how I slept.

I'm aware of every ache, every confusion. It's too hot, too tight, and I feel it all.

Especially the way my mind and body won't get with the program, like I've run a marathon and haven't had time to recover.

Looking around, I spot my phone. I stretch for it, fingers trembling against the screen.

It lights up and unlocks. No service, because of course not.

Low battery. Fuck. I turn it off to preserve what little it has.

The room seems to spin around me. The effort drains me more than I care to admit, but it's proof I'm alive.

Barely. My eyes fall shut as I grasp for any sense.

The room is warm, too warm, like I'm breathing inside an oven.

I shift, skin tight against the soft cotton of his shirt.

It moves against me and my body responds, too alive and too strange.

My skin tingles and I'm acutely aware of the fact that I'm wet between my thighs.

My own wetness, to be exact and I fight the urge to rub my legs together to be rid of

the throb.

I blink hard against the sensation, the guilt and need that follow.

This has to be some fucked up dream, and I have to find my way out of it.

Dizzy, dizzy. Breathe. More flashes. The way here, stumbling in a panic. Calm down, Gianna. Breathe. A silhouette, a door, falling. Dizziness and fatigue. Darkness. Heat. Tea.

He carried me to bed and tucked me in... did he...?

The rough heat between my thighs grows, and it leaves no doubt.

Leaves the feeling that I shouldn't be this sticky.

That I should be more angry. More... The pulsing in my body hits each spot I don't want it to.

More... More than a little afraid. But there's a hint of shame and the smallest thrill that makes me forget the rest. For a second.

I take a breath, turn the awful wonder of it into a thought I can hold.

Into something I can maybe understand. My heart is loud in my chest, and so is the heat that pulses through my veins.

He did. He definitely did. He came on me.

What the fuck else did he do? I cover my face, feel my own breath against my hands.

Feel the rise and fall, the hum of it in my bones.

Feel the places he's touched, even if I'm only just now realizing.

Despite what my ex said, I am very attuned to my body. To how it reacts. How it feels.

And right now it feels... alive in ways it hasn't in ages. And that terrifies me. I should be terrified, but honestly, years of shitty sex will do that to you. This... if my savior did use me as a come dumpster... would it be so bad? It's more than I ever got with Brad.

I get out of bed before I think it through. There's no other way out except through the bedroom door. The window has bars on it. So... I have no choice but to put my proverbial big girl panties on and go see who the fuck is waiting out there for me.

The edges of the room swim as I stand. It's too much, all of it. I feel every cut, every bruise, every memory on the verge of coming back to me. God my knees hurt. Looking down, I can see the scrapes and bruises, but they're clean. Like someone washed the dirt and blood away to let them heal.

With a sigh, I force my legs to walk out the door before I give myself a chance to chicken out.

He sees me before I see him. His gaze, the kind that burns. His eyes are a trap I walk straight into, his body leaning casually against the counter as I approach. The scent of coffee fills the air, fills my head, and he fills everything else, even my confusion. The grin says it all.

"You're up."

My stomach turns. My pulse turns. Everything inside me turns except for my body, still under his control. The grin widens. "Wasn't sure you'd be moving this early. You were exhausted last night."

Everything is warm and close and deliberate. Each movement as precise as his stare. He pours coffee, his gaze unblinking, eyes tracking me, seeing entirely too much judging by the small smile that crinkles the sides of his lips. "You had a rough night."

I clam up. He's making me nervous, but not in a 'you scare me' kind of way.

More in a 'Goddamn how is this man so sexy' kind of way.

He's got to be at least 6'4, piercing blue eyes, light, sandy hair.

But it's cropped close to his head... I'm thinking he's military?

His biceps are massive and it definitely looks like he weight lifts.

I can't stop staring and he notices because he clears his throat and cocks his head.

"Breakfast?" A pause. His eyes linger on the hollow of my throat, on the curves he's thoroughly eye fucking.

Finally, my voice finds its way back to me. "Who are you?"

"Knox. Knox Milano. The guy who saved your life."

His confidence is unnerving. The air smells like syrup and heat and the slightest bit of danger, and all of it wraps me up.

"I saw you collapse." He motions to the pancakes piled on a plate and the

ridiculousness of it all makes me bark out a nervous laugh.

"Brought you in. Warmed you up." My pulse quickens at the reminder. " I guess it worked."

My throat is dry. My body isn't. Not at all. It's so fucking obvious. If my nipples could get any harder, they'd break glass.

"So?" He leans back, never breaking eye contact. "You hungry?" I swallow against the wild thing inside me that says yes to all of it. The desperate, wrong, and beautiful thing that says yes and says more.

He's exactly the type momma warned me about. Dangerous. Electrifying. Like standing too close to the sun and expecting to come away unscathed.

Stupid girl, you should run.

I can hardly breathe with the way he looks at me, with the way he makes my skin ignite and my mind struggle to keep up. The slow drag of his eyes is more dangerous than I want to admit. I should be gone. Should have made a dash for the front door when I had the chance.

But the chance is gone, and I'm still here.

"Gianna," I manage, the word catching in my throat as he nods like it's a prize. "My name's Gianna." A small, satisfied grin. A dangerous one. I try to look away but I can't. He knows what I am before I do.

"I know your name. Coffee?" He asks again, patiently. As if I'm a child unable to understand words. The cup is already in his hand, and I reach for it, trying to seem unaffected. Trying to keep my hands from shaking.

His attention is consuming, leaving no room for anything else, and it takes all I have to speak. "How long was I out?"

"Not as long as you needed."

I should hate this. Should hate him. Should not feel this drawn, this frantic, this absolutely wrecked human being who thought he was allowed to jizz on my tits because he saved me. But I am, and it's fucked and now I'm conflicted.

His gaze locks onto mine, more intense than anything I've known. Than anyone I've known. A force of fucking nature, this man.

I know what he is. He's the devil wearing the smile of an angel.

But I don't know what to do about it.

"Breakfast sounds good," I say, trying to hold on to something, trying to make it seem like my choice.

We sit across from each other, like this is a first date and we're two lovers, sharing pancakes and coffee.

"Do you live here?" I ask.

"As much as anywhere else, I suppose." He doesn't look away. Not once. Not fucking ever. I feel my cheeks burn. It wasn't the answer I wanted, but it was. It was and it wasn't, like everything about this.

The kitchen is quiet. His presence is not.

I try again. "It's beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as some things." The pause after he says it, the way it hangs.

Such a smooth talker. "You say that to all the women you kidnap?"

He chuckles. "Kidnap? You came here. And to answer your question, no Gianna. Those words are reserved for you."

My fuck he's intense. Not even keeping anything behind those lips that look so soft, they'd destroy me and rebuild me with one kiss.

I fill my mouth with food, trying to fill the spaces I can't close up. Trying to fill the emptiness, the hunger, the suffocating want.

I fight to keep the nervousness down, but it's like trying to push a fire out with more flames. The shame of wanting him, even as a one night stand, a rebound, of sorts. Of knowing he knows. Of wanting more than I've ever wanted anything.

Certainly more than I ever wanted to fuck my ex.

But how the hell does one approach something like that?

Yeah, um, so let's bang and then I'll be on my merry way?

I focus on the table as I think. It's ridiculous, really.

I should be calling the cops and yet... My pussy decides to start throbbing again and I squirm, trying to get rid of the feeling.

"Seems like you found a nice spot." My voice is too loud, too eager, too fragile. "It's isolated. Remote. Out of the way."

"Great for getting away."

Or getting luring unsuspecting women inside. Oh fuck, what the hell am I doing? This shit is dangerous as fuck. I am going to land up on Missing Women posters .

The heaviness settles over me, and I don't push it off. I let it in, knowing how dangerous it is.

"What about you?" He asks, tilting his head to study my face, my body language. "How'd you end up in the middle of nowhere?"

I swallow hard, and the sound seems to echo. "Thought I'd unplug," I say. My tongue trips over the words. "Take some time alone. I wasn't... wasn't expecting this. The storm. I mean. It wasn't in the forecast for this week."

"Hmmm, weather up here can change pretty rapidly. But since it's still going, you're welcome to stay another night."

I can hardly speak because my mouth is so dry and it's as if there's cotton balls in my mouth.

Taking a long sip of coffee, I clear my throat and my voice comes out a squeak. "I don't want to impose."

He leans in, and it makes me shiver, goosebumps spreading over my skin. "Stay as long as you need."

A careful breath. I put the mug down, pretend my hands are steady. He is so close. Too close and not close enough. His knee touches mine under the table, and I lose the rest of my defenses. "If you're sure..." A quiet plea that shames me, a quiet plea that saves me. A quiet, soft defeat.

"I'm sure."

The mug slips, spilling my coffee. Exhaustion, to be sure. Definitely not him. He's not affecting me this way. Nope. He watches me clean it up, knows it's me who's undone. Not the fucking coffee.

My God what have I just agreed to?

It would be safer in the woods.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

Chapter Six

Knox

Morning is a lie. The sun pretends to rise in this shit part of the world, but all it really does is turn the sky from black to the color of old bruises.

The light that leaks through the windows is gray, weak, half-hearted.

I don't usually love coming here because rains so much, but that's the Pacific Northwest for you.

The embers in the fireplace have all but given up.

I didn't see the need to keep them alive, not when I had something better to watch.

She is so beautiful when she sleeps. It's quiet in here.

The kind of quiet you get when you wake next to a woman you want more than air, but all you can do is wait and watch.

So I do both, waiting for Gianna to shift, her small breaths catching now and then as she dreams about God knows what.

She's wrapped in the blanket, blissfully unaware of the dirty thoughts that roam my mind.

She pulls it closer around her, a soft sigh escaping her lips.

It does nothing to hide the line of her hip, the bare length of leg she's left exposed in sleep.

My shirt hangs off her, too big in the shoulders, almost obscene in the way it gapes around her tits when she rolls.

I've never wanted anything so much as I want to peel that blanket away and taste the skin beneath it.

The urge to touch her is an ache I've had since she walked into my life.

Since she caught my attention. The difference now is she's breathing easy, safe, and all I want is to keep her that way.

She stirs. Her lashes flutter. I watch the moment her consciousness returns, slow and ugly like a hangover, her first instinct to curl into the warmth, her second to flinch at the unfamiliar.

She sits up, the blanket falling away, and her gaze lands on me with the dull suspicion of someone who's been caught stealing.

I like that. I like the way she gets defensive before she's even remembered her own name.

"Morning," I say, and it comes out smoother than I mean it. I'm not a morning person, not a person at all most days, but she brings out something feral in me, a kind of animal patience. I watch her swallow the word, roll it around in her mouth like it might taste better the second time.

She looks away, trying to hide her discomfort at the fact that I didn't sleep last night and choose to sit here, in the corner of the room, unable to look away from her. "You always get up this early?" Her voice is rough. It suits her.

"I like to see the world before it ruins itself," I say, and it's true.

I like to see things before the tourists piss all over them.

Rich fucks who come here. I don't particularly care about the resort, much less the people in them.

I just hate when I'm interrupted. My silence is my own and small talk makes me rather homicidal.

She rubs her eyes. Her hair is a rat's nest, dark and wild. It's beautiful, actually. Makes her look like she survived something. "Is there coffee?" she asks, voice softer now, like she's decided not to even acknowledge the fact that I can't keep my eyes off her.

"Yep. I'll get you a cup."

I pour a mug, and head back into the room and hand it to her.

She doesn't say thank you, just wraps her hands around the heat and drinks.

My eyes track every movement, the way her fingers grip, the way her lips part for the steam.

It's almost a religious experience, a 'coming to Jesus' moment where I realize that I want to both devour and preserve her.

I could worship her, if I was the kind of man who believed in worship.

She drinks, then sets the cup down on the nightstand. Her eyes slide over to the door. I watch the tension draw her shoulders up, the subtle shift in her jaw. She's thinking about leaving. Of course she is.

"I should check my car," she says, not looking at me.

I nod, slow and deliberate, then shake my head. "You'll want to give it a while," I tell her. "Storm last night knocked out half the road. Trees are down, and the mud's a mess. Besides, you'd freeze your ass off before you made it three miles."

She bristles. "I'm not helpless." The words are a reflex, I can tell. They come out clipped, defensive, like she's had to say them a thousand times to people who thought she was.

"I know you're not," I say, softer than I want to.

"But you'd die anyway. Not for lack of effort, but because the world doesn't give a shit about effort.

It only cares about who's left standing at the end.

"I sip my coffee, watching her over the rim of the mug.

"You want to get out of here, you'll need help. "

She doesn't answer right away. She looks at her hands, the calluses on her fingers, the fresh scabs from the hike. One's I took time to clean last night. I want to run my tongue over each one, but I don't move. I wait.

Finally she sighs. “When can we try?”

“Tomorrow,” I say. “Give the ground time to settle. I can look at your car then. Probably just a battery thing, maybe the starter. Either way, I’ll get you moving.” I let the words hang, then add: “If you want to leave.”

She blinks at that, and her whole body shifts a little. A tiny, almost imperceptible flinch. She’s not sure if she wants to go. I file that away, a small victory in a long war.

She stands up, the blanket dragging behind her, and starts to pace the room.

Her bare feet are silent on the wood. I watch the way she moves, the way she avoids the animal skin rug, the way she lingers by the window.

She presses her palm to the glass, breath fogging the pane, and I catch a glimpse of her in profile—shoulders squared, chin up, the muscle in her jaw ticking as she fights whatever war is happening in her head.

“You staring at me for a reason?” she asks, not turning around.

I smile, baring my teeth. “I like what I see.”

She flips me off, but it’s half-hearted. I can see the corners of her mouth twitching, the urge to laugh fighting with the urge to stay aloof.

She walks out of the room, to the couch, sits, pulls the blanket up over her knees. I follow like a lost fucking puppy. She watches me now, eyes narrowed, measuring. “You live out here alone?”

“No. I live in the city. Every now and then I come out here,” I tell her. “I like the

quiet, even if I hate the fucking rain. I like knowing what's mine."

"And what is?" Her voice is sharp. Like a test.

I lean forward, set my mug down, elbows on knees. "Everything I can see. Everything I can touch." My eyes rake her body, slow and unapologetic. "Sometimes, the things I want most are the ones I stop myself from taking."

She doesn't look away. Doesn't blink. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Why not both?" I say, and her breath stutters just enough for me to see the effect.

The silence that follows is thick, sticky. It clings to the air. I can taste her uncertainty, her curiosity, the small, secret thrill she gets from being watched. She doesn't know what to do with it, so she just sits, hands in her lap, waiting.

"I need clothes," she says finally, almost a whisper.

I get up, the movement deliberate, and cross the room to a battered old trunk.

Noah cleared out Cassidy's shit when they moved, but left some of her shit here on Kairo's request. Guess he wanted them in case Harbor needed clothes.

I can feel her eyes on me, taking in the width of my back, the scars on my arms, the tattoo curling up my neck.

I'm proud of every mark. They're warnings as much as they are history.

I pop the trunk, dig around, and come up with a pair of worn PJ shorts and a t-shirt.

They're going to be too small for her, and it sends a thrill through me.

That will let me eye fuck her more easily, with her busting out of the fabric that will hardly hide her curves.

I toss them over, and she catches them one-handed.

“Thanks,” she says, this time looking straight at me.

I nod. I wait as she stands, awkward for a second, and looks around for privacy. There isn’t any, not unless she goes to the bedroom... in which case I’ll just follow her anyway. She knows it, and I know it, and for a moment she pretends to care, then just turns her back and drops the blanket.

I watch the line of her spine, the dip at the base of her back, the pale stretch of skin before the shorts swallow it whole.

She wriggles them up, and they fit tight over her thighs.

She struggles with the waist band, laughs under her breath, and then yanks the t-shirt down.

It hugs her tits, clings to her ribs. She turns, arms crossed, cheeks flushed.

She hates that I’m watching, but she loves it more.

“Better?” I ask, my voice low.

She nods. “Yeah.”

We spend the next few hours in a kind of dance.

She tests the edges of the room, the edges of me.

She opens cabinets, pokes through drawers, makes a show of not being afraid.

I let her. I let her think she's free. I make her a sandwich and watch the way she devours it, like she hasn't eaten in days.

Damn, I love a girl who isn't afraid of eating and enjoying it.

At some point she sits across from me, legs pulled up, her chin resting on her knees. "Why are you being nice?" she asks.

"Do you want me to stop?" I counter. I half-debated on it. This isn't me. The nice guy. I'm more introspective than extroverted, I think murderous thoughts but have enough restraint not to act on them.

Though... for her... I would. I've been in bar brawls and prison fights.

Yeah, my time in state jail was a fucking trip.

Got tripped up on illegal carry with a weapon whose serials I'd filed off.

Good thing considering I had been on my way to some stupid fucking college fight that Creed had started.

With every intention of killing the guy.

That stop saved me from a longer stint in prison because it turned out, Creed had pissed off the police commissioners son. That pig stopping us that day saved his ass.

She shakes her head. "No. Just... not used to it, I guess."

I stare at her, let the silence stretch until she squirms. "People are shitty," I say. "But

not all the time. Sometimes, you get lucky.”

Not with me though, little bird. Soon, you’ll be running, screaming from me and you’ll understand why they say ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

She smiles at that, a real one, and I feel it hit me in the gut. I want to ruin it. I want to make it permanent. Maybe I’ll tattoo it across my chest.

The day crawls by. We talk about nothing—her job, her travels, the dumbass ex who thought he was doing her a favor by dumping her.

She doesn’t know that I know all of this already, that I made it my business to know her inside and out.

Once I set my sights on her, I used Noah’s surveillance systems to dig into her life.

I ask questions anyway, just to hear her answer, just to see the way her mouth moves when she lies.

At dusk, she stands by the door, staring out at the line of trees bleeding into the sky. “It’s beautiful out there,” she says.

“It’s beautiful in here, too,” I say, and I mean it.

She glances over her shoulder, hair catching the last of the light. “You’re full of shit,” she says, but it comes out gentle. Like a compliment.

I close the distance, just a step, maybe two, and reach out. My hand lands on her shoulder, my palm heavy, fingers curling just enough to let her know who’s in charge. She doesn’t flinch, doesn’t pull away. She just stands there, breathing slow and even.

“You ever think about just... disappearing?” she asks, voice quiet.

“All the time,” I say, and I let my hand slide down her arm, slow, steady, the way you’d touch something fragile but not breakable. I can feel the heat of her through the fabric, the tension wound up tight beneath the skin.

She leans into it, just a little, and I know I have her.

“Tomorrow, then,” she says. “We’ll see if you can get me out.”

I nod, but my mind is already working the angles, already planning every second I get with her. I could keep her here for days, weeks, years. She wouldn’t know the difference until she tried to leave.

As the light dies, I let her go. “You can have the bed again,” I tell her. “I’ll take the couch.”

She hesitates, then nods, then disappears into the bedroom, the door left half-open behind her.

I sit in the dark, staring at the embers, watching the last of them flicker and fade. The air is thick with her scent, sweet and full of promise.

I pour myself another coffee, fingers tight around the mug, jaw aching from the effort it takes to play nice. Tomorrow I’ll check her car, I’ll play the hero a little longer. But tonight, I let myself think about what it would be like to never let her go.

Mine. The word tastes good on my tongue.

It always does.

The coffee isn't cutting it and my thoughts are turning dark again.

How easy it would be to seduce her, to do this the nice guy way.

But something about her defiance makes me want to see how she feels when she shatters.

When the illusion of control breaks and she realizes there's been nothing but the truth of me staring her in the face this whole time.

I pour myself a drink, whisky burning a hole in my stomach.

I watch the moon come up, a thin, sickle thing barely bright enough to cut through the trees.

I want her to come to understand that I'm fighting against my base nature, all for her to figure out the game. A test, if you will. Downing my drink, I realize that my cock is so hard it's painful.

When I finally move, it's to the bedroom door. I stand outside, listening. Her breathing is even, almost peaceful. I imagine her on her back, arms flung wide, taking up space she's too proud to admit she wants. I imagine her dreaming of water, or blood, or me.

I lean against the frame, let the darkness settle in my bones.

This is the part I like best—the waiting. The knowing. The slow bleed of control from her world into mine.

She'll wake in the morning and think nothing has changed. She'll eat, and dress, and ask me to go fix her car, and I'll say yes. I'll always say yes. But even through the

compulsion to give her what she wants, I know I'll never let her leave.

And when it's time, when she's ready, when she's so sure of her freedom that it's the only thing she believes in, that's when I'll take her.

Because that's what I do. That's what I am.

The perfect host.

The patient predator.

The man who won't let go of what's his.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

Chapter Seven

Gianna

I wake to the sound of an axe.

It's not a cartoonish, "here's Johnny" kind of threat, more like the metronome of rural necessity—steady, unhurried, precise. Each thunk splits the air in measured increments.

He's been out there for twenty, maybe thirty minutes, hacking away at an old tree near the edge of the clearing.

I watched him from the window for a while, arms bare, blade flashing above his head, the muscles in his shoulders moving like something out of a low-budget god mythology movie.

But there's only so much skin-show before it starts to look like I'm thirsty for him, and besides, the longer I stare the more it feels like he's putting on a show for me.

The kind of show that ends in a grave and a clever local news headline.

No thanks. Today, he fixes my car and I can get back to tenting. Peace. Calm. Serenity.

The moment he's out of sight, I make a decision. If I'm going to die in this cabin, I want to at least know what kind of horror movie I'm starring in. Something tells me

this is the kind with a slow build and a lot of unsolved trauma.

I slip out of bed, still in my borrowed t-shirt, and prowls the main room.

There's something off about him and I have every intention of figuring out what the hell it is.

The rough-hewn furniture is heavy, masculine, exactly what you'd expect from a guy who split his own logs and probably his own enemies too.

I drag my fingers along the spines of battered books.

Titles: wilderness survival, two volumes of Dostoevsky, and a bent copy of *Misery* with the cover ripped off.

The kitchen drawers are full of mismatched cutlery, the kind people hoard from takeout orders, and underneath, in the lowest drawer, a single paring knife that's been sharpened so many times the blade is almost concave. I pocket it. Just in case.

The main hallway has three doors. The first is the bathroom—tiny, utilitarian, and disappointingly normal. The second is a closet, empty except for a battered duffel and a raincoat that looks dusty as hell. It's the third door that stops me cold.

It's at the end of the hallway, heavy and painted a dark, glossy brown that doesn't match the rest of the cabin.

You wouldn't even notice it if you weren't looking.

The knob is black metal, cold even though the rest of the cabin is baking.

I reach out to turn it and see, right at eye level, a halo of deep scratches around the

lock.

They cut through the paint, angry and erratic, some of them wide and shallow, some so deep they reach bare wood.

The edges are stained darker, like something got in and wouldn't come out.

I put my ear to the door. Nothing but silence. I try the knob. Locked, of course. Of course.

Something in my chest kicks into gear, full of adrenaline and survival instinct. My palms start to sweat. I'm not sure if it's the door or the realization that this is real. There is something on the other side of this door that does not want to be seen. I want to see it anyway.

I keep moving, opening cabinets, feeling the air with my hands.

In the built-in hutch, I find a length of rope.

Not just rope—hemp, thick and neatly coiled, the ends bound with electrical tape.

I lift it out, and it's heavier than I expect.

I can smell the residue of sweat and dirt, and as I unspool it, the fibers catch on my skin.

There's a spot near the center that's gone fuzzy, like it's been looped and pulled and tightened, again and again, until the strands started to break down.

There's a dark stain near one end, brownish and irregular, and it's not sap.

I try to laugh at myself, but the sound comes out wet and small.

I imagine the look on his face if he caught me holding his favorite murder rope and almost drop it, but curiosity is a sick, bitch of a thing, and I can't let it go.

I try to remember every episode of Criminal Minds I ever binge-watched, and then immediately wish I hadn't.

The next find is almost accidental. A tiny alcove near the door, a single shelf, and on it, a wooden bird no bigger than my palm.

At first glance, it's just a little souvenir, the kind of thing you buy at a craft fair and forget until you need to dust it.

But this one is different. The wings are sharp, almost knife-edged, and the eyes are obsidian beads set too close together.

It looks like it wants to take flight and never come back.

I turn it over. My blood freezes.

There, on the base, scratched in, are the words:

“G.V.”

My initials. My fucking name.

For a second, I can't move. My hands go dead cold. My vision tunnels, the world reduced to the three inches between my face and this horror-show pigeon. The only thing that drags me out is the sound of the axe.

It's stopped.

The silence is immediate, total. The way it would feel if you went deaf in the middle of a symphony, every note suddenly vacuumed out of the air.

I hear my own breath. There's no way he carved this in two days.

The rope is still on the table, staring at me.

I rush to put it where I found it. I'm in such a panic, I forget to put the bird back.

The front door creaks. Heavy boots on the porch, then nothing.

I imagine him standing there, listening, calculating the new shape of the room from the echo of my fear.

I imagine the lock on that door, the scratches.

What the hell does he do in this cabin? I want to run, but my feet are stuck to the floor with pure terror.

I'm not ready for this scene. I'm not even sure what kind of movie I'm in.

But I know who the villain is. And I know he's coming.

One minute I'm in a state of panic, frozen to the spot, the next he's in the door, axe slung across his back like it's just another piece of him.

He's wearing a different shirt now—dark green, clings to his chest in a way that makes it look less like clothing and more like a shield.

His boots leave muddy prints on the hardwood.

He stops three feet away, breathes in, takes in everything.

His eyes aren't blue, not really—they're that metallic color that shifts with the light, and right now they're so bright they don't even look human.

He glances behind me. To where I didn't shut the door all the way to where his rope is hidden and he smirks...

For a second, neither of us speaks.

I want to say something witty, but my voice is gone. Buried in the part of me that's bracing for impact, bracing for the inevitable. He walks forward, slow and deliberate, and sets the axe down by the door. It makes a heavy, final sound against the wall.

He doesn't lunge. He doesn't yell. He just moves into my orbit, a planet with its own gravity, and holds out his hand for the statue. I want to hold onto it, make him earn it, but my fingers betray me. The bird slips out of my grip and into his palm, like it was always his to begin with.

He turns it over, thumb tracing the gouged letters on the base. He doesn't smile. He doesn't frown. He just breathes, deep and untroubled.

"Dangerous thing," he says, that low timber doing weird shit to my stomach. "Looking too deep into a man."

His voice is even, almost lazy, but the warning sits under every syllable. I know it's meant for me, meant to teach me something about curiosity and the price of staring down the wolf in his own den.

He circles me, one slow revolution, feet barely making a sound. The only thing louder is my heartbeat, and I know he hears it. I feel it in my throat, a vibration that threatens to turn into a scream or a sob or maybe something else entirely.

He stops at my back, so close I can feel the heat coming off his body. I hold perfectly still.

“Some truths,” he says, and the words are right against my ear now, “should be earned, little bird.”

The air crackles. I realize I haven’t exhaled in a full minute. My knees are close to giving out, but the rest of me is too proud to let them.

He’s not angry. He’s not anything. He’s just the stone face of fate, waiting for me to blink first.

When he moves, it’s to brush a strand of hair off my neck, fingers grazing the skin like it’s an afterthought. He sets the bird on the shelf behind me, careful and precise, then steps back, letting the space fill with something thick and alive.

He looks at me for a long time, then past me, to the window where night is starting to muscle in. In my discoveries, I all but forgot about my car. Maybe I’ll just leave and go find the resort...

He pulls down the blinds, one by one, the sound sharp as gunshots in the quiet. Then he moves to the fireplace, stacking logs with practiced efficiency, striking a match and holding it steady until the kindling flares.

I stand there, useless, still trembling, until I realize he’s watching me in the reflection of the glass. Watching every movement, every flinch, every panic-stricken breath.

The fire catches. Shadows crawl up the walls, giving the illusion that this place is cozy. The illusion of safety. The only thing more alive than the flames is the man who brought them.

He settles into the armchair, legs stretched out, head tilted. He doesn't say another word. Just watches, the way a hunter watches a trapped thing, curious what it'll do next.

I wish I could hate him. I wish I could hate myself for needing to know what comes after.

"Um... I'm gunna go sleep... tomorrow. Car. I need to go." My words come out in stutters.

"Mhmm." Was all the acknowledgement he gives me.

I can't sleep.

It's not just the adrenaline. It's not just the fear.

It's the sense that the house is still breathing, that the shadows from the fire have found new ways to tangle around me, and none of them are friendly.

I stare at the ceiling and listen for footsteps.

Sometimes I think I hear them—just outside the door, sometimes closer—but it could be the house settling, the wind picking up, or my heart beating so hard it moves the air.

Or maybe it's him. Waiting for you to sleep...

I replay every detail. The bird, the door, the rope.

The way Knox said “dangerous thing” like it was a curse and a love letter in the same breath.

The way he watched me across the room, eyes never closing, never forgiving.

Every time I start to drift, I see the flashes behind my eyelids—letters cut into wood, knots tightening, paint peeling away from deep, deep gouges.

Knees to my chest, I curl into a ball, tucked into his oversized shirt, and wait for sleep to claim me the way it always does: violently, without warning.

The dream comes in pieces.

First the forest, but not the real one. This one is made of teeth, the trees bending toward me like fingers.

I run, but my legs barely work. They’re full of mud, or maybe something thicker.

Every footstep lands with a wet, sucking sound.

I know he’s behind me but I don’t dare look back.

I want to scream, but the sound catches in my throat, locked behind my tongue like a dirty secret.

When I finally make it to the cabin, the door slams shut behind me.

The fire is lit, same as before, but the room is warped and doubled, like I’m seeing it through a funhouse mirror.

He's there, but not—his face is a blur, a smear of light, except for the eyes.

They burn blue, sharp and unblinking, twin stars in the dark.

He's sitting in the chair, hands folded, patient as death.

He stands. In the dream he's taller, broader, his body all edges and shadow. When he comes close I shrink back, but there's nowhere to go. He reaches for me, slow and deliberate, and puts both hands around my neck.

His hands are hot. Not just warm, but burning, like he's been holding them to the fire for hours.

They fit so perfectly it feels like they were made for this, for me, like I'm the last puzzle piece in a box he's been searching for his entire life.

He squeezes—slow at first, just enough to make the air catch, then harder, harder, until my breath comes in tiny, desperate gasps.

I want to claw at him, I want to run, but all I do is stare up into the void where his face should be. The nothingness. The absence. Except for the mask.

I hadn't noticed it at first, but now it lowers onto his head—a demon mask, half red, half black, with curling horns painted the same color as blood. He pulls it into place, hides everything but his lips and chin, and then he leans in, lips brushing my ear:

“Some truths should be earned, little bird.”

He squeezes harder.

I'm not scared, not really. I should be, but I'm not.

Instead, I feel the heat between my legs, a pulse that matches the throb in my throat.

My body betrays me. I'm shaking, but it's not from fear.

It's something else, something alive and dark and hungry.

I feel myself bucking against him, desperate for the friction, desperate for the permission to let go.

He presses his thumb to my windpipe, and I come apart.

The dream fractures, splits into light, and I jerk awake in a sheet of sweat.

My body is trembling, heart clawing its way out of my chest. My hand is between my thighs, pressed hard against my own wetness.

I gasp, half in pain, half in pleasure, and it takes a full minute before I can breathe again.

I lie there, frozen. Staring into the dark.

There's no sound from the rest of the cabin. No footsteps, no breathing, no nothing. Just me, alone with the ghost of my own fucked-up fantasy.

I wipe my hand on the sheets and curl in tighter, shivering even though the room is warm. I know I should be scared. I know I should pack my shit and leave. But I also know that if I walk out that door, he'll find me.

Worse, I want him to.

I want to see what's behind the door with the scratches.

I want to know if the rope is for me. I want to see the mask in real life, feel the weight of it, press my fingers to the horns and taste the sweat and smoke and iron.

I want him to wrap his hands around my throat and call me “little bird” with that smile, the one that isn’t really a smile at all.

I want to see if I’m the kind of girl who runs, or the kind who stays and finds out what happens next.

I roll onto my back, stare at the ceiling, and wait for morning to save me.

But deep down, I know it won’t.

Chapter Eight

Knox

She hardly slept last night. I sat outside the door and listened to her talk to herself for hours, trying to process what the fuck she found. So far, she's seen my level-headed side. Pretty quick here she's going to get a taste of the monster inside me.

It's wearing me thin trying to be a gentleman when I want to be anything but.

I listen to her footsteps for an hour before I bother to go in.

She's wearing a path into the floorboards, the same frantic route every time: window, then door, then window, then door.

As if the outcome would change with each repetition, as if she'd wear down the lock with nothing but persistence and raw animal panic.

She's not wrong. Persistence does win, sometimes. I want to see how long it takes before hope burns out and something else flickers in.

To be perfectly honest, all I can think about is that look of terror in her eyes while she's on her knees in front of me, sucking me into the back of her throat as I face fuck her. Tears streaming down her face as she chokes.

God, wouldn't that just be the most holy of sights?

When I finally enter, she's standing at the window, palms splayed on the glass, fogging it with her breath.

Her shirt is too big, the one I gave her, and it slides down her shoulder.

A wave of shock hits me when I realize that despite her fear, she still chose to wear my shirt instead of finding another one.

I take a moment to study her. The way her hair clings to the sweat on her neck.

The way she chews the inside of her lip, fighting not to cry.

She notices me and spins, eyes wild. "Open it," she says.

Her voice is hoarse from hours of talking to herself, or maybe screaming at the wind.

"Let me out. You said you'd fix my fucking car yesterday and somehow it keeps getting pushed off.

Unlock the damn door so I can go down to the Retreat and figure it out on my own. "

I move slow, measured, crossing the room with my hands in my pockets. "You'd last half a mile," I say, "if you were lucky." I let my eyes travel down her body, lingering, because I want her to see it. I want her to feel it. "It's safer here."

She bares her teeth. "Safer for who?"

A low chuckle shakes loose from my chest. I like her anger. I like it more than fear. I like it when the prey looks the predator in the eye and dares him to do his worst.

She's trembling, but she stands her ground as I stop a foot away. The heat coming off

her is something I want to bottle, something I want to rub all over my skin until the scent of her sticks. I lean in, but she doesn't move. She's learning.

"What do you want from me?" she demands. Her hands are fists at her sides, nails biting into her own skin. "What are you going to do?"

I take my time, let the silence stretch out between us. I want her to think about it, want her to feel the weight of every second I don't answer.

"Why do you have rope in your drawer?" she blurts. "Why do you have a bird with my name on it? Why—" her voice shakes, breaking the mask for a half second—"why do you stare at me when you think I'm asleep?"

I don't bother denying it. Instead, I touch her face, careful, like I'm inspecting bruised fruit at the market. Her skin is hot under my fingers, feverish and tight. "Because you're mine," I say, calm and cold, like a doctor telling some asshole he's going to die. "And because I can."

She tries to slap me. It's beautiful, really. The way her body coils, the way her arm flies, the way she commits to the strike even though she's shaking. It lands across my cheek, stinging and bright. I let the pain bloom, let it settle in. I want her to know she got through.

She's so stunned that I let it happen, she barely has time to react before I grab her wrist and pin it behind her back, twisting her body into mine. Her breath explodes from her lungs, wild and sharp.

"That all you got?" I murmur into her ear.

She kicks me in the shin, hard enough to hurt. Then she spits, the fleck landing on my collarbone, where it glistens like a second mouth. I press my hips into her, letting her

feel the evidence of what she does to me.

Her voice is thin, almost a whimper. “Don’t.”

But she doesn’t mean it. Not really. Her body betrays her in every way that matters, the arch of her back, the way she leans into me, the way her fingers curl into my shirt instead of clawing for the exit.

I take her face in my hands and kiss her.

I don’t give her the option to resist. My mouth is a weapon, a hunger, a warning.

I bite her lower lip and draw blood. She tries to pull away, but I hold her there, let the taste of her fill my mouth.

When I finally let her breathe, she gasps, shaking all over.

“You fucking psycho,” she hisses, but her arms are around my neck, her nails digging deep into my skin.

I walk her backward to the bed, never breaking the kiss. She tries to twist away, but I grip her waist and throw her down, hard. She lands with a yelp, legs splayed, eyes burning. I like the look on her face. I like the way her thighs are open, the way she’s still glaring up at me even now.

Pulling her up by the hair, I twist her body and push her face into the pillows. My hand finds her ass and I squeeze, leaving red fingerprints that will blossom into bruises by morning. No underwear. Such a good girl. She’s panting, desperate, a wild thing that’s run too far to turn back.

I shove the shirt up, exposing the creamy expanse of her back. I run my nails down

the length of her spine, leaving thin, red trails. She shudders, her body going limp for a moment, then tensing again as I press my cock against the heat between her legs.

I can't fucking wait anymore. Pulling my sweats down past my hips, I manage to grab her just as she tries to jump off the bed.

“Stay still, Gianna. All you're doing is making me harder.”

She whimpers again, but this time it's a plea, not a protest.

I run my fingers through her pussy lips.

“You say you don't want this, but your pussy is telling me a very different story.

” I want to be inside her more than I want to breathe.

I want to fuck the defiance right out of her, to make her forget every man who ever made her feel small. I want to ruin her for anyone else.

I spread her open, fingers digging into her hips. She's dripping, slick and ready, and the sight of it makes me lose what's left of my control.

I push inside, slow at first, letting her feel every inch of it.

She cries out, tries to twist away, but I hold her still, hands locked on her hips.

My weight slams into her, forcing her to arch her back so she doesn't suffocate in the pillows.

I pound into her, harder and harder, until her body gives up and melts.

“Do you like it when I fuck you like this, pretty girl?” My voice is a rasp, I can hardly contain the urge to take all her holes, leave her a gaping mess.

She moans, low and desperate, biting into her forearm to keep from screaming. Her hands claw at sheets and the sounds she makes drives me wild.

The wait was worth it. The way my balls ache with the need to empty inside her, the feel of her tight pussy clenching around me as she comes all over my cock...

She’s fucking perfect.

Just like I knew she would be.

I fuck her until she’s sobbing, until her voice is hoarse and her body is limp. I fuck her until the only sound in the room is the slap of skin on skin and the wet, broken gasp of her surrender.

When I come, I bury my teeth in her shoulder, marking her, branding her, making sure she knows she’s never getting away.

When it’s over, I collapse on top of her, my weight crushing her into the bed. She doesn’t move, doesn’t speak, just lies there, trembling and spent.

I roll off, leaving her in a heap. I stare at her, let the image burn into my memory. The perfect ruin of her, the way her body is curved, the red handprints on her thighs, the blood trickling from her bitten lip. My come seeping from her well fucked hole.

“I’ll be back in a second.”

There’s no rhyme or reason why, but I want to clean her. To take care of her. To show her that as much as I’m a monster, a demon who should terrify her, I’m also her

demon.

She curls into herself, small and shaking as I head to the bathroom and grab a wash cloth, making sure the water is luke warm before making it wet enough and heading back to the bed. With steady hands, I wipe her up, taking care on her split lip, even as she stares at me with hatred in her eyes.

After a minute, she says, “I shouldn’t have done that.” Her voice is so soft I almost don’t hear it.

I smile. The kind of smile that splits a face in two.

“But you did,” I say. “And you’ll do it again.”

“Fuck you, Knox. Let me leave.”

She wants to leave, hmm? “Sure. I’ll go unlock the door.”

“Really?” Her eyes are glassy as she looks at me.

“Cross my heart and hope to die, I will let you walk out that door.”

True to my word, I leave her on the bed and go unlock the front door before going to put on a pot of coffee. I’ll give her just enough of a head start that she believes she will actually make it to Pine Ridge.

She’s gone before I finish my coffee.

The front door is wide open, swinging slightly in the wind, a hinge squealing with every gust.

I sip, slow. No need to rush. Let her get the illusion of distance, let her believe in her own escape. It'll make what comes next that much sweeter.

When I step onto the porch, the world is glassy and bright with cold.

Raising my arms above my head, I stretch, relishing in the way my back cracks.

Mmmm, smells fresh out here. Heading back inside, I walk towards the bedroom, finding the small button in the back of the closet. The surveillance room.

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The mask is there, hanging like a severed head on its hook.

Half red, half black, horns curling back from the brow.

The eyes are dead and blank and empty, a void to stare through.

It's cut off just below the nose. I run my thumb over the paint, the smooth rise of the horns.

It fits perfectly when I slide it on, the leather straps tight behind my skull.

Next, my knife, a gleaming strip of steel honed to a razor edge.

The rope she found, coiled neat, ready to tie her hands in front of her.

I feel alive in a way I haven't in years.

The trees are still dripping from last night's rain, small splatters on me as I take off jogging.

It's not long before I find the tracks her feet left when she slipped and crashed into a bush.

I hear her before I see her—heavy, ragged breathing; the slap of feet on wet ground; the crash of brittle twigs.

She's moving fast, fueled by adrenaline and the terror of what we just did.

I follow the trail, tracking the sound of her panic.

I take my time, listening to her path grow wilder, more erratic.

She veers off the old logging road, into the denser thicket, where the branches will claw at her arms and face.

I imagine her blood blooming in thin lines, bright against her skin, the cold air biting the sweat that beads down her chest.

I move at a light jog, knowing she'll tire out soon.

By the time I catch up, she's on her knees in the brush, hands pressed to the earth, trying to catch her breath.

Her hair is tangled with leaves, her shins streaked with mud.

She looks up, wild-eyed, and I know she sees the mask first—the demon, the monster, the nightmare that followed her out of the cabin and into the waking world.

She screams, but her voice is raw and broken. She staggers to her feet, stumbles forward, crashes through the last tangle of undergrowth.

That's when she sees him.

He's not from here. Out-of-towner, probably.

Backpack, flannel, boots too clean to belong.

Short, kinda wimpy looking. Light hair. Not a threat.

Maybe a lost hiker, maybe someone trying to camp nearby.

She barrels into him, wraps her arms around his neck, babbling, crying, clutching him like he's the last branch on a cliff's edge.

A growl rises in my throat as I step behind a tree to see what she says. That just simply won't do.

"There's someone after me—please, you have to help, please, he's—"

He steadies her, putting himself between her and the woods. "Hey, hey, it's okay," he says, looking over her head. "Who is chasing you?"

She's shaking so hard her teeth rattle. She turns, points, and that's when he sees me as I step out and into the path.

The hiker's face blanches, then settles into something like determination. He sets his jaw, squares his shoulders, and steps forward, chest out, like he's got something to prove. He pushes her behind him. A little show of bravado.

How cute. Willing to die for a girl he hasn't even had a taste of.

"Back the fuck off," he says. "Leave the girl alone."

I say nothing. The mask is enough.

He takes a step closer, his hand reaching for something—a phone, maybe, or a knife.

I let him close the gap, watch the calculation in his eyes as he tries to size me up.

He glances down at the blade in my hand, the rope slung over my shoulder.

For a second, I see his confidence waver, the bright spark of heroism guttering out. But he masks it well.

“Hey, man. I don’t know what your problem is, but you need to walk away right now.”

He puts his hands up, palms forward, trying to deescalate. It would almost be funny, if it wasn’t so sad.

I let him talk. I let him feel the hope swell up in his chest. Then I move.

He doesn’t see it coming.

I close the distance in three steps. The knife is out and up, slicing through the air.

He manages to get a hand on my shoulder, but it’s nothing—no more than a mosquito on a dog.

I bury the blade in the soft space below his jaw, twist, and pull free.

Blood jets out in a hot, pulsing arc, splattering across my mask, across Gianna’s white, terrified face as I push him away from me and towards her.

The hiker tries to scream, but it’s all gurgle and blood. He drops to his knees, clutching at his throat, red pouring over his fingers. His eyes roll up, wide and shocked. He collapses in the mud, twitching, then still.

Gianna is frozen. She doesn’t even run. She just stands there, staring at the corpse, hands over her mouth, stained with his life force. The world is silent except for the wet drip of blood onto the ground, the ragged wind through the trees.

I pull off the mask and let her see my face. Let her see the man, not the monster.

She doesn't scream. The only indication that she even understands what happened is her eyes, tracking the blood on her hands, on my skin.

I walk up to her, so close she can feel my breath. I wipe a smear of blood across her cheek, red bright on her skin. She doesn't flinch. Doesn't move at all.

"You see?" I whisper, voice raw. "There's no one here to save you."

I press the mask into her hands, closing her fingers around the horns.

She takes it, numb, eyes glazed and vacant.

I turn her face up to mine, thumb still sticky with blood, and kiss her.

I want her to taste it. The possession, the hold I have over her.

I want her to know what's real. She needs to understand that she became everything to me the moment she stepped foot in these woods.

Shrugging the rope off my shoulder, I grab her hands, putting my mask back on, and tie them in front of her. She doesn't even fight me, and I can see the fight has drained out of her.

Pity that killing someone was all it took. I took her for more than that.

Her hands are slick with blood from when she tried to grab him. She doesn't protest, doesn't even try. Her face is pale except for the smear across her cheek.

Behind us, the forest is silent. Even the birds are smart enough to stay quiet.

I make her look. I stop us at the body, force her to open her eyes and take in the stillness, the ruin of the man who thought he could save her. The smell is thick, coppery, sharp. I kneel beside him, unhurried, and press my hand into the open wound, the heat of it still alive and throbbing.

I look up, let her watch as I smear it down my face, then across hers, bright red streaks like war paint.

“Was his life worth your little run?” I ask, voice muffled behind the mask.

She doesn’t answer. Her teeth are clenched so hard I think they’ll shatter. Her chest rises and falls, breath a thin whistle through her nose.

I stand, step into her space, close enough to hear her heavy breathing, to feel it fan over my skin. I lift her chin with the tip of my blade, gentle as a lover, and study her eyes.

“Look at you,” I murmur, “covered in someone else’s mess. You’re perfect.”

Her knees give out, but I catch her, haul her up against my body, her feet just barely ghosting the ground.

I kiss her, forcing her mouth open, let her taste the death on my tongue. She chokes, almost retches, but I hold her tight, one blood-slick hand cupping the back of her neck.

“Bad little bird,” I whisper against her lips. “Trying to fly away.”

She shudders, and slumps into my chest as I lift her off her feet and sling her over my shoulder.

She's limp. Not unconscious, not broken, just... surrendered. I like the weight of her. I like the way her hair brushes my back, the way her feet dangle, like she trusts me, even though it's clear she doesn't.

She has to know I'd never hurt her.

As I walk, I hum, low and tuneless. The same lullaby I heard as a child, the only thing I remember from before I became this.

At the cabin, I set her on the couch. I cut the rope, but she doesn't move, just stares at her hands, the red slowly fading as I rub the life back into her.

I crouch in front of her, peel off the mask, let her see my real face.

She looks at me, eyes red, devoid of emotion. "What now?" she whispers.

I brush a strand of hair from her cheek and tuck it behind her ear. "Now," I say, "you learn how to stay."

She starts to cry, quiet and steady, tears carving clean rivers through the blood on her face.

I watch, content. The world is quiet again. Everything exactly where it belongs.

Mine.

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Chapter Nine

Gianna

He walked me back to the cabin. Slung over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes.

I hated that I liked being taken care of this way because he is the reason my entire world just derailed.

He's a fucking psychopath! The same blood that's drying on his knuckles smears onto my legs with every jostling step.

I feel the stickiness, smell the iron. I want to get it off me.

The trees look different now. Less like guardians, more like voyeurs, silent witnesses to the absolute derailing of my world.

My head feels like a split log. My body moves without me.

He's still in the mask, the demon face red and black and slick with splatters, and he moves with a confidence that says he belongs here, that the universe was built around this moment.

We reach the porch. He kicks the door open and places me on the couch before cutting off the rope. I am numb. My wrists were chafed from the rubbing of the rope, but he tries to soothe the ache with his fingers. These hands don't even feel like mine.

Nothing does.

He's behind me, peeling off the mask, but I only see it in the glass reflection—his face flushed, lips parted, sweat sticking his hair to his brow. He looks... alive. More alive than anyone has a right to be after what he just did.

“Stay,” he says.

The word is simple, but what the fuck else am I supposed to do?

I collapse onto the couch. The fabric is soft, old, and beige, but I already know it will never come clean again.

Some of the hiker's blood smears onto the armrest as I smush myself into the back corner, and a strange, giddy part of my mind thinks: At least it's not on the carpet.

He stands in the center of the room for a moment, letting the silence build. I want to say something. I want to scream, beg, bargain, do anything except sit here and let his world become my world. But I don't. I just breathe, counting the seconds, waiting for him to snap.

Instead, he walks to the kitchen and mumbles something about me not having had breakfast. The movements are normal.

Like a man returning from work, or a run, or a murder .

I watch him, transfixed. He pulls eggs from the fridge, slaps bacon onto a pan, and sets the heat to medium.

The sound of sizzling fat is loud, too loud, louder than the way the hiker's throat sounded when it opened up under his blade.

He hums as he works. I don't recognize the tune, and while my curiosity peaks for a moment, I shove it down.

This man is a murderer and he's probably going to kill me too .

He cracks eggs one-handed, shell fragments dropping into the sink.

He slides the bread in the toaster, times the lever to the second, popping it and immediately buttering so it's melted.

Every motion is so precise, so practiced, that it's almost beautiful.

He wipes the knife on a dish towel. The towel was white. Now it isn't.

Fuck, he didn't even wash his hands! What if the hiker had a disease! I'm half delirious as I burst out laughing before it turns into a strangled cry.

What the actual fuck is happening right now.

I'm still on the couch, hands locked between my knees, trying to decide if I should wipe away the blood or let it sink in.

My body is electric with adrenaline and shame and the raw animal urge to run, but the stronger urge—the sick, heavy one—is to see what he'll do next. I watch him. He knows I'm watching.

He doesn't look at me until the toast pops up.

Then he turns, crossing the floor in three easy steps, and sets a plate in front of me on the coffee table. Two eggs, sunny-side up, flecked with black pepper. Four strips of bacon, crisp and glistening. Toast, evenly buttered, cut diagonally.

He crouches so we're eye level. His hand is still smeared with blood. He taps the plate with a single finger. "Eat," he says. "Or don't. But if you try to run again, I will fuck you so hard you'll have to crawl to the bathroom for the next three days."

The word is delivered in a tone that leaves no question: This is not a come-on. This is a promise. A warning and an inevitability.

He rises, pours two mugs of coffee, and sits in the armchair across from me, watching. Always watching.

My stomach growls, even as nausea hits me.

How can I be hungry when someone just died in front of me?

And yet... I grab the plate. The fork is cold against my skin.

I try to grip it, but my hand shakes so hard that the tines clatter against the plate.

He doesn't comment. Just sips his coffee, eyes never leaving my face.

I replay the murder. The flash of the blade.

The spray of blood, the hot, arterial pulse.

The hiker's face, gurgling, eyes bulging, hands clamped to his throat.

The way it made me want to throw up and want to watch and want to run all at once.

I had tried, I really did, to grab him, to help him, but the sound of his body thudding against the forest floor replays over and over.

I replay my own body. The way my legs folded under me, the way I couldn't look away, the way my mouth was open and I didn't even realize I was screaming until he smirked. Those full lips pulling at the edges as he watched me through that fucking mask.

I replay him. Knox. The way he moved. The way the mask seemed to become his real face, the way he looked at me afterward—smeared in gore, chest heaving, and more aroused than angry.

The way he wiped the blood from my cheek with his thumb, smearing it instead of cleaning it, as if he wanted me to know it was mine now, too.

I look at the eggs. I look at him. He raises his eyebrows, almost polite.

“If you're trying to poison me, I'd rather just cut my wrists and save you the time,” I say, voice trembling.

He laughs. It's a good laugh. Warm, deep, human. He seems almost flattered. “If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead,” he says. “Eat. You'll feel better.”

I eat. Because he tells me to, but also because I'm starving.

The bacon is perfect. The eggs are perfect.

The toast is golden and melts on my tongue.

I hate that it tastes good, hate that it's the best breakfast I've ever had, hate that I'm eating it in a room with a man who could slit my throat without blinking.

I hate that I keep glancing up at him. At his arms, still streaked with blood. At his throat, corded and bare. At his eyes, cool and flat and beautiful.

With a long gulp, I down the coffee, hoping it will still my nerves. All it does is ramp up my heart rate until I feel like I'm in a sprint.

He finishes his coffee, gets up, and comes back with a second cup for me. I flinch when he sets it down, expecting him to grab me, shake me, hurt me. But he doesn't. He just returns to the armchair, sits, and stares.

We sit like this for a long time. Me, eating. Him, watching. The sound of the woods outside is muted by the triple-paned glass. The only noises are the clink of my fork and the wet sound of my own swallowing.

When I finally finish, he stands. He takes my plate, my mug, and carries them to the sink. Washes them, even. He wipes his hands on the bloodstained towel, then turns to face me.

"You're going to take a shower," he says. "Then you're going to come back here, and we're going to talk. If you try to run again, I will tie you to the bed, splayed open and fuck you until you're begging for release. But know this, little bird, only good girls get to come."

He says it like it's a normal thing, like it's an agenda item.

I don't move and despite the fear, a small ache starts between my thighs. He may be a brute of a man, but he fucks like a god.

He walks over, grabs me by the arm, and hauls me to my feet. He's not gentle, but he's not brutal either. He guides me to the bathroom, pushes me inside, and closes the door behind me. There is no lock on the inside. Of course there isn't.

There's soap and shampoo, and a fresh towel draped over the bar. The mirror is fogged, so I don't have to see myself. Thank fucking god.

I peel off my shirt. The blood is dry and flaky, stuck to my collarbone. My skin is a mess—bruises, scratches, a dark fingerprint blooming above my elbow. God my feet hurt.

The water is hot and sharp. It stings, and I let it. I scrub until the blood runs pink at my feet. I shampoo twice, three times. I scrub my nails until they hurt. I want to be clean, but I know that's not possible anymore.

I cry for a while, head against the cold tile. The water drowns the sound, but I know he hears it anyway.

When I'm done, I dry off, wrap myself in the towel, and open the door. He's there, in the hallway, leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

He looks me up and down, slow, deliberate. Not like a man undressing a woman with his eyes, but like a scientist cataloging a specimen.

"You're beautiful," he says. "Even more so now."

I want to hit him, but I don't. I just walk past, back to the couch, sit, and wait.

He follows, brings me fresh clothes—a t-shirt, flannel pajama pants. I put them on, watching him the entire time.

He sits across from me, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. His hands are clean now. The blood is gone. But I can still smell it. I think I'll always smell it.

He doesn't speak for a long time. Just lets the silence build, the way you'd let a dam fill before deciding whether to open the sluice.

"You're safe here," he says. "No one is going to hurt you."

I almost laugh. Instead, I just stare, waiting for the punchline.

He tilts his head. “You think I’m a monster?”

I nod, slow.

He smiles. “Good. Monsters are real. You can stop pretending that they’re just under your bed now.”

He leans back, stretching his arms above his head, joints popping in the quiet. “Eat, shower, nap. Tomorrow we’ll see about your car.”

He stands, walks to the kitchen, and begins to clean his knife. The sound of the blade against the sharpening stick is loud.

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I watch, numb and alive at once, the air in the room thick with violence and eggs and the weird, relentless certainty that none of this is over.

Not by a long shot.

The rest of the day passes in a kind of trance, the hours pooling and spreading like old blood on linoleum. I don't move from the couch for a long time. Every time I close my eyes, I see the hiker's mouth opening, closing, trying to beg for air. I hear the wet rattle, the knife catching on bone.

At some point, Knox disappears into the back room. I hear him moving things, the thud and scrape of wood, the hum of low music. For a while, I think he's forgotten about me. I wonder if he's going to sleep, if he dreams, if his dreams are as loud and bright as mine.

I pull a throw around my body, try to remember what it feels like to be clean, to be untouched. There's a bloodstain on my ankle, a thin line where it dried in the hair. I scratch at it until the skin turns raw.

I don't realize I've dozed off until I wake to the smell of food again. This time it's chili, tomato-sweet and full of cumin and spice, the kind that sticks to your ribs and won't let go. My mouth waters and my stomach flips, but I'm not sure if it's hunger or dread.

Knox appears with a tray, sets it in my lap, and sits next to me.

Not across, but right next. His thigh is pressed against mine, a hot, deliberate line.

He picks up his own bowl and starts eating.

I stare at my food. The spoon shakes in my hand.

The beans look like tiny, petrified organs. They're red. Like the hikers blood.

I eat anyway, because that's what he wants. Because I want it, too, and because it's easier to let him decide what happens than to fight the undertow. I try to eat slowly, but my body betrays me, and I finish half the bowl before I even taste it.

He watches, just watches, never blinking.

He wipes his mouth, then licks the spoon clean, tongue curling over the metal in a way that makes my skin go tight and hot. I hate that I notice it. I hate that I feel my pulse in places I shouldn't.

"Um... thanks. For the food. Not for keeping me kidnapped here."

A slow smile spreads across his face. "You'll come around."

He stands and collects both bowls in one hand. I think he's going to leave, but instead he leans down, so close I can see the individual stubble on his jaw.

"I need to shower, there's something so... beautiful about the way you watch me, watching you and I have an issue to take care of. You can join me and take care of the mess, if you'd like. I'd love to see how beautiful that mouth is around my cock."

My mouth drops open and I'm at a loss for words. Who the fuck does he think he is to talk to me like that?

He's already down the hallway before I can try and formulate a protest.

He leaves the bathroom door open, lets the sound of water fill the cabin. It's a challenge. An invitation. A leash.

I stare at the door for a long time. I try to remember the rules of survival. Stay calm. Be obedient. Wait for a mistake. I don't know if the mistake is going to be his or mine.

My legs are jelly when I finally stand. The air in the hallway is steamy, warm. I stop at the threshold, just out of sight, and listen.

He's in the shower, humming again. The same song as before. Something low and foreign and full of minor chords. I should run. I should barricade the door and call for help, even if no one would hear me. I should do anything except step forward.

But I do. I do because he told me to, and because some part of me—the dark, broken part—wants to watch him.

He's turned away from me, water running down his back in thick, streaming lines. His muscles shift and bunch with every movement, every small adjustment. There's a constellation of scars across his shoulders, white and ragged. He's not just a monster. He's a survivor.

I stand in the doorway, arms crossed, not sure what to do with myself. It's... weird.

Watching him like this. Seeing him vulnerable.

He turns, slowly, and looks at me. He's naked, and the sight of it is almost too much. His body is beautiful, in a brutal, dangerous way. The kind of beauty that would crush you if you got too close.

He doesn't beckon. He just waits.

“Come here,” he says. The words are soft, but they hit me like a fist.

I step forward. He holds out a hand. I take it.

He pulls me into the shower, fully clothed, and the water is so hot it stings my skin. He wraps his arms around me, and I stiffen, expecting pain, expecting violence. But he just holds me there, under the spray, hands on my shoulders, his head bent to rest against mine.

We stand like that for a long time. I can't tell if I'm shaking or if he is.

He turns me around, gently, and starts to strip the wet clothes off me. His fingers are careful, reverent, almost tender. He strips me down to bare skin, and I let him, because what's left to lose?

He lathers my hair, working his fingers through the knots. He washes my back, my arms, every inch of me. It's not sexual, not exactly. It's more like erasing, more like starting over.

He rinses me clean, then shuts off the water. He wraps me in a towel, presses his lips to my temple, and lets me go.

I hate him. I hate myself more for wanting him to touch me again.

He dresses and leaves me in the room, alone. It feels like it takes me forever to get dressed and head out into the kitchen. I'm getting tired of the same shit everyday.

Only this time, the kitchen is empty and there's a note on the counter.

GONE TO FIX YOUR CAR.

A thrill shoots through me as I head towards the front door and test the lock. It's unlocked. An oversight?

I stare at it for a long time. My hands shake, but I can't tell if it's fear or the withdrawal from adrenaline.

I want to run. I want to stay. I want to slam my fist into his perfect fucking face and scream until the world ends.

Instead, I pour myself a cup of coffee and sit at the table, legs folded under me, back straight, just waiting for the next move.

God, I have to take this chance. It might be the only one I have before he kills me the way he killed that hiker.

The silence stretches until it starts to vibrate, until the air hums with it.

I move, slow and careful, back to the door. This has to be some kind of joke. A guy like Knox doesn't just fuck up. I stare at it, dumbfounded, for a full ten seconds before I push the door open.

It's not a taunt. It's a dare.

He wants me to run because he wants to hunt me. He wants to chase me down. He wants me afraid but aching for him.

He has to catch me first. I pull on my shoes and straighten my shoulders. I survived a fucking storm, I could survive running a few kilometers to the main lodge.

The outside world is cold and damp and smells like pine needles and rot. The forest is thick, but not impassable. The path is right there, a thin dirt line leading down to the

lake, down to the lodge, anywhere but here.

Freedom. If I want it.

I hover at the threshold. The sky is silver and fat raindrops start falling. Of course. Why wouldn't it fucking rain? The wind cuts through my shirt and makes my nipples hard, the fabric sticking wetly to my skin. I want to cry, but the tears won't come.

I take a step outside.

The earth is wet and soft. Every footfall is a betrayal, every movement too loud.

I walk, then jog, then stop and turn, looking back at the cabin.

The windows are black and flat. There's no movement, no shadow.

If he's fixing my car, then I need to go around it, through the copse of trees on the outskirts of the trail to avoid a run in.

But I know better.

I run.

I don't make it ten yards before I hear him. Not footsteps, not breathing. Just the sense of presence, the way a storm front feels before it breaks. I duck behind a tree, my breath clawing at my ribs, and try to make myself small.

It doesn't matter. He finds me anyway.

He's there, right behind me, close enough that I can feel the heat of his body through the bark. He doesn't touch me. He doesn't need to.

“I knew you wanted to play hide and hunt,” he whispers, his voice a low, rough rumble, “keep running, little bird. I’ll be right behind you.”

I turn, slow, and see him.

He’s wearing the mask. Fixing my car, right. There’s something in the way he’s standing that makes me pause. He’s somehow soft, yet strong, calm yet on edge. It’s beautiful and terrifying and so perfectly him.

He doesn’t move.

I could run. I could scream.

Instead, I just stare.

He tilts his head, the gesture so human and so monstrous at once that it makes my bones vibrate.

“Go on,” he says. “I’ll give you a head start.”

I run. I run until the trees blur, until the air is hurting my skin, until the world is nothing but the sound of my own pulse and the certainty that he’s right behind me, always, forever, just close enough to touch.

I run because I want to live. I run because I want him to catch me.

I run because I finally understand the game.

Chapter Ten

Knox

There's nothing more beautiful than my woman running for her life.

That's a hard truth, but it's the only one worth saying.

Most men will never know the feeling of finding their other half and forcing her to confront the darkest parts of herself.

They'll chase, but it's never real. It's not true.

Not primal. Not what's pounding in her veins right now as she barrels through the woods like she's the first person to ever feel fear. True fear.

I let her think she's outsmarted me, just a little.

Give her that head start. Let the taste of hope bloom in her chest before I rip it out again.

There's an artistry in the patience. The anticipation is everything—the way it sharpens each sense until the world is nothing but nerves and need and the absolute conviction that this moment is all there ever was.

It's beautiful, really. Not only had I just slit the throat of some nobody, but now I get to ravage her in the most basic sense a man should destroy a woman.

And she will try to hate me, but love me all the same.

I stalk her, silent on the rain-slick earth, boots rolling heel-to-toe through the moss.

It's not a pursuit, it's communion. A tense cord between us, drawn tighter with every gasping step she takes.

She crashes through bracken and slips in mud, leaves a clear track for me to follow, and I do, methodically, savoring every sign of panic.

She tries to make noise, to break through the silence and call the world to witness, but these woods don't care about a woman's screams. There's no one out here.

Still, she does it anyway. At the bottom of a draw, her lungs splitting, she lets one loose—a perfect, throat-shredding wail that ricochets off every trunk and branch.

It's a beautiful thing, a hymn, a perfect note that makes my blood go liquid-hot.

I almost wish she could see my smile.

She runs herself ragged, like I knew she would.

It's not hard to watch her struggle. She's pretty quick, but not when she's already tried this once.

I could do this all fucking day. Stepping behind a tree, I smirk at the way her chest heaves, her shirt ripped off her body, exposing that golden skin I crave running my tongue over.

Her legs buckle once, twice, then she finds a second wind and stumbles into the stream bed, water up to her shins.

She tries to make distance, but the rocks are slick, and she falls hard.

Her hands are raw when she claws herself upright.

The pain is sharp enough to make her yelp, but she keeps going.

She's thinking about the main lodge, I'm sure.

Maybe the idea of rescue. Maybe the fantasy that someone will see her, that someone will care.

She doesn't know there's nobody here but us.

That the woods don't give a single fuck about her, except as a vessel to carry my intentions from one edge of the property to the other.

Noah wouldn't interfere, even if he saw her, and Kairo would probably clap me on the back for finally finding someone to stick my cock in.

I let her get half a mile ahead of me before I bother to run.

It's not hard—she leaves a story in every patch of crushed grass and smeared mud.

At a fallen cedar she almost loses me, doubling back on herself, smart little bird.

I slow, drink it in. The panic-smell of her, the blood left in smears on bark, injuries from falling, I'm sure, the near-sobbing breaths she can't stifle.

She's losing it. And I love baring witness to her unraveling.

On the east slope, the trees get denser, old-growth pine crowding out the light, the

ground soft and spongy and perfect for padding a stalk.

She's all turned around and heading the complete opposite direction to the lodge.

Works for me . She's slowing, looking over her shoulder, tripping more than running.

I can see the muscles in her calves trembling, the flex of her jaw as she bites down on another scream.

There's a map in my head, and I overlay her movements across it. She doesn't know it, but she's headed straight for the old ranger outpost. I would have bet money on it. She's desperate for shelter, for any illusion of safety, no matter how flimsy.

It's a fucking tomb out there. Nobody's kept it up in years, and the last time I visited, the ladder was rotted out, but hey if she can make it up there.

I let her get there, watching from the shadows as she hauls herself up the ladder, missing the steps that have fallen apart.

She's silhouetted in the open door, face half-shadowed, hair tangled and matted with sweat and debris. She scans the woods behind her, eyes wild. I flatten into the darkness, let her feel watched, even when I'm not moving.

She slams the door and throws the deadbolt.

Funny, given that wood is older than I am and one well placed kick will tear the damn thing down.

I know she's not stupid, she'll barricade herself as best she can.

I circle the outpost once, silent, picking up the minor tremors of her movement

inside—the scrape of furniture, the crash of what sounds like an old filing cabinet, maybe a chair dragged across the floor.

She's improvising, working every angle of fear and hope.

I slip to the window and watch.

Inside, the air is thick with dust. My shirt clings to me, and I can feel the sweat down my spine, a cold band where the wetness meets the chilly Pacific air.

She's frantically moving around, shoving an ancient cot against the door, then scanning for something—anything—to use as a weapon.

She rifles through a pile of debris and comes up with a rusted hunting knife.

She tests the blade on her thumb, flinches when it slices, but the look of satisfaction on her face makes me want to tear the door off its hinges and fuck her right there on the linoleum.

She puts it down and keeps looking around.

But I wait. I always wait.

She checks the window across from me, locks it tight, tries to board them up. Good girl. She's methodical, even in terror. She finds an old radio, but it's busted. She curses, low and vicious, then starts to pace, hands knotted in her hair.

She's beautiful like this. All that civility stripped away, all the social pretense and politeness burned off by sheer animal panic. There's only the raw, untethered urge to live, and the knowledge that she's not the one in control.

I circle the perimeter twice more, letting the time work on her, letting the stillness press in.

She starts to panic for real around the two hour mark.

The noises she makes are incredible—a whimper that bubbles up from the core, a rhythm of ragged breaths, the slap of her shoes on the plywood.

She scratches at the dirt-streaked window, just once, like a trapped animal testing the cage.

I know the layout of that spot like the back of my hand.

It's where Slade and I would come to get drunk and shoot shit.

There are old maps on the walls, corners curling, smeared with decades of dead insects.

A single, battered desk sits in the far corner, covered in the detritus of a decade's worth of bored park rangers: faded Playboys, a coffee mug with a cracked lip, pens snapped in half by restless hands.

One last look at my girl through the window and I can't help the wistful sigh that escapes me.

She hunkers behind the desk, knees pulled to her chest, the knife gripped white-knuckle in her fist. Her head is bowed, eyes closed, lips moving in a silent prayer.

I could watch her for hours, but the thrill of it starts to crest in me, the need to be seen, to be known.

I go to the door. Knock, soft, just once.

The sound rips through her, and she jolts upright, scattering a pile of papers in her scramble to stand. She backs against the wall, knife at the ready, breath coming in shallow, high-pitched stabs.

“Gianna,” I call. My voice is even, gentle, the voice of a man offering directions or a ride home from a bar. “Are you going to let me in?”

Nothing. Just the whine of the wind through the eaves and the increase in her breathing.

“I told you I’d give you a head start,” I say. “But now it’s my turn.”

She shouts, wordless, raw, the sound so beautiful it hurts. I hear her hurl something heavy at the door—it lands with a thud, maybe a drawer or the old cot. I laugh, loud and clear, and her silence is my applause.

“Go away, Knox! Leave me alone!” Her scream is loud, breathy. “FUCK!”

I wait. I let the time stretch, let it wind her tighter and tighter until she’s vibrating with it.

When dusk falls, I light a cigarette and flick the butt at the door, the ember a brief, dying star on the stoop. I want her to see the glow, to know I’m out here. I want her to imagine me, crouched in the dark, watching, waiting, building a cathedral of patience for the moment I take her apart.

I don’t break the door. Not yet. I want her to last through the night, to sleep with one eye open, to wake to every creak and sigh of the old outpost and wonder which noise is me.

When the stars rise, I circle the perimeter again, slower this time, savoring the way my body aches with anticipation. It's a good pain, the kind that makes every nerve feel like it's lit from within.

Tomorrow, I'll let her think she's outlasted me. Tomorrow, I'll let her taste the sunrise and the idea that maybe, just maybe, she's won.

And then I'll show her what it means to be caught.

For now, I crouch outside the window and listen to the sound of her tears.

It's the most honest thing I've ever heard.

Daybreak brings the answer I've been starving for. I don't sleep. There's no point. My mind runs laps around her, stripping the outpost down to blueprints and probabilities, rerunning the scene of how she'll try to hold me out, how she'll fail, how she'll beg for mercy and I'll pretend to care.

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My body hums with need, with the absolute certainty that soon I'll have her.

I can almost taste the sweat and salt of her skin, the sound of her heartbeat stampeding against her ribs as I pin her down and make her understand.

The anticipation burns through me, crawling up my arms, winding around my neck until my vision sharpens and everything else falls away.

When the sun cracks the horizon, I move.

The outpost is silent, but I feel her inside—coiled and bristling, the way a wild animal waits in the trap, unsure if it should fight or die. I throw my shoulder into the door. The barricade gives way with a splintered shriek, wood exploding into the room as I step through the dust.

I wear the mask. I want her to see it first. Want her to see the demon before she sees the man, so she knows that both are real, and both are hers.

She's waiting, pressed against the far wall, lips cracked and white with fear. Her eyes are blown wide, whites stained pink with the sleepless dark. For a second, she freezes, and in that second I see the math running behind her stare—run, plead, scream, or maybe just let go.

She doesn't. She's better than that.

Instead, she raises an old rifle I must have missed seeing her grab, an old Winchester crusted with rust and spider webs.

She rips it down, aims it straight at my heart.

The barrel trembles in her hands, but her arms are steady.

I see the moment of hope flare inside her, the sick hope that maybe this time, something will break her way.

She pulls the trigger.

The click is so loud it might as well be a gunshot. The room echoes with it, the vacuum of failure. The smell of her despair hits me, metallic and sharp.

I laugh, the sound raw through the mask.

“That hasn’t worked in years,” I tell her, voice thick with delight.

“You really think I’d let you ever raise a gun to me?”

Tsk, tsk, little bird, you should understand me a bit better than that, though, I do understand we haven’t exchanged life stories. Yet.”

She screams, a perfect, wordless animal sound.

She hurls the rifle at me, and I let it hit—pain blossoms across my ribs, but it’s nothing compared to the high of watching her fight.

She bolts for the window, tries to pry it open with her bare hands.

I’m on her before she can get a finger beneath the wood.

Funny. The very same window she tried to reinforce to keep me out, is the one

keeping her in.

I grab her by the waist, hauling her back towards me.

She rakes her nails across my forearm, drawing blood, then turns and sinks her teeth into my wrist. She bites down hard, hard enough to break skin.

God it hurts so good. Maybe I'll tattoo her teeth marks on me.

My pulse spikes and I grip her harder, dragging her back against my chest.

She kicks, she twists, every muscle in her body dedicated to the single cause of not being mine.

But that's the thing: she is.

There is no choice here.

I throw her to the floor, pin her wrists above her head, my body pressing her into the filthy planks.

She spits at me, a feral, furious gesture, and I let it drip down my chin before swiping my tongue over it.

Delicious . It's perfect, and I want to ruin her, to take every last drop of defiance and squeeze it into something I can keep forever.

She thrashes, screaming again, then grinds her heel into my thigh, aiming for my balls. She almost makes it—I block her with my knee and press down, hard. Her eyes fill with tears, not from pain, but from the bright, helpless rage of it.

I wrench her arms above her, locking them with one hand while I tear the mask off with the other. I want her to see my face when I break her. I want her to remember exactly who she lost to.

Her breath comes in frantic, shallow gasps. Her skin is hot, burning, the veins in her neck blue and perfect against the red flush rising up her cheeks. She hurls a string of curses at me, her voice wrecked, each word a blunt weapon aimed at my skull. I take every one and let it hammer into me.

I grab her jaw, force her to look at me.

“Done?” I ask, voice so low it barely registers over the beat of her pulse.

She bares her teeth, every inch of her vibrating with hate and fear and something else—something that makes her even prettier than before.

“No,” she spits. “Not even fucking close.”

Good girl.

I keep her pinned, feeling her body go slack as the fight drains out. But even then, even when she’s limp in my grip, her eyes never break away. She won’t give me the satisfaction of surrender. Not with her voice. Not with her face.

She doesn’t have to. I love this, I love her, just the way she is, because even behind her anger, her blatantly disrespect, I can see the way her nipples harden. The way her body sighs as it’s forced to submit.

I can feel it in the way her body molds to mine, in the way her hips shift against my thigh even as she tries to pull away. I can feel it in the way her breathing changes, in the way her nails curl and uncurl against my skin, desperate for a grip that isn’t there.

I press my mouth to her ear, close enough to feel her flinch.

“You’re mine now,” I whisper. “Every piece of you. Every fucking thought in your pretty little head.”

She tries to jerk away, but I bite her neck, just below the ear, hard enough to leave a mark. Her gasp is sharp, wounded, but I hear the edge of something else riding under it, a current of need that terrifies her more than I ever could.

I stand, hauling her up with me. She doesn’t fight now, just sags in my grip, the knife edge of exhaustion finally carving its way through the adrenaline.

I drag her out of the outpost, back into the cold morning, both of us drenched in sweat.

The hunt is over. The real work starts now.

It takes an hour to drag her back through the forest.

She puts up a fight for the first fifty yards—threshes, claws, tries to dig in her heels or break free.

She fails, every time, but I let her believe in the effort.

It’s all a show. To try remind me that she’s still got power.

She doesn’t, and she knows it. I want her to have the story of resistance.

Want her to remember every second she tried, and every second she was outmatched.

She stumbles. The bruises on her arms are already blooming, perfect, blue-black, the

kind that will linger for a week or more.

Her face is streaked with dirt and tears, but there's still a stubborn tilt to her chin, even now.

Even after I've ruined her. She'll keep going, keep hoping, keep pushing the limits of what she can stand.

It makes me want to fuck her right here in the mud, but I don't.

The cabin looms up out of the trees. She sees it and starts to whimper, low and desperate, but doesn't beg. Not yet. She's saving it, hoarding the last of her dignity for the moment she needs it most.

I haul her up the steps and inside. The air is warm—too warm, stifling after the chill outside. I let her breathe it in, let her catch her breath, inhaling the deeper animal funk of sweat and old sex that never truly leaves this place.

She stares at the room, at the bed, at the single heavy iron ring bolted to the footboard, a long chain attached by one end with a leather cuff on the other.

One she didn't notice before, but has been there this whole time.

She knows what's coming when she spots it. I put there before going on my hunt.

I throw her down on the mattress, face first. She bounces, tries to scramble away, but I'm already on her, knees on either side of her waist as I wrap the cuff around her wrist. The click of the lock is final.

She goes still, forehead pressed to the sheet, hair fanned around her face.

She shakes, not from cold, but from the hopeless, exhausted rage that she can't get loose.

I stand over her. I want to see every inch of her.

The way her ribs heave with each breath, the way her ass tenses and unclenches as she realizes there's no escaping me.

I let her stew. Let her feel the weight of the silence and the newness of her captivity.

She flips over, pushing herself to the back of the bed, just watching me.

I unbutton my shirt and strip it off, peeling it from skin still sticky with sweat and dried blood.

Her eyes flick up, just once, and I catch the glint of something electric in them—a flash of recognition that even now, she's still looking at me.

Still reading me. Still, against all reason, wanting to know what comes next.

“Now we play by my rules,” I say.

She flinches. “Please,” she whispers. “Please, Knox. You don't have to do this.”

“I do.” I kick off my boots, strip down to bare skin.

I want her to see me as I am—unadorned, unmasked, the man and the monster fused into something she can't unsee.

“You ran,” I say, walking to the foot of the bed.

“You made me chase. You made me hunt you.” I kneel, stare her dead in the eye.

“Now you will tell me the truth, Gianna.”

She looks away. I grab her chin, force her to meet my gaze. “Say it,” I growl. “Tell me you understand.”

Her throat works, the words trapped behind her tongue.

I squeeze harder. “Say it.”

“I—” She swallows, her voice barely a wisp. “I understand. I...”

“Yes?” I grin, “Does my little bird have something to confess?”

She looks strained as she tries to figure out what the fuck her feelings are. “I hate you. But I want you too.” Even as she says it, she loathes the words. The emotions.

“Good girl.” I let her go. For a second, she slumps, every muscle in her body slack with defeat. But she’s not really defeated. I can see the way her hands twitch, the way she flexes her legs, calculating. She’ll never give up. She’ll never stop.

She’s perfect.

I climb onto the bed, straddling her legs.

The chain on her wrist gives her about eighteen inches of play—enough for most things, but not enough to hurt me unless I let her.

I pull her up to her knees and push her face down onto the mattress again, ripping off her clothes with the movement.

Her ass is bare, skin marbled with dirt and goosebumps.

I rake my nails across it, drawing a line from hip to hip. She shivers.

I spit into my hand and slick my cock, then line it up with her cunt. There really wasn't any need. She's wet. Not just wet—soaked, dripping, a hot, sweet mess even after all the hell I've put her through.

I laugh, long and low. "Look at you. Ready for me even now. You may hate me, Gianna, but you want me too."

She tries to shake her head, to deny it, but I slam into her, burying myself to the hilt in one brutal stroke. She cries out, the sound muffled by the sheets.

I fuck her slow, savoring the way her body clenches around me, the way her thighs tremble with every thrust. I grab her chain and use it as a handle, pulling her back onto me, over and over, until she's gasping, sobbing, but still trying to buck me off.

"You like this," I say, bending low to bite the curve of her shoulder. "You fucking love it. You love being ruined."

She shakes her head again, but it's a lie. I see the way she arches, the way she grinds her ass against me, desperate for more even as she chokes on the shame of it.

I reach around and slide my fingers between her legs, rubbing her clit in slow, tight circles. She whimpers, tries to twist away, but her hips betray her, tilting up to meet my hand.

"Tell me," I say, pressing down hard. "Tell me you love it."

She gags on the words, her voice thick with tears and spit. "I—no—"

I slap her ass, hard enough to leave a handprint. “Louder.”

“I—fuck—” Her voice breaks. “I love it. I love it. Please—”

I lose myself in the rhythm, the slap of skin, the music of her surrender. I keep fucking her until she screams, until her whole body locks up and she comes, wild and broken, around my cock.

I don’t stop. I want her to feel it forever. I want her to carry me inside her until the end of time.

When I finally come, I pull out and shoot all over her back, marking her, painting her skin with the truth of who she belongs to.

She collapses onto the bed, sobbing, the chain rattling with every shudder.

I watch her for a long time, savoring the silence, the utter completeness of the moment.

When I finally move, I kneel at her side, stroke the sweat-soaked hair from her cheek. She doesn’t recoil, but I hold her there, gentle, careful, as if she’s something fragile.

She hates me for it. Hates that I can be both monster and caretaker, abuser and savior.

I love her for it.

I bend low, kiss her eyelids, her temple, the line of her jaw. She shakes, but doesn’t pull away.

I whisper, “You’re perfect like this. Helpless. Owned. Mine.”

She says nothing, but her body tells the truth.

The bed dips as I get off and go get the washcloth, taking due care around the cuts and scrapes and bruises.

She needs a long shower, but not now. Rest is what I'm ordering and as soon as she's asleep, I'll undo the cuff. For now, a cloth will have to do.

Gianna sighs as I go back and rewarm it, going over her body a second time. I hate that I want to take care of her like this, but I love it, too. She watches me through slitted eyelids, a small smile playing over her lips.

"I don't understand you." She whispers.

"What don't you understand?"

"How you can slit a mans throat, chase me through the woods, fuck me like a madman, and care for me the way you are." She looks at me. Really looks at me.

"I don't either. The only thing I'm certain of is that I'd kill a thousand men if it meant you'd look at me the way you are now, for the rest of my life."

She whimpers, but doesn't break eye contact.

"Get some rest, Gianna."

I lie beside her, arm thrown across her waist, the chain running cool and heavy between us.

She'll sleep. She'll dream of running, of fighting, of maybe even winning.

But she won't.

She never will.

Not while I'm here to love her.

Chapter Eleven

Gianna

I wake up still handcuffed to the bed.

I figured he'd have at least undone it last night, but no such luck. I may have to use my feminine wiles to seduce him. As much as he intrigues me, I can't seem to get over the fact that he killed that man without remorse.

If he has no remorse, what the fuck could he possibly feel for me besides obsession?

The pain in my shoulder registers before anything else.

Every muscle in my body feels tight. My mouth tastes like defeat and adrenaline and the faint ghost of his skin, but I'm not going to think about that.

I'm not going to think about the way his hands felt, or the way he said my name, or how I said his right back.

I focus on the chain, the cold press of steel, the bite of the cuff against my wrist. I pull, slow at first, then hard, but all it does is drag the metal link across the post and make the wood groan.

Maybe if I ask him nicely, he will let me go.

It's too bright. I shut my eyes and try to remember what happened, but my brain only

coughs up scraps. Maybe it's the trauma that's been inflicted on me in such a short period of time. Brain's short circuiting so that I can survive.

Block it out and fight.

The taste of iron, the sound of his voice, the heat of his breath at my ear. The chain rattling with every thrust. His laugh when I said "please" and how I hated that I meant it.

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling. There's a knot of wood above me that looks like an eye. I stare at it until the tears burn off. I will not cry. I will not give him that.

Instead, I inventory the damage.

My wrist is chafed raw, a red ring encircling the bone like a cheap tattoo. My thighs are bruised, inside and out, the colors already blooming blue and purple. There's a constellation of fingerprints on my hip, perfectly spaced, each one a little trophy he left behind.

I try to reach the nightstand with my free hand. It's just out of range. I grab the sheet and pull, dragging the lamp closer inch by inch until it wobbles and tips over, clattering to the floor. There's nothing under it except dust and a single hair tie. Useless.

I laugh. The sound is wild, and I have to bite my lip to keep from going further.

That's when I hear him.

The careful tread of boots across the floor. The pause at the door. He knocks. He fucking knocks.

I roll onto my side, twisting the chain so it bites deeper into my skin, and wait.

He opens the door with his foot, carrying a tray balanced on one hand. Food. I watch the steam rising off the mug, the neat little sandwich triangles, the orange sliced into perfect moons.

He doesn't look at me right away. He sets the tray on the dresser, like this is a normal morning and I'm not chained to the bed like a dog in heat.

Then he turns.

His eyes are flat. Not cold—there's too much fire in them for that—but empty, like he's emptied himself out to make more room for me. He doesn't smile. He just stares.

"Good morning," he says.

"You're a real gentleman," I say, rattling the chain. "Breakfast in bed is a classic touch."

He tilts his head, studying the way the cuff has cut into my wrist. "You're bleeding."

"Not as much as you probably hoped."

The corner of his mouth twitches. He picks up the sandwich and holds it out, just out of reach.

"Eat," he says.

I make a show of sighing, then grab the sandwich with my free hand. I take a bite, slow, never breaking eye contact. It's ham and cheese, just enough mustard to make my tongue burn. The bread is stale. I eat anyway.

He sets the tray on the bed and crouches, close enough that I could kick him if I really tried. He studies the ring of bruises on my thigh, his fingers hovering above the skin but not touching.

“You’re healing fast.”

“You keeping score?”

He looks up, meets my gaze. “Always.”

I finish the sandwich in three bites, wipe the crumbs on the sheet. I want to throw the plate at his head, but I know he’d catch it. I want to hate him, but my body remembers every second he’s touched me, and I hate that more.

He stands and produces a tiny silver key. He holds it between his thumb and forefinger, so small it could disappear if I blinked.

“I’m going to unlock you,” he says. “Don’t do something you’ll regret, little bird.”

I nod.

He unlocks the cuff. The pressure releases in a rush of blood, and I have to clench my fist to keep from moaning. He doesn’t move, just stands there, watching the way my hand trembles.

“There’s a change of clothes in the dresser. Cassidy’s old shit, it’ll be tight, but I think she has some weird stretchy dress. Get comfortable Gianna, we’re going to the lodge today for a grocery top up,” he says. “Shower if you want. I’ll wait outside.”

He leaves, closing the door with a soft click.

For a second, I just sit there, free hand clutching my wrist, the rest of me shuddering with the shock of movement.

Then I stagger to the dresser, open the top drawer, and pull out a t-shirt and sweatpants.

Fucking hell. The sweats are way too small.

Grabbing the dress he talked about, my mouth fell open.

It's a clubbing dress. What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?

Frustration claws through me, but I carry it into the bathroom with me. I miss my own clothes. Goddamn, I miss having a toothbrush. My hairs a wreck. I wanna go home.

The bathroom is tiny, but clean. The soap is unscented, the towels white and threadbare.

I strip and step into the shower, cranking the heat until the water scalds my back.

I scrub until the skin is red, until the bruises stand out like stains on a painting.

I scrub between my legs, over my wrists, behind my ears.

I want to erase him, but all I do is make myself raw.

When I finally step out, the steam has fogged the mirror. I wipe it clean with my palm, then stare at my reflection.

I look like hell. My eyes are ringed with dark circles, my cheekbone is swollen, my

lips are chapped and cracked. I look like a girl who's been dragged through the woods and fucked into submission.

I look like a girl who liked it.

I punch the mirror, not hard enough to break it, just enough to see the white flash of pain in my knuckles.

The dress is warm. I sink into it, relishing the softness even as I hate it. The t-shirt falls to my mid-thigh, I towel my hair dry, then tie it back with the hair tie.

Then... I feel the wet between my thighs.

Fucking fantastic. I've got my period and I'm stuck in here with the equivalent of a fucking shark. Maybe he will smell it, go feral and eat me.

When I open the door after shoving wads of toilet paper in the underwear I am forced to keep reusing, he's waiting.

He stands at the end of the hallway, arms folded, leaning against the wall like he owns the place. Like he owns me.

He does. He fucking does.

I walk past him, refusing to flinch. He follows, slow and measured, every step a reminder of who is in control.

"It's good we're going to the lodge, my period started." I state.

His eyebrows raise. "Is that so? You aren't due for another week."

I choke on my shock. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.” He sighs. “No matter, you can choose to bounce on my cock to help your cramps, or bleed yourself into a little painful ball.”

“You’re fucked.”

“Meh.” He gestures to the couch. I sit, hands folded in my lap, and stare at the floor.

He sits across from me, elbows on his knees, gaze fixed on my face.

“You remember last night?” he asks.

“No,” I lie.

He smiles, the first real smile I’ve seen. It’s small, private, like a secret he doesn’t plan to share.

“I think you do.”

I meet his eyes, and something in me breaks. The chain is gone, but I’m more trapped than ever.

I look at my wrist. The mark is already fading, the skin pink and tender. I wonder how long it will take before the rest of me heals.

I wonder if I want it to.

“No, Knox, I think all the trauma you’ve forced on me has short-circuited my brain and now I’m basically a smooth brain.”

He chuckles, a loud, warm sound that makes me pause. Damn, I like that way too much. “You’re a funny girl, Gianna.”

We don’t talk for a long time. The fire cracks and pops. I listen to the sound of his breathing, slow and even, like he’s mastered the art of calm just to show me how badly I lack it.

Finally, he breaks the silence.

“You want to know how this started?” he asks.

I shrug. “Why not. We have all day, but just remember, I’m bleeding so if your aim is to stain this couch before we go to the lodge, you’re doing just fine.”

He leans back, stretching his legs until his foot brushes mine. He doesn’t pull away. I don’t either.

“My brother,” he says. “Well. Not my blood brother. But may as well be. Kairo is the one who started all this, commissioned Noah into letting us use his cabin.”

I roll my eyes. “What, like, hunting people for fun? That kind of game?”

He smirks, a slow, mean thing. “Not at first. At first, it was just talk. Fantasy. Stories around the fire.” He glances at the flames, and for a second I see something flicker behind his eyes. Not regret. Hunger. “But the stories weren’t enough. Not for Creed. Or Kairo. Or Slade.”

“Those real names? Stupid fucking names. Makes sense though, Knox. ”

“Real enough.”

I rest my chin on my hand. “So, what? They picked up girls at bars and brought them out to the woods? Told them it was some rustic fuckfest and then let them run for their lives?”

His mouth curves. “The first time was just some chick who had the same kinks. I think it was Creed who found her. Over time it evolved into some kind of mission to find ‘the one’ and stayed that way. Out of all of us Creed was the worst. He went through women so often we never knew what the fuck was up. Slade is a close second, but he just enjoyed the hunt. Not so much the after, if you catch my drift. Kairo had held out. Found Harbor a few months ago and they’ve been happy ever since. ”

“And you?”

He takes his time with the answer, rolling it around in his head before he spits it out. “I never participated. Not really. I just... watched.”

I almost laugh. “So you’re the pervert in the corner with the camera? The guy who jerks off while the real monsters do their thing?”

He doesn’t react. Not even a twitch. “Maybe. Or maybe I was just waiting for the right girl.”

He says it so quietly I almost miss it.

I stare at him. “You mean me?”

He nods.

The room feels smaller, the air thick and heavy. My heart pounds, too loud, and I know he can hear it. He drums his fingers on the table, slow and steady, the rhythm

matching the thud in my chest.

“Why me?” I ask, hating the way my voice breaks at the end.

He shrugs. “Because you fight. Because you don’t just run—you make me want to chase. You make me want to catch you.”

I should be terrified. I should be disgusted. Instead, my skin is hot, my palms sweat, and I can’t look away.

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, his eyes locked on mine.

“You know what I think?” he says.

I don’t answer, because I don’t want to.

“I think you like it. I think you want to be caught. I think your idiot ex showed you that you wanted more. Needed more. And I think despite the fact that I killed a man in front of you, it doesn’t really matter to you.

You like the fact that I’m so obsessed with you that I’d do something like that.

But you don’t want to admit it because what kind of sick woman would that make you? ”

“Go fuck yourself,” I say, voice sharp.

He grins, flashing those infuriatingly perfect white teeth. “Maybe later. For now, I’d rather fuck you.”

I feel my cheeks flush. I hate that he can do this to me, hate that my body answers to

him before my mind has a chance to protest.

“Do you know what they called it?” he asks, voice low. “The hunt?”

I shake my head.

“They called it ‘The Night Game.’ Because everything happens after dark. No rules. No witnesses. Just you and the woods and whatever you can get away with.”

He places his hands on the back of the couch, trapping me in place. His breath brushes my ear.

“I love the way you run from me, Gianna.”

I close my eyes, willing myself not to shiver. It doesn’t work. “You’re demonic.”

“Yeah, baby, but I’d be Satan himself if you’d be my queen.” He stands and leans down to grab my hand and pull me up. “Come, let’s go to the lodge. No funny business, Gianna, I mean it. I’m not above gutting guests.”

Goosebumps travel down my arms. “Fine.”

The smile he gives me somehow makes me fear him, while also making me want to sit on his perfect fucking face.

Maybe I will later.

Just to ease the cramps.

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Chapter Twelve

Knox

The Pine Ridge main lodge is a different kind of beast. It's made for the princesses who can't stand being outdoors.

Nothing like my girl. The lights are too bright.

The forced air is too dry. The kitchen's always awake, even at the ass-end of the morning, when the only people up are staff and the type of guest who doesn't care about the difference between AM and PM.

At least it's a decent time right now. Midday, so they're prepping lunch for everyone. Definitely going to grab some to take back to the cabin. If I'm tired of shit food, Gianna most assuredly is.

We get looks before we even cross the threshold.

No surprise. Gianna is wearing a club dress, hair slicked down but wild around the edges, her face bare, her skin glowing except for the bruises I painted on her last night.

God, she looks divine like this. She's trying to hide the one on her neck, but all that does is draw attention to it. And to her.

She keeps glancing at her own legs, at the bruise on her thigh that blooms blue and

purple just below the hem. The dress was meant to show off a body in a club bathroom, not a body in a wilderness lodge kitchen, but the effect is the same. Every man in the room tracks her from doorway to fridge.

I love the attention she's getting, but I love it even more when they see me stalking behind her and they avert their gazes. One might think she's been abused, but I know, and she knows, these bruises were born from the passion we share. She's marked. Claimed. Protected.

She tugs at the dress, hissing, "Fuck, Knox, I look like I just left a crime scene."

I shrug. "You did."

She scowls, whispers out the side of her mouth, "They're all staring."

"Let them."

There's a silence when we cross the dining hall, one that isn't really silence at all.

Forks clink against plates, someone coughs, a glass shatters in the back—then the chatter picks up again, twice as loud, like a dam trying not to break.

I'm not here to socialize, but I relish the way the staff tries not to look directly at me when I head straight into the kitchen, the way the chef nearly drops his pan when I open the fridge for a carton of eggs.

Gianna wants to disappear. She's not used to being a spectacle.

She tucks herself behind me, tries to become my shadow, but I won't let her.

Turning around, I plant a kiss on the top of her head and slide a hand down to her ass,

palm open, daring these assholes to say something about it. She jumps, but doesn't pull away.

I head for the coffee, ignoring the way the room arranges itself to let me pass. The staff have seen me before. They know what I am, even if they don't know what I've done. Guess my name precedes me.

Gianna leans in, her hair tickling my jaw. "This is mortifying," she whispers, voice raw with something like shame, or maybe arousal. It's a fine line with her.

I pour her a mug. "You'll get used to it."

She sips, hands shaking just enough to rattle the cup against her teeth. "I look like a battered wife."

"No, you look thoroughly fucked. There's a difference, Gianna. I'd never hurt you."

She flinches, but only a little. Progress.

She keeps shifting from foot to foot, like she wants to bolt for the nearest bathroom, but can't bring herself to move.

I watch her reflection in the metal door of the fridge—chin down, shoulders hunched, lips pressed tight together.

Every instinct in her wants to hide, to cover herself, but the dress won't let her.

"Why are you doing this?" she says. "Why bring me here if you're just going to show me off like—" she gropes for a word, settles on, "like a trophy?"

I tilt my head, consider her. "Because you are."

She laughs, a brittle, glassy sound. “Fuck you.”

“You’d like that,” I say, and I mean it. “I could. If you wanted. Bend you over this counter and make them watch as I fuck you until you’re dripping on the floor.”

The tension in her shoulders bleeds out a little. She stares into her coffee like it’s a divining pool, but really she’s just looking for a way to make it through this without self-destructing. “Shut up, Knox! They can hear you!”

From the back, a pair of line cooks whisper behind their hands, one of them bold enough to make eye contact. I raise my mug. He looks away, a flush blooming up his neck. I imagine what it would take to make him hold my gaze. Too weak to be a man.

Gianna taps her nails against the counter. Her fingers are red at the tips from last night, where she clawed at the ground in the outpost. She catches me staring, and for a second, something dark flickers in her face. Not fear. Not hate. Something closer to hunger.

I make a note of it, file it away for later.

She fidgets again. “I need to pee,” she whispers, urgent.

I point down the hallway. “You know where it is. It has a big W on it. Gianna... don’t do anything stupid. Come right back.”

She hesitates, then bolts, head down, arms crossed tight over her chest. I watch her ass move, slow and deliberate, every step broadcasting the memory of what I did to her last night. Fuck she’s voluptuous and beautiful and perfect, the way those cheeks bounce.

I wait. I always wait. “Hey, you.” I point at a line cook. “Put some of that in a couple

take-out containers when it's done." It smells delicious and I'm starving."

He nods and scurries away.

When she comes back, her hair is a little damp and she's smoothed the dress down so the hem is just a couple inches longer than it was before.

It only exposes her tits more. Fine by me, I can appreciate all her curves.

Her eyes dart around the room, then land on mine.

She expects me to say something, to reprimand her for taking too long or for trying to fix herself, but I let her stand in the uncertainty.

With a grin, I scoop fresh fruit, the eggs, a loaf of bread, coffee and a few other items into a bag.

She cracks first. "Are we done here?"

I finish my coffee in a single gulp. "For now."

We head out of the kitchen and back into the dining room. The crowd parts for us again. The same line cook tries to meet my eyes, and this time, I let him. I don't smile. I just watch as he shivers and looks away.

On the porch, Gianna inhales, breathes the cold mountain air like she's just surfaced from drowning.

I light a cigarette, let the smoke drift out between us. "You did so good," I say.

She snorts. "You're a fucking asshole."

I step closer, crowd her against the railing, thumb her jaw until she's forced to look up at me. "Yeah, but you like it."

I kiss her, rough and fast, biting her lip just hard enough to make her whimper.

She doesn't pull away.

Such a pretty little bird.

We haven't been on the porch two minutes before Noah shows up.

He moves like a mountain that learned how to walk—impossible to ignore, silent as stone until he's right on top of you.

Today he's dressed like every other day: battered jeans, boots older than most people in the resort, flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

His forearms look like they could snap a moose's neck, which is funny, because the only thing he ever snaps is my fucking patience.

His eyes flick to me, then to Gianna, then back to me. He doesn't bother with pleasantries. Never does.

"What are you doing here, Knox?" The words aren't a question, just a challenge.

I tilt my head, let the corners of my mouth pull up. "Getting groceries. Stocking up for the week."

He grunts, eyes raking over Gianna with the bare minimum of interest, like she's a new piece of furniture in a room he's already catalogued. He addresses her only to say, "You're bleeding on the stairs." Then, to me: "Put it on the account?"

“Yeah,” I say. “Put it on the account.”

He rolls his eyes and walks away, not even bothering with goodbye. The kind of man who only exists in stories about war or murder, but here he is, alive and sweating and hating every second of it.

Gianna watches him leave, then huddles close to me again. “He’s intense,” she mutters.

“He’s nothing,” I say. “You want intense, you should meet his cousin, Kairo.”

She laughs, a soft little sound, then shivers. I like it. I tuck her under my arm, more to keep her in place than to comfort her. Noah was right though, she was bleeding on the porch. I didn’t care. I’d let her bleed on me if it meant I was buried between her legs.

I take another drag and savor the flavor. I don’t smoke often, but something about today calls for some nicotine.

A few minutes later, the door behind us opens again, and this time it’s Cassidy.

She’s the kind of woman who doesn’t walk so much as glide, her feet barely making a sound on the old boards.

Hair tied up in a messy bun, yoga pants, baggy sweatshirt, no makeup.

She looks like every woman who has ever tried to fix a broken man.

Good thing for Noah. She might have actually succeeded.

Her eyes land on Gianna first. They widen, then soften, and she steps toward us, ignoring me entirely. She stands in front of Gianna, like approaching a wounded

animal.

“Oh, honey,” she says. “Are you okay? Hey, is that my dress?”

Gianna blinks, like she’s never heard those words before.

“No,” she says, voice small. “I’m not.”

Cassidy’s face is all sympathy. She reaches for Gianna’s hand, and for a second, I think Gianna might let go of mine and reach back. She doesn’t.

Cassidy leans in, voice low. “These men,” she says, “are savages. But they’ll treat you right if you let them.”

Gianna’s mouth opens and closes. She’s trying to process the words, but I see the moment she files them away for later. She’s already learned not to trust anything, but Cassidy is different. She wants to believe her.

I squeeze Gianna’s hand. Hard. “See?” I say. “Told you.”

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Cassidy looks up at me, eyes sharp. “You take care of her, Knox. Stop leaving these bruises on her! She looks like a battered wife,” she says. It’s not a request.

Gianna stifles a giggle, elbowing me in my side.

“I will,” I say.

The way Gianna shivers when I say it is almost obscene.

Cassidy stands, “Well, I’ve got to get to Noah. He’s in a whole ass mood today.” She gives Gianna a long, meaningful look, then disappears back into the lodge.

We’re alone again, but the silence is different now. Warmer, maybe. Or maybe just less hostile.

Gianna leans into me, head on my shoulder. “She’s nice,” she says.

“She is,” I agree. “Maybe once you’re trained, you two can have tea and crumpets.”

Cassidy is barely inside before Gianna tugs my sleeve, urgency all over her face. “Wait,” she says, voice pitched low. “Do you think she has—” she glances around, cheeks bright pink, “—like, pads or tampons or anything? I didn’t see any in your bag.”

I bark a laugh. “Go ask her.”

Cassidy must have been listening at the door, because she reappears before Gianna

can chicken out. “You need something?”

Gianna hesitates, then nods, mortified. “I... yeah, sorry. I’m kind of dying.”

Cassidy waves it off, already rummaging through her massive over-sized purse.

“You should see the crap I have to keep for Noah in here. Hence why it’s so ridiculously big,” she says, pulling out a travel pack.

She hands over a handful of pads, a box of tampons, even a couple of mini-packs of some kind of pills.

“Always be prepared,” she says, like a Girl Scout who grew up and never learned to quit.

Gianna takes the stack and shoves it in the bag I put on the porch deck, mouth twisted into a weird shape that’s half gratitude, half shame. “Thank you,” she says. “Seriously.”

Cassidy shrugs. “Women have to stick together, right?”

Gianna manages a shaky smile. “Right.”

Cassidy leans in, voice barely above a whisper. “Seriously, don’t fight it so hard. You’ll like it if you just give in,” she says. “Trust me.”

She squeezes Gianna’s arm, then ghosts away for good.

“I ordered the chefs to prep us some take out. Should be ready right about now.”

We head back inside to pick up the food.

The kitchen staff have packed everything in brown paper bags, the tops rolled down tight and the insides lined with foil containers.

Smells like fried chicken and biscuits, mashed potatoes, all the comfort food you could eat if you weren't worried about what might come after.

Gianna sniffs the bag, her eyes closing for a second. "God, I've missed takeout," she says, almost reverent. "Can we do this again?"

I pause, pretending to consider. "Maybe," I say. "If you behave."

She makes a face at me, then smiles, the first real one I've seen since I kidnapped her.

We walk out together, me carrying the bags, her glued to my side like we're a real couple, not a monster and his favorite girl.

"Knox," she says, just as we hit the front doors.

"Yeah?"

"I know you're fucked up. But... thanks. For not making this worse."

I look at her, really look, and for a second I almost say something true.

Instead, I just grin, hand low on her back, steering her into the cold.

"Dinner's at six," I say. "If you're hungry then, we can come back."

"Oh, I'm so excited!"

The look on her face is enough to make me feral. I'd kill men for that smile.

When we get in the door, the mood changes instantly. The air in here is thicker, sexually charged with everything we left unsaid. I put the food on the counter and open the fridge. The hum of it is the only sound for a long, loaded minute.

I'm pouring a glass of water when I realize she's just standing there in the entryway, not moving.

She's watching me. I turn around and lean on the counter, watching her right back.

She looks small, even though she isn't. Her lips are chapped, bitten raw, and her eyes are black and wide.

I let the moment hang. The only thing in the world is the soft click of her teeth as she bites the inside of her cheek.

She clears her throat, and the sound is so quiet I almost miss it.

"Knox," she says.

I don't answer.

She's gathering herself. I can tell by the way her hands go from fists to fingers and back again. She's terrified, but she's also angry. That's my favorite flavor on her.

"I need..." she starts, stops. "I want to make a deal."

This is good. I let a smile break over my face.

"Go on," I say.

She takes a deep breath, and it hurts to watch. It's like her lungs are trying to

remember what air is for.

“You want me,” she says. “Fine. But if you ever hurt someone—kill someone—like you did that hiker, or anyone else, it’s over. You let me go. No chase, no games. Just done.”

It’s not the speech I was expecting. It’s better.

She holds my gaze, and I see it: the flicker of hope, the belief that I can be negotiated with, that there’s a man under the animal. I almost want to tell her she’s right.

Almost.

I set the glass down, cross to her slow, each footstep deliberate.

“Okay,” I say. “Deal. But you should know, Gianna, that if someone comes for you—if anyone tries to take you from me—I will kill them. I can’t promise I won’t.”

She nods, and the motion is half defeat, half relief.

“Fair,” she says. “Just... don’t make it a habit.”

“Noted.”

The tension is still there, so thick you could wrap your hands around it and squeeze.

She looks at the floor, then back up, and there’s something hungry in her eyes. “What happens now?” she asks.

Now it’s my turn to pace her. I step in, crowd her against the wall, my hands braced on either side of her head. She’s trapped, but she doesn’t flinch.

“You tell me,” I say, low. “You made the deal. You set the rules, just this once.”

She licks her lips, breathing quick and shallow. I can smell the fear, the sweat, the tiny spark of something else under it.

She puts her hands on my chest, and instead of pushing me away, she pulls me in.

“I want you to stop treating me like I’m going to break,” she says, voice trembling.

I grin, slow and sharp. “You sure?”

She nods.

“Get on your knees,” I say, voice flat.

She slides down the wall, palms skimming the wood as she drops. The dress rides up her thighs, exposing everything. She shivers, but she doesn’t hesitate.

I step back, let her look up at me from the floor. I want her to feel the weight of this, the finality.

“Crawl to me,” I say.

She does, hands and knees, head up, hair falling around her face. There’s no shame in it—just raw, bright desire. She stops at my feet, waiting for the next command.

I tilt her chin up with my thumb, force her to look at me. “Open your mouth,” I say.

She opens, lips glossy, tongue wet. Her eyes never leave mine.

I undo my pants, slow, and feed her my cock. She takes it, first inch, then more, until

her lips hit the base. She gags, just a little, but steadies herself, breathing through her nose.

“That’s it,” I say, running my hand through her hair. “Take it. All of it.”

She chokes, but doesn’t back off. I fuck her mouth, slow and with purpose, letting her feel every second. Her mascara runs down her face, black streaks painting her cheeks. I love her like this—ruined, and loving it.

I pull out, slick and hard, and drag her up by the hair. She’s gasping, spit dripping down her chin.

“Over the couch,” I say.

She stumbles, catches herself, braces on the armrest with her ass up. The dress is just a belt now. She’s shaking, but I can see the way she pushes back into my hand as I grab her hip.

I press against her pussy, teasing, then slam in hard. She cries out, her head falling forward before I pull her hair, yanking it back. The arch in her spine is divine. I set the rhythm brutal, relentless. The slap of skin on skin fills the room.

“God, you’re wet,” I say, bending over her back. “You fucking love this, don’t you?”

She whimpers, and I grab her wrists, pinning them behind her. Her face is buried in the couch, but her ass is high, begging for more.

“You ever been tied up, Gianna? And I don’t mean by me, leading you back home.”

She shakes her head, wild.

I grab my belt off the couch cushion and use it, wrapping her wrists together behind her back.

I fuck her harder, rutting into her like I want to hollow her out. She screams, and the sound is music.

I lean in, mouth right at her ear. “Next time, I’m going to take you out to the woods. Tie you to a tree and fuck you until you’re screaming so loud the bears think you’re a wounded animal.”

She sobs, and I know she’s close.

I reach down and rub her clit, fast, merciless. “Come for me,” I say. “Come now.”

She does, body locking up, every muscle trembling. She goes limp, arms wrenched behind her, mouth open, drooling on the cushion.

I pull out, jerk myself, and paint her back with my come. She shudders at the heat.

I untie her, collapse her onto the couch, and sit next to her. I’m breathing hard, my chest heaving. Such a perfect, perfect girl for me.

She curls into me, cheek on my thigh, hair a mess. I stroke her head, soft for once.

She’s so fucking innocent like this. Freshly fucked, taking what she wants and giving it in equal measure.

After a while, she looks up, dazed.

“Deal?” she asks, voice hoarse.

“Deal,” I say. “But remember, you’re mine now.”

She closes her eyes, but she’s smiling.

I watch her breathe, the bruises on her back, the new marks on her wrists.

I can’t say I saw this coming, but I don’t hate it.

“Come, let’s eat. Then we can nap before I take you back for dinner. I’m sure we can find something more suitable in the chest for you to wear.”

She looks up at me. “Like... a date?”

I shrug. “Sure. Like a date.”

It surprises me. The fact that I want to take her on a date.

But she deserves it.

If nothing else, she deserves all the good the world has to offer.

That I have to offer.

Chapter Thirteen

Gianna

The next three hours are the kind of limbo no one warns you about.

After the messy, hard-won negotiation of our morning—after the groceries, the sex, the deal—I expected Knox to go full psycho or at least disappear to the shed and start dismembering squirrels as a hobby.

Instead, he domesticates. He's not a man who needs to fill the silence, but today he does.

He starts tinkering around the cabin. He fixes the drawer that squeaks in the kitchen.

I watch him as I pretend to read on the couch.

The book is nothing—just a prop, spine never cracked, pages smelling like sun-bleached paper and disappointment.

The real show is watching him: the way his forearms flex under the white t-shirt when he tightens the screws, the smooth, graceful way he moves around the space, always aware of where I am, even when I think he isn't.

Sometimes he hums, but never a full song, just a threadbare melody that evaporates when I listen too hard.

It should freak me out. Maybe it does, but there's something about it that relaxes the panic center in my brain. Maybe this is how hostages develop PTSD—a slow drip of ordinary kindness, almost accidental, until you're rooting for your captor to make a perfect fucking omelet.

Every now and then, he'll glance over at me, just a flicker, eyes the color of steel gone hot in a forge.

If he catches me looking, he doesn't smirk or preen.

He just stares until I look away, flushed and pissed that I let myself get caught.

I snap the book shut and cross the room to see what he's doing.

He's standing at the sink, arms braced on either side, staring out the window. The woods behind the cabin are full of mist and dripping leaves, the trees skeletonized against the dull sky. The faucet is running, splashing over a glass that's already clean.

I hover. He doesn't move, doesn't even acknowledge me, but I can feel the heat radiating off his body. It's both an invitation and a dare. My mind says: get out while you can, idiot. My body says: just lean into him a little. See what happens.

So I do. I bump his hip with mine, just hard enough that water slops onto his hand and down onto the floor.

He looks down at me, one eyebrow up, and for a second we're just two people in a kitchen, fucking with each other.

"You break it, you buy it," I tease. My voice is thin but not as shaky as I expect.

"Not a thing in this place I can't fix." He says it like a threat and a promise, then

shuts off the water and wipes his hands on a towel. “You want something?”

I want to say, I want to know why you’re like this, why you need to own every room you walk into, why you touch me with such obscene tenderness when you just as easily could snap my neck.

I want to say, I want to understand why I’m not more afraid, why I feel like living in the woods could be home if I just let it.

Instead, I say, “How do you even know how to fix a cabinet?” I lean in, arms folded, mimicking his posture. “What are you, some kind of handsy survivalist?”

He shrugs, gaze never leaving mine. “Dad taught me before he bailed. If something’s broken, you fix it. Or you learn to live with the brokenness.”

“Is that what you’re doing with me?” The words are out before I can stop them.

He grins, slow and lazy. “What do you think?”

I think I want him to touch me again, even though I shouldn’t.

Instead, I snatch the towel from his hands and throw it at the table. He doesn’t react, just takes a step closer, the space between us going electric.

For a long time, neither of us speaks. I want him to say something cruel, to remind me that I’m not here of my own will, that every kind gesture is just a new thread in the noose he’s braiding for me. But he doesn’t.

Finally, I break. “You’re a weirdo.”

He puts his hands on my hips, just barely, fingertips burning through the fabric of my

sweatpants. “So are you.”

It’s probably true. Who else would negotiate her own captivity over breakfast and then make a pact not to murder anyone else? Who else would stand in a kitchen, post-coital and post-trauma, and let the man who kidnapped her cradle her like she’s made of spun sugar?

He pulls me into him, and I let myself go soft against his chest. For a second, it’s okay to just be here, to listen to the birds outside and the clock ticking and the steady, deep beat of his heart.

He presses his mouth to the top of my head, a gesture so gentle that I almost flinch. But I don’t. Instead, I breathe him in, the smell of soap and cigarette smoke and something sharp underneath.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says. “You know that, right?”

“I know.” I say it because it’s easier than arguing, because even if I don’t believe it all the way, I believe it enough for now.

He pulls back, searching my face. “You’re not just some toy to me, Gianna. You’re my forever,” he says, almost to himself.

“That’s what all the guys say,” I joke, but there’s no bite in it.

He snorts. “I don’t care if you believe me.”

We stand like that for a while, until the clock says it’s after four and the light through the windows goes from cold to blue.

He lets me go and returns to his project—this time, taping a torn screen on the porch.

I go back to the couch, but the book is forgotten.

I just watch him, watch the way he owns every inch of the space.

My phone is gone, of course, but the clock on the wall says it's almost six when he finally calls me.

"You ever hike at night?" he asks, voice casual.

I blink, trying to process. "Is this a murder thing?"

He laughs, and it's so genuine that I forget to be afraid. "No, Gianna. It's a walk to the lodge. They've got a bar, and I think you could use a drink that isn't instant coffee. Plus, you wanted dinner. Thought we could get some together since you've been such a good girl."

He waits, letting me weigh my options. I know I'm not getting out of this, but I appreciate the illusion of choice.

"Sure," I say. "But if you're planning to hunt me, just know that I am starving so now is not a good time."

He grins. "Noted. Go change, I found something for you to wear."

I head into the bedroom and find a pair of jeans and a simple black shirt. Both my size. Half of me wonders how he got this, the other half doesn't want to ask because I know it'll be something creepy. Beside them is a red lace thong. No bra, because of course not.

After I put the clothes on, I head out of the bedroom and see him wearing dark wash jeans, a navy shirt and a black bomber jacket. He's holding up a thigh length jacket

for me. His eyes shine with appreciation and without thinking, I twirl.

“You look stunning.” He smiles.

“I’m not even going to ask how you got these.” I say in response.

“Meh, I had them here the whole time, I just enjoy watching you bust out of your clothing. Didn’t figure it would be an issue.” His shoulders shrug as he helps me into the jacket. “Let’s go.”

We step outside, the air biting, but thankfully not raining. The path to the lodge is visible, just a thin, muddy track between the trees. The last of the light catches on the wet leaves, turning the forest into something both dangerous and holy.

He offers his hand. I pretend not to notice, but when I trip over a root two steps later, he catches my elbow. His grip is steady, warm, unyielding.

We walk like that for a while, not speaking. I listen to the crunch of gravel under our feet, the wind in the pine needles, the echo of my own breathing.

After a few minutes, I risk a glance at him. He’s not looking at me, but there’s a small smile at the corner of his mouth. Not a predator’s grin, just something softer, almost sad.

I want to ask what he’s thinking, but I already know.

I want to ask if he regrets any of it, but I already know the answer to that, too.

We’re just two people walking through the woods, alone but not lonely, bound together by something I can’t name.

Maybe it's trauma. Maybe it's fate. Maybe it's just that we're both too fucked up to know how to want anything else.

Either way, I keep walking. Either way, I stay.

The thing about walking through a forest with your kidnapper is that there's no protocol for it.

You'd think there'd be at least one guidebook, a pamphlet in a doctor's waiting room, something with cartoons and a bulleted list of "Do's and Don'ts."

"There isn't. There's just the sucking noise of your shoes in the mud, the wet slap of a low branch against your cheek, and the man who alternates between being your tormentor and your only lifeline.

We keep to the main path at first, but then he veers off. No warning, no explanation, just a sharp turn left into the denser brush. I almost protest, but I catch the look on his face—mischievous, maybe, or just intent—and follow without a word.

The woods are alive in the weird, muted way they get just after sundown. Knox moves through it like he was built for this: low, smooth, and unerringly quiet for a guy with a solid eighty or more pounds on me.

I try to keep up, but my foot catches on something and I stumble forward. He grabs my arm before I hit the ground. His fingers bite in, but he steadies me, then doesn't let go, just keeps hold of my wrist like he's afraid I'll float off if he stops.

"Careful," he says. "This is where the animals hunt. Don't wanna bleed here. Mountain lions come out this way for mating season."

"You mean... there's animals that hunt here besides you?"

He grins, but doesn't answer.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

After five minutes of walking, we break through a tangle of pine into a small clearing.

It takes me a second to realize where we are.

The cold firepit, the circle of logs, the black scar in the dirt—it's my old camp site.

The place I started this entire disaster.

Everything is gone except a few things I didn't pack, but there is still the stone circle, still the faint depression where my tent used to be.

He stops in the center and turns to face me. The setting sun, what little there is, falls on the sharp planes of his face, making him look both younger and harder than he does in daylight.

He waits until I catch up, then just says, "This is where I saw you."

I should say something witty, but my chest is tight. "Creepy. You must have been thrilled when I arrived on your doorstep."

He shrugs, shoves his hands in his pockets, rocks back on his heels like he's auditioning for a role as "troubled yet irresistible lumberjack."

"I knew I'd keep you," he says. Not a joke. Just flat, like saying he knew the sun would rise or the river would flood if it rained enough. "I saw you and thought, that one's mine."

I want to roll my eyes, but the words land. Not soft, either. They thud somewhere low in my gut, vibrating like a struck bell.

I look around, trying to distract myself. “So what, you just stalked me for a while? Made sure I couldn’t get away?”

He smiles, a quick flash of teeth. “I wanted to see what you’d do. If you’d fold. If you’d run. If you’d break.”

He takes a step closer. The moon shadows his eyes, makes them unreadable. “You didn’t break.”

I cross my arms, defiant. “Not yet, but maybe tomorrow is the day I do.”

He tips his head, like he’s considering whether he likes that answer or not. “You won’t.”

I want to ask how he knows, but instead I blurt, “What’s your story, anyway? You got a degree in Creeping, or is this just a family tradition?”

He laughs, and for a second, the air gets lighter.

“Nah, my family didn’t care enough to keep me around, let alone teach me shit.

My dad taught me a few things in between being a drunk, but he didn’t give a shit much beyond that.

” He kneels by the firepit, digs at the blackened logs with a stick.

“You want the long version or the short?”

“Short. I don’t need your autobiography, just the SparkNotes.”

He pokes at the ashes, thinking. “Grew up in the city. Hated it and loved it at the same time. Dad was a gun nut, taught me to hunt and shoot before I could do multiplication. Mom was gone by the time I was ten. Dad drank himself to death by the time I was sixteen.” He shrugs. “The end.”

I blink, surprised at how fast he rattles it off, like he’s told this story so many times it’s just muscle memory.

“What about work?” I ask.

He looks up at me, eyes catching the moonlight for a second. “Work for a guy named Kairo. You’d hate him. Energy sector stuff. Creation and innovation of new projects.” He grins, a real one this time. “But what I really do? That’s more fun.”

I sit on one of the logs, ignoring the way the damp soaks through my pants. “Which is?”

He leans in, voice lower. “I move things. People, sometimes. Mostly guns. Some drugs, if the price is right. Off the books, off the grid. No one cares as long as the money’s good.”

He says it like he’s reading a menu, no weight, no apology.

I watch his face, trying to spot a tell—something that says he’s testing me, trying to see if I’ll flinch. But I don’t.

“Gun running,” I say. “That tracks.”

He laughs, the sound big and rolling. “You’re not surprised?”

I shrug. “Nothing about you is subtle. Besides, you handle a knife like a pro, and you’re way too casual about dead bodies.”

He lets that hang for a second. “You ever shot a gun?”

“A couple times. Boyfriends who thought it was hot to ‘teach a girl self-defense.’ They never realized I could shoot better than they could.” I can’t help the grin that creeps across my face.

He seems to like that answer. “Maybe I’ll take you to the range sometime. It’s by the ranger outpost you found”

I roll my eyes, but the idea isn’t as stupid as it should be. “Sure, as long as you’re the target.”

His smile stretches over his face and he winks.

We sit like that, both of us perched on opposite logs, staring at the dead fire like it’ll spark back to life on its own. The woods breathe around us, and I’m aware—painfully aware—of how alone we are, how the world feels both too big and too small at the same time.

He’s the first to break the silence. “You want to ask me something else.”

It’s not a question. He just knows.

“Why me?” I ask. “Why not any of the dozens of other girls who came through this place? Why risk your job, your life, whatever, just to... keep me?”

He thinks for a long time. Then, “You smell like survival. Like someone who’s been to the edge and decided to push back. Most people crumble when you show them

who you are. You didn't."

He leans forward, elbows on knees. "I could spend a lifetime looking for that and never find it again."

I look away, flustered. "You're such a fucking psycho."

He grins, unbothered. "Takes one to know one."

He stands and brushes dirt off his hands before bending and picking something up, smoothly placing it in his pocket. It looked like a rock, but maybe he has a collection. I've seen weirder hobbies. "Come on," he says. "We'll miss dinner if we don't move."

We walk the rest of the way in silence, but it's a different silence than before. It's full, weighted with everything we said and everything we didn't.

As we hit the trail back to the lodge, he slips his hand into mine. Not rough, not demanding. Just a quiet claim.

His palm is rough, warm, callused in a way that tells the story of his life better than words could. I let him hold it as we walk, not because I want to, but because it feels weirdly necessary. Like letting go would be admitting defeat.

The trail widens as we near the lodge. Little lights are strung up along the path, blinking through the trees like half-hearted Christmas. Knox doesn't look at them, but I can see his face in the glow—more relaxed than I've ever seen him, eyes crinkled at the corners, mouth soft.

"Tell me something real," I say, just to see what he'll do.

He looks down at me, brow furrowing. “Like what?”

“Anything. Something about you as a kid. Something that isn’t murder or weird.”

He snorts, but there’s no bite in it. “I had a pet monkey once.”

“What? How the?”

“Meh, my neighbor was a crackhead and bought weird pets. Couldn’t take care of this thing and gave it to me. I dunno what happened to it but it was gone by the end of the week.” He shrugged, his jaw clenching.

“What else?”

“Well, I like trapping. Hunting and all that. The wait for something to step in the trap you set is unlike anything else.”

“That’s why you like watching me?” I ask, cocking a brow.

He squeezes my hand, not letting go. “It’s better than anything else I’ve ever hunted.”

There’s a strange comfort in that, even if it’s sick. I could say something mean, but instead I just walk closer, matching his stride. Our bodies move in sync, the way animals do when they’ve stopped pretending not to want each other.

We pass the last of the lights and head up the porch steps.

Before we reach the door, I pull him to a stop. He turns, curious.

“Your dad,” I say. “You talk about him like he was the hero and the villain in your story.”

He laughs, bitter. “He was both. Mean drunk, but he made sure I never forgot how to survive. He died in a gutter with a bottle in his hand. Maybe that’s the way he wanted it.”

He tries to make it sound like he doesn’t care, but his jaw clenches so hard I can see the veins pop in his neck.

“Sounds like you miss him,” I say, soft.

“Don’t know about that.” His voice cracks on the words, barely audible. “I just wish he could see me now. What I turned into.”

For once, I don’t have a smartass reply. I just let the words hang.

He looks down at me, searching my face for something. I’m not sure what he finds, but he lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles, slow and deliberate.

It’s the most intimate thing anyone’s done to me in years.

I look away, because if I don’t, I’ll lose my Goddamn mind.

He releases my hand and motions me down a smaller path. “I have something I want to show you before we go eat. Don’t worry, dinner will be served until late.”

“But I’m—”

“Please.” Something breaks in me the way he says it and I just nod, allowing him to lead me down the path.

I follow him, and for the first time, I think maybe we’re not predator and prey anymore.

Maybe we're just two animals who found each other, in a world that doesn't care if we survive.

Chapter Fourteen

Knox

I keep my hand wrapped around Gianna's as we leave the trail.

She doesn't fight me, not tonight. Maybe she's tired of fighting.

Maybe she wants to be led, at least for a while.

I drag her down the path toward the west slope, where the trees grow close enough to block the stars, and the ground falls away into a gully that used to be a riverbed before the last drought.

When the guys hunted, I'd come here. To the space where the earth met the water and the sound of solace was all there was.

She shivers in the cold, but doesn't ask for my jacket.

She won't show weakness if she can help it, not even to me.

Especially not to me. Her chin is up, eyes scanning the darkness ahead, but every time I squeeze her hand, she flinches just a little.

Like a dog waiting for the next hit, even after I've proven I'd never hurt her.

I hate it. I hate whoever did that to her, and I hate myself for being the next link in a

chain she never got to choose.

Yet, I'd do it all again because there's no choice here. She is the one I will grow old with.

"Where are we going?" she asks, voice a notch too casual.

I ignore it, but tug her closer. I want her in my shadow, want her to forget that the world is big enough to swallow her whole. "You'll see."

We walk in silence for a while. The only light is the moon, and even that gets cut to shreds by the branches overhead.

I watch the way she moves. She tries to keep her steps light, but the earth here is uneven, scattered with roots and jagged rocks.

When she stumbles, I hold her tighter, allowing her to regain her footing without hurting her pride.

The muscle jumps in her jaw, but she doesn't pull away.

I could say something. I could tell her how good she looks like this, all soft in the dark, hair catching silver in the half-light. But I don't. Instead, I push her forward, making her walk ahead of me for a stretch, just so I can watch the way her ass shifts under the jeans.

The riverbed comes up quick. We cross it, and she slips on the slick stones, almost going down.

My hand wraps around her waist, hauls her upright.

She makes a sound, more breath than voice, and the urge to bite her right at the pulse in her neck is almost unbearable.

I settle for squeezing, letting her feel the strength in my grip.

“Careful,” I murmur. “It’s easy to get hurt out here.”

She glances back, her eyes sharp. “Not my first rodeo, cowboy.”

I grin, slow and wide but don’t have a retort. It’s like watching a flower blossom for the first time, her with these funny little quips of hers.

We keep moving, up a narrow trail cut between two walls of trees. At the top, they thin, and the world opens out into a basin maybe fifty yards across. In the middle is the waterfall. Noah and Cassidy’s place is just beyond this spot.

It’s not big, not by Pacific Northwest standards—maybe thirty feet, a single sheet of white water plunging into a deep blue pool. Moss grows in thick ropes on the rocks, and the spray hangs in the air before dispersing. The sound of the falls is a freight train, drowning out everything else.

Gianna stops dead, staring.

“Holy shit,” she whispers.

I come up behind her, slide my arms around her waist. She tenses, then relaxes when she realizes I’m not going to push her in. Not yet.

“Ever swim in a waterfall?” I ask, mouth against her ear.

She shakes her head. “Looks cold.”

“It is.”

I let her go, step around in front of her, and start stripping off my shirt.

The air bites at my skin, but I like the sting.

I like the way her eyes flick over the scars on my chest, the ones she pretends not to notice when we fuck.

I undo my belt, never breaking eye contact.

She’s already blushing, but she doesn’t look away.

“Your turn,” I say.

She glances at the falls, then at me. “You serious?”

“Dead serious. Skinny dip or nothing.”

She huffs out a breath, but her hands go to the bottom of her shirt.

She lifts it, slower than she needs to, and I know it’s a power move.

She wants me to watch, wants to make me wait.

I let her. The shirt comes off her head, and her skin is pale in the moonlight, dusted with goosebumps.

She’s not wearing a bra, just like I planned.

I watch her hands as she undoes the jeans, pushing them down over her wide hips.

She steps out of them, standing in nothing but a red thong. She hesitates, then slides them off, shivering in the night air.

Her arms go up, covering her tits. “Don’t stare.”

I walk up, close enough to feel her breath, and catch her wrists in one hand. I pull them down, exposing her.

“Never hide from me,” I say, voice low. “You will never think of yourself as anything other than perfect, ever again.”

She tries to look away, but I grab her chin, force her to meet my eyes.

“Say it,” I whisper. “Say you’re perfect.”

She swallows. “I’m perfect.”

I let her go.

She watches as I peel off my boxers. I stand there, naked and hard, and her eyes widen just a little. I don’t comment, just take her hand and pull her toward the water.

The pool is black and glassy. The roar of the falls swallows every sound. I wade in first, pulling her behind me. The cold is fucking brutal, but I don’t react. She hisses through her teeth, then plunges in up to her shoulders, arms crossed over her chest.

“Jesus Christ,” she gasps. “You’re insane.”

I swim a few strokes out, then turn back, treading water. “Come on. It’s better out here.”

She paddles to me, her hair streaming behind her in dark ropes. I reach for her, slide my hands around her waist, and pull her in so close I can feel the shiver running through her spine.

We float like that, bobbing in the current, the spray from the falls making her skin slick and cold. Her nipples are hard as glass, and she tries to cover them, but I won't let her. I grab her hands, pin them behind her back, force her chest up against mine.

She glares at me, but I can see the heat under the ice. She wants this. She just doesn't want to admit it.

I lean in, mouth barely touching her ear. "No one can hear us here," I say. "You can scream as loud as you want."

She laughs, breathless. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I squeeze her wrists, hard enough to hurt. "I would. But I'd rather you tell me what you want."

She goes quiet, thinking.

"I want you to let me go," she says.

I don't react. "Lie."

She smiles, slow and wicked. "I want you to fuck me in the water."

"Better."

I kiss her, hard, biting her lip until she gasps. Her legs wrap around my waist, and I feel her slick and hot even through the chill. I slide inside her in one stroke, and she

moans, head falling back.

The cold vanishes. All that's left is her, tight and perfect around me, her body arching and straining with every thrust. The water slaps against us, the noise of it lost in the thunder of the falls.

She bites my shoulder, leaving a mark, and I fuck her harder for it. She comes once, then again, nails digging into my back. I don't stop until she's shaking, until her voice goes raw and hoarse.

When I finish, I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in.

For a long time, we just float. Her arms are around me, her head on my shoulder. It's almost peaceful.

I hate it.

I want to ruin it, to drag us both back down into the violence that feels more real than this.

But I don't. There's growth in fear and Gianna makes me want to grow through it instead of caving because it's who I've always been.

Instead, I hold her there, letting the water carry us, letting the sound of the falls drown out the voice in my head that tells me to never let her go.

She pulls back, searching my face. Her eyes are clear, and for once, she doesn't look away.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

The question is so fucking stupid I almost laugh.

“No,” I say. “But I will be. As long as you don’t run ever again. Well... unless it’s so I can find you and fuck you.”

She nods, pressing her mouth to mine.

I let her kiss me.

I let her have this.

Tomorrow, she’ll probably regret it. But tonight, she’s letting herself be mine.

The water makes her hair heavy. It drapes over her face, sticking in black lines to her cheekbones. She brushes it aside, fingers clumsy and blue with cold, and for a while we just drift, her legs still hooked around my hips, her breath warm on my jaw.

This is the closest I’ve come to peace in years, and it’s fucking terrifying.

Gianna’s eyes are wide open. She stares at the sky, the low cloud smear above us, the occasional gull wheeling overhead. I think she’s counting the seconds before she ruins it.

She doesn’t disappoint.

“My ex was a captain,” she says. “I never told you that.”

I grunt, holding her tighter so she can’t drift away from me.

“He ran one of those luxury cruise liners,” she goes on, voice thin and flat. “Six months on, three months off. He said he loved the ocean because it made him feel

like a god. Like he could go anywhere, do anything, and no one could stop him.”

Her nails dig into my bicep. Not hard, but deliberate. I think she wants me to hurt, just a little. Fair enough.

“He cheated on me,” she says. “Every time he docked. Didn’t even bother to hide it. Told me once, if you can’t handle the freedom, you shouldn’t be with a man like me.” She spits, a hot fleck that vanishes into the spray. “Like it was some gift, his honesty.”

I listen, because that’s what I do. I listen and I remember.

“I stayed,” she says, her voice getting softer, “because I thought it would make me stronger. That if I could take it, I could take anything.” She laughs, sharp and bitter.

“Turns out all it did was make me hate myself. He’d tell me I was fat.

Worthless. Show me pictures of the women he’d fuck in between ports. ”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

The water laps at us. A piece of moss floats by, catching at her shoulder, and I brush it off with two fingers. Her skin is covered in goosebumps, her nipples peaked and pale as pearls. She doesn't try to cover them this time. Maybe she's tired. Maybe she trusts me. Maybe both.

"Why'd you finally leave him?" I ask, just to keep her talking.

She blinks. "I thought I was going to die there," she says, and now her voice is a whisper. "Not because of him. Because of me. Because I knew if I didn't leave, I would never leave." She looks at me, really looks, and I see the hole in her where hope should be. "That make sense?"

I nod, because it does. It makes more sense than anything.

She lets her head fall against my shoulder, lips brushing my neck. "What about you?" she asks, almost gentle. "Any fucked up girlfriends?"

I bark a laugh. "Nothing to tell."

She snorts. "Bullshit. A man like you? You must have had a whole graveyard of exes."

I squeeze her, hard enough to make her gasp. "Maybe I buried them," I say.

She laughs, and the sound is real. "God, you're impossible."

We drift, spinning lazy circles, her toes brushing mine underwater. I can feel her

getting braver, the way she angles her face up to look at me, the way her hands start to explore my chest, tracing the old scars and the fresh ones, mapping me out like a new country.

After a while, she gets quiet. I watch her, waiting for the next hit.

She doesn't look away when she asks, "Why me?"

"Why not you?"

"No, I mean—" she bites her lip, frustrated. "Not why did you kidnap me... we went over that. Why do you want me so bad? There's nothing special about me. I'm not beautiful, I'm not smart, I'm not even that good in bed. You could have anyone. Why this?"

I don't answer right away. I let the silence fill up with the sound of the falls, the pulse of the water against our bodies, the weight of her question.

Finally, I say, "Have you ever craved something so badly, out of nowhere, that it takes over your life? That you know you're supposed to have it, even if you don't deserve it, even if it's wrong?"

She nods, slow, a frown knitting her brows.

"That's you," I say. "You're my craving."

Her eyes flicker, like maybe she doesn't know whether to be scared or flattered. Maybe both.

"You're fucked," she says, but it's soft, and she cups my jaw with her hand, pulling me in for a kiss.

Our mouths meet and it's electric. The water between us, the cold and the heat, her breath and mine. I bite her lip, just enough to make her whimper, and she presses closer, grinding against me, wanting more.

I could stay like this forever.

But I don't get forever.

The shrill ring irritates me and a flare of anger travels down my spine. My phone, buried in the pile of clothes on the rocks, screaming for attention.

I ignore it. She doesn't. "Go check," she says, pushing me away.

I don't want to. I want to drown us here, keep her under the surface until the world forgets we ever existed. But I swim to the edge, haul myself out, and drip cold water all over the phone as I unlock it.

A text from Noah.

INCOMING. GIANNA'S EX CHECKED IN WITH A NEW GIRL. JUST A HEAD'S UP.

I stare at the words. My vision goes white for a second, a flash of something violent and pure.

I turn back to the pool, watching Gianna float on her back, eyes closed, face to the sky. She looks peaceful, but I know she's thinking about her soon-to-be-dead cruise ship captain. All the shit he put her through. How did none of this show up on my background checks? Slimy ass motherfucker.

I grip the phone so hard the glass creaks. My muscles coil, ready for a fight.

Gianna opens her eyes and sees me watching.

“What is it?” she asks, voice careful.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

But it’s not nothing. It’s the start of everything.

I toss the phone onto the rocks and slip back into the water. I swim to her, pull her close, hold her so tight she can’t move. She squirms, but I won’t let go.

She’s my girl. And now everyone will know it.

Even her ex.

Especially her ex.

It’s not long before we’re freezing, but not for the lack of fury running hot through my veins.

I needed the cold to decide what the fuck to do about this little problem.

I promised I wouldn’t kill anyone else, but does he really count as a person?

I remain unconvinced. She wraps herself in my shirt and wrings her hair out, drops falling on her bare feet.

I dry off slow, savoring the sight of her stripped raw, the way she tries to hide but keeps looking at me like she wants me to see her anyway.

She glances at my phone, still face up on the rocks, the last message glaring in the

dark. She walks over and reads it.

“Your poker face sucks,” she says, voice hoarse.

I crack a knuckle. “You want to see him?”

She stiffens, then pulls the shirt tighter. “I want to burn the lodge down with him in it.”

“Not an option,” I say, pulling my jeans back on. “Too much paperwork.”

She laughs, mean and bright. “You think I’m joking.”

“I never think you’re joking.” I toss her the rest of her clothes. “We’re maybe a half mile from the main building. We could be there before dinner’s over.”

She doesn’t move for a second, just stands there, goosebumps prickling up her arms, hair wild around her face. Her eyes are old, dark, dangerous.

“Tell me what else he did,” I say, needing her to relive it. To be angry enough to do what I need her to do.

She flinches, just once, but I see it. “He’d hit me if I didn’t do what he wanted. Not like... hard. Well not hard enough to leave bruises.”

I feel my jaw ticking. I want to carve the bastard up slow, let her watch, but I know that’s not the point. The point is what she does, not what I do.

She rubs a thumb over the inside of her wrist, nails digging into the skin. “I used to dream about killing him,” she says, voice light as a child’s. “Then I felt guilty for dreaming. I thought maybe I deserved it.”

I move fast, get in her space, grab her chin so she has to look at me. “You deserved better. Always.”

She stares back, furious and wild. “I know that now.” Then, softer, “Because of you, you maniac.”

I let her go. “So. What do you want to do?”

She grins, teeth white and sharp in the dark. “Let’s play a little game.”

I cock my head, curious.

“We hunt him,” she says, voice low. “Through the woods. Like you hunted me. If Brad falls and hits his head and dies, well, accidents happen.”

I start laughing, can’t help it. “You want to be the monster now, huh?”

Her smile widens. “Maybe just for tonight.”

I pull her close, pinning her arms behind her. “Deal’s off, then? I’m allowed to kill again?”

She leans in, lips brushing my cheek. “Only if you promise not to get blood on my shirt.”

“Deal,” I say, and we both break out laughing. Who knew my little bird could be so savage?

She gets dressed, still shivering, and I help her pull her jeans up, my fingers slow and careful. She doesn’t pull away. She lets me wring out her hair, knot it up at the base of her neck, tying it tight. When I’m done, she leans into me, heavy, like she’s letting

me carry the weight for once.

We walk together, up the trail and through the dark, the forest closing behind us like a zipper. Her hand is cold in mine, but she squeezes tight, not letting go.

The main building comes into view at the bottom of the hill. It's a monster—logs the size of telephone poles, windows as big as movie screens. The place is lit up like a promise, warm yellow light spilling out over the porch. Noah spared no expense with this place.

I glance at Gianna, and she's staring straight ahead, jaw set.

"We go in together," she says, "like we own the place."

I nod.

"Ready?" I ask.

She grins, all teeth. "Born ready."

We hit the porch and stop at the door. For a second, the world feels like it's waiting for something.

And then it happens.

The switch.

She looks at me, something fierce and hungry in her face.

"Let's ruin his fucking night," she says.

I can't wait.

I watch the way men look at her: hungry, calculating, some of them already imagining how they'd taste her.

I want to gouge their eyes out, but I let it go.

When we came here earlier, it was fun and games watching the way they desired her.

My mask pokes me through my jacket pocket. A smirk crosses my face.

But now the time for fun is over. We're here for one purpose. Dine and hunt.

She walks straight to a table in the back, never hesitating, and sits with her back to the room. I take the chair next to her. We don't speak. She scans every face, scanning for him.

A waitress appears, young, desperate to please. "Drinks?" she asks, her voice brittle.

"Whiskey, neat," I say.

"Gin and tonic," says Gianna, never looking up.

We order food without reading the menu. I get steak. Gianna orders the fried chicken with mash potato and gravy.

We eat in silence. The food is good, but I barely taste it. I watch Gianna instead: the way her jaw works when she's chewing, the way her eyes keep darting to the door. She's coiled so tight the fork almost bends in her hand.

Halfway through the meal, he walks in.

He's shorter than I expected. Tanned, handsome in a greasy, overproduced way.

White teeth, expensive watch, cheap aftershave that hits my nose even across the room.

He's got a blonde on his arm—young, huge tits, red lipstick over her lips.

He parades her through the entryway, soaking up the glances, the little smirks from the other men.

Gianna goes rigid. The air around her shifts, crackles, like she's about to explode. I put my hand on her thigh, squeezing just hard enough to ground her.

He doesn't see us at first. He's too busy showing off for the room. When he finally does, his face freezes for a split second. Then he smiles, wide and fake, and steers his girl to a table on the other side of the room.

Gianna stands. I catch her wrist, but she yanks free.

She walks straight to his table, eyes locked on his. The blonde shifts, looking from Gianna to her boyfriend, already sensing the storm.

Brad's smile gets sharper. "Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

Gianna ignores him, stares at the blonde. "Blink twice if you want to be saved," she says, voice flat.

The girl giggles, unsure if it's a joke. She blinks once, slow and then holds her eyes open so wide she looks like a dead fish.

This asshole leans back, arms wide. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" He eyes me,

then Gianna, then me again. “You trading down, babe? Or is this a charity case?”

Gianna doesn’t flinch. “You’re a fucking wet sock, you know that.”

He looks at me, eyes raking over my frame. “What’s it like, having my whore for a girlfriend?”

I smile, slow and lazy. “I’ll show you,” I say. “Come outside.”

He laughs, loud enough for half the room to hear. “Yeah? You want to go? Let’s do it.”

He stands, shoving his chair back, and gestures for Gianna to lead the way.

She doesn’t move. “Bitches first,” she says.

He shrugs, strolls to the door, never once looking back at the blonde. I follow, close enough to watch the confidence in the set of his shoulders.

We step onto the porch. The night air is colder than before, and there’s cloud of vapor when we exhale.

Gianna stands at the top of the stairs, arms folded. She looks at him like she’s deciding whether to break him or just let him go.

He turns, cocky, fists balled at his sides. “So what, you gonna fight me for her? Is this some kind of sick game?”

Gianna laughs, high and brittle. “No one would fight you for me. You’re not worth the calories.”

He flushes, eyes darting to me, then back to her. “So what the fuck do you want?”

She steps closer, her voice barely above a whisper. “I want you to run.”

He blinks, confused. “What?”

“Run,” she says. “We’ll give you sixty seconds.”

He laughs, nervous now. “You’re fucking nuts.”

She doesn’t move. Just starts counting, loud and steady.

“One.”

He looks at me, but I don’t react. I just stand there, arms crossed, letting him see the truth in my face.

“Two.”

He backs away, slow at first, then turns and jogs toward the tree line.

“Three.”

He glances back, sees we’re still standing there, and breaks into a sprint.

Gianna stops counting at ten, her lips pulled back in a savage smile.

“You know he’s not going to get far,” I say.

She shrugs, watching the woods. “He doesn’t understand the rules of the game yet.”

We wait, just long enough.

Then we follow, side by side, into the dark.

She's laughing, wild and free, and I know I'll follow her anywhere.

Even into hell.

Especially there.

Chapter Fifteen

Gianna

The forest almost sighs as we enter the dense trees.

Every step feels electric, my feet barely making a sound on the pine needles and rotting leaves.

Behind me, Knox is already tuned in. His mask gleams dully when he turns his head, catching fragments of light through the canopy.

I should be terrified. I should be sick with what we're about to do.

Instead, my blood sings with anticipation, a high, sweet note that drowns out everything else.

So much for being terrified about being murdered. I almost roll my eyes at myself, but the truth is... Knox is making me feel alive in ways I've never been before.

Isn't that every woman's dream? A man who makes them feel life, passionately, wholly?

Well, I'm done fighting it. I am going to explore these feelings and it starts with ending Bradley.

"There," Knox whispers, pointing to a broken twig dangling by threads of bark. "He

went this way."

I nod, following his gaze to where the underbrush is trampled, leaves smeared with mud. I smile, imagining his panicked breathing, the sweat soaking through his designer shirt. I wonder if his perfectly styled hair is ruined yet.

"You're enjoying this," Knox says, his voice amused behind the mask.

"Maybe," I admit, the word hanging between us like a confession. "Is that fucked up?"

He laughs, low and warm. "Welcome to my world, little bird."

We move deeper into the trees and the dark is so poignant I struggle to see in front of me. Knox seems to flow through the shadows, not even a single misstep. I find myself mimicking him, rolling my feet from heel to toe, slowing my breathing to match the rhythm of the forest.

Behind us, the lights of the lodge have long disappeared. Ahead lies only darkness and the promise of something I've wanted for so long without knowing it.

It strikes me then—the deal I made with Knox. No more killing. But here I am, hunting a man through the woods like an animal. I should feel guilty or afraid, but all I feel is a strange sort of clarity, as if I'm finally seeing the world without a filter.

"I don't know how I feel," I whisper, not slowing my pace. "I've never... never even hurt a fly."

Knox's hand brushes the small of my back, a touch so light I almost imagine it. "Well, Gianna, this is what you wanted. The truth of who you are is always in the parts of you that you don't want to confront. But fear not, baby girl, it's not just you.

This is us."

Us. The word sinks into me, warm and dangerous.

"He was horrible to me, but does he deserve to die?"

"Yes." The word is a rasp.

"I definitely am starting to believe that."

Knox's breathing changes, becomes deeper, more deliberate. "And how does that make you feel right now?"

I consider the question, turning it over like a smooth stone. "Powerful," I finally answer. "Like I'm taking back something he stole."

The forest floor dips suddenly, leading us into a shallow ravine.

The moonlight is stronger here, painting everything in silver and shadow.

I spot it before Knox does—a flash of white fabric against a fallen log about thirty yards ahead.

Brad, huddled against the rotting wood, breath clouding in the cold air.

Knox spots him a second later, a predatory stillness washing over him. He gestures for me to stop, then points to the left. I understand immediately—we'll circle, cut off his escape.

I move quietly, heart hammering against my ribs, not from fear but from the electric thrill of the hunt.

It finally makes sense why Knox likes to hunt me.

This is amazing. Freeing. Primal. The ground is softer here, muddy from yesterday's rain.

My shoes sink slightly with each step, but I don't care.

All I care about is the look on Brad's face when he realizes there's nowhere to run.

I reach my position just as Knox begins his approach from the other side. Brad doesn't see us yet. He's too busy checking his phone, the blue light illuminating his face in ghostly hues. Fucking idiot. Even now, he thinks technology will save him. He curses when he realizes there's no reception.

Knox moves like a shadow given form, slipping from tree to tree until he's directly behind Brad. I hold my breath, watching as Knox gathers himself, muscles coiled tight. Then he launches forward, a blur of motion that ends with Brad face-down in the mud, Knox's knee driving into his spine.

The scream that tears from Brad's throat is loud, raw with terror. He thrashes wildly, but Knox pins him effortlessly, twisting one arm behind his back until he howls.

"Please," Brad gasps, mud spattering his lips. "I have money. I'll give you whatever you want, just—"

His words cut off as he sees me stepping into the moonlight. His eyes widen.

"Gianna, I thought you were joking. I didn't actually think you were fucking insane. What the fuck? Is this—" He struggles against Knox's grip, face contorting. "Is this your boyfriend? Jesus Christ, you psycho bitch, call him off!"

Knox laughs, the sound muffled behind his mask. "That's not how you talk to a lady."

To punctuate his point, Knox slams Brad's face into the ground. Blood sprays from his nose, dark against the pale mud. When Knox lets him up again, Brad's eyes are wild, darting between us.

"Look, Gianna, I'm sorry, okay? Whatever I did—"

"Whatever you did?" My voice comes out softer than I expect, almost gentle. "You know exactly what you did."

Brad's face shifts, a calculating look replacing the fear for just a moment. "We had problems, sure, but this? This is insane. You need help, baby."

The old nickname hits me like a slap. I step closer, crouching to meet his eyes. "You hit me when I wouldn't suck your dick. You showed me pictures of other women and told me they were better than me. You made me feel worthless, and you enjoyed it."

Knox's head tilts, the mask regarding Brad with alien curiosity.

Then, methodically, he begins to hit him.

Not wild, angry blows, but precise strikes—to the ribs, the kidney, the back of the head.

Brad's screams grow weaker with each impact, until he's just whimpering, blood bubbling from his split lip.

When Knox finally stops, Brad is barely conscious, held upright only by Knox's grip on his collar. The forest is silent except for Brad's wet, labored breathing and the soft patter of blood dripping onto dead leaves.

Knox reaches into his jacket and pulls out a hunting knife. The blade catches the moonlight, throwing silver reflections across Brad's terrified face. Knox holds it out to me, handle first.

"Your choice, little bird," he says softly. "Should he live or die?"

I stare at the knife, my heart pounding so hard I can feel it in my fingertips. This is it—the moment where I decide who I really am.

The age old question... who am I and who do I want to be?

Brad's eyes lock with mine, pleading, wet with tears and snot and blood. "Please," he whispers. "Gianna, please."

I reach for the knife, my hand steadier than I expected. The handle is warm from Knox's grip, the blade perfectly balanced in my palm. Power surges through me, and a little flutter beats in my chest.

Time stretches as I stand there, poised between what I was and what I might become.

Brad's eyes follow the blade as I test its edge with my thumb, drawing a thin line of blood that wells up black in the moonlight.

Behind his split lips, his teeth chatter with fear, and I realize I've never seen him afraid before.

He was always so goddamn confident—so certain of his right to take whatever he wanted from me. Not anymore. Not ever again.

"Gianna, baby, think about what you're doing," Brad wheezes through bloodied teeth. "This isn't you. You're not violent. You're sweet and kind—that's why I loved you."

A memory flashes through me: standing in the bathroom of our apartment, pressing a cold washcloth to my cheekbone where his ring had caught the skin.

He'd been drinking, angry that I'd worn a dress he thought was too revealing to a friend's birthday dinner.

The next morning he'd brought me flowers, told me he was sorry, that he just loved me so much it made him crazy sometimes.

I crouch down, bringing the knife close to his face. "You never loved me. You loved owning me."

Knox shifts his weight behind Brad, keeping him pinned but giving me room to work. The mask reveals nothing, but I can feel his eyes on me, patient and curious.

"That's not true," Brad stammers, a tremor running through his body. "We had something special. I know I made mistakes—"

"Mistakes?" The word tastes like acid. "You called them learning opportunities, remember? Like when you made me watch you fuck that stewardess in our bed. A learning opportunity to show me how a real woman takes a man."

His eyes widen, darting to Knox and back to me. "I was drunk. I didn't mean those things. People change, Gianna. I've changed."

I laugh, the sound hollow and strange in the quiet forest. "So have I."

He tries once more, voice rising to a desperate pitch. "Please, I have money. I'll give you anything. We can work this out like adults. You don't want to throw your life away over—"

"My life?" I interrupt, pressing the knife tip against his throat, just enough to dimple the skin. "You stole years of it already. Made me believe I was nothing without you. That no one else would ever want me."

"That's not—"

"Shut up." My voice is steady now, cold as steel. "I don't care what you have to say anymore."

I think of all the nights I cried myself to sleep. All the times I apologized for things that weren't my fault. All the ways I made myself smaller just to fit the box he built for me.

The knife moves almost of its own accord, slipping down from his throat to his stomach. I drive it in with a force that surprises even me, the blade piercing fabric and flesh with a sick, wet sound. Brad's eyes bulge, his mouth opening in a perfect O of shock.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

Blood blooms across his shirt, dark and spreading like spilled wine. His hands come up instinctively, grabbing at mine where they still grip the knife handle. I twist the blade, feeling tissue tear and resistance give way.

"That's for every time you made me feel worthless," I whisper, my face inches from his.

He tries to speak, but only a wet gurgle escapes. Blood bubbles at the corners of his mouth, trickling down his chin in thick rivulets. His eyes are wild, disbelieving, locked on mine as if trying to understand how this could possibly be happening to him.

I pull the knife out and stab again, higher this time, under his ribs. His body jerks, hands clawing weakly at my arms. I barely feel the scratches. All I feel is a strange, floating sensation, as if I'm watching myself from somewhere far away and very close at the same time.

Knox releases his hold, letting Brad slump to the ground.

The captain of the ship, master of his domain, reduced to a twitching heap of meat on the forest floor.

I kneel beside him, watching with detached fascination as his breathing grows ragged, then shallow, then stops altogether.

His eyes stare upward, reflecting pinpricks of starlight, seeing nothing.

"He's gone," I say, my voice oddly calm.

Knox kneels beside me, his mask tilted as if in question. "And how does it feel?"

I consider this, running my fingers through the blood pooling on Brad's shirt. It's warm and slick, already cooling in the night air. "Right," I answer, surprised by my own certainty. "Like fixing something that was broken for too long."

I look at my blood-covered fingers, turning them in the moonlight.

The dark liquid catches the light in strange ways, almost beautiful.

Without thinking, I bring my hand to my face, drawing a line across one cheek.

The blood is tacky against my skin, marking me in a way that feels ancient and significant.

Knox watches, his breathing changing behind the mask, becoming deeper, more ragged. I meet his eyes through the slits in the demon face, seeing the hunger there, the approval.

I dip my fingers again, drawing another line across my other cheek. Then down my neck, across my collarbone, staining my skin with what used to be Brad's life. Each stroke feels deliberate, meaningful—a baptism in the dark waters of who I'm becoming.

"I spent so long pretending," I say, my voice low and intimate in the silent forest. "Hiding parts of myself because I was afraid of what they meant. Afraid that if I admitted I wanted to hurt him, it would make me just as bad as he was."

Knox reaches out, tracing a finger through the blood on my cheek. "And now?"

I lean into his touch, closing my eyes for a moment. "Now I understand that everyone has darkness in them. Most people just pretend it isn't there. They smile and nod and say please and thank you while fantasizing about violence."

I open my eyes, holding his gaze through the mask. "But you—you never pretended. That's what unsettled me from the beginning. Not that you were dark, but that you owned it so completely. No apologies, no excuses."

His hand slides to the back of my neck, gripping it firmly. I can feel his pulse through his fingers, racing to match my own.

"I finally understand what it's like to balance the light and dark," I tell him, my voice steady despite the trembling in my limbs. "And I love it."

I press my blood-slick hand to Knox's chest, feeling his heart hammering beneath my palm. His breathing has grown heavy and labored behind the mask, his body radiating heat like a furnace.

"You showed me that I don't have to shove the dark down to stand in the light," I whisper, leaning closer to him. "Sometimes, becoming the dark IS the light."

In the stillness that follows, with Brad's cooling body beside us and the forest breathing around us, I feel something unlock inside me—a door I've kept bolted for as long as I can remember, finally swinging open to reveal not a monster, but simply another part of myself. Waiting. Complete.

The sound that tears from Knox's throat isn't human.

It's something older, something that existed before words, before civilization—a growl that vibrates through the space between us and settles deep in my core.

He steps forward, ripping the mask from his face and casting it aside.

His eyes burn in the darkness, pupils blown so wide they swallow the color.

He looks at me like I'm water in a desert, salvation and damnation wrapped in one blood-streaked package.

My breath catches as his hands reach for me, not gentle, not asking—taking.

He lifts me easily, hands gripping under my thighs with bruising force, and slams me against the nearest tree.

The bark scrapes my back raw through my shirt, but the pain just sharpens everything else; the heat of his body, the hard press of his cock against my clothed pussy, the metallic tang of blood in my mouth when he crashes his lips to mine.

The kiss isn't gentle. It's consumption, his tongue invading, teeth clashing against mine. He tastes like violence and desire, a combination that makes me dizzy with want. My legs wrap around his waist tighter, pulling him closer, grinding against the hard ridge behind his zipper.

"Fuck," he growls against my mouth, one hand moving to tear at my clothes. "You have no idea what you look like right now."

I do, though. I can feel it—power pulsing through me like a second heartbeat, the blood on my skin still warm enough to remind me of what I've done. What we've done.

Knox yanks my shirt up, not bothering with being gentle, the fabric ripping under his impatient hands.

Cool air hits my skin, raising goosebumps across my chest. He stares at my breasts, pupils dilating impossibly wider, then lowers his head to bite at my nipple.

The sharp pain makes me arch against him, a moan escaping my throat.

"I want you," I gasp, digging my nails into his shoulders. "Now. Hard."

He laughs against my skin, the sound dark and hungry. "Since when does my little bird give orders?"

"Since she grew talons," I reply, reaching between us to unbutton his jeans.

His answering grin is feral. He shifts his weight, using one hand to hold me up while the other works at his zipper. The muscles in his arm bulge with the effort, veins standing out beneath skin that glistens with sweat and smears of Brad's blood.

I can't wait. Hopping down, I shimmy out of my pants, letting them hang off one ankle, the chill night air making me shiver as it hits my wet, swollen pussy.

Knox yanks his cock free, thick and hard and already leaking at the tip.

He grabs me again, lifting me and sliding his finger along my slit.

He positions himself at my entrance, his eyes locked on mine.

"You sure?" he asks, voice rough with need. "Once I start, I won't stop."

I dig my heels into his back, pulling him closer. "If you don't fuck me right now, I'll gut you with your own knife."

He slams into me in one brutal thrust, stretching me so suddenly that I cry out, my

head banging back against the tree trunk.

He doesn't give me time to adjust, just starts fucking me with deep, punishing strokes that knock the breath from my lungs.

Each thrust pushes me harder against the bark, scraping my back, the pain mixing with pleasure until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

"You're mine," Knox growls, his mouth at my ear, breath hot against my skin. "Say it."

I clamp down on him, squeezing his cock with my inner muscles, making him groan. "I'm yours," I gasp, the words dragged from somewhere deep inside me. "And you're mine."

He bites my neck in response, teeth breaking the skin, marking me as surely as the blood I've painted across my face. I cry out, the sharp pain sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my core. My nails rake down his back, tearing through his shirt, leaving bloody furrows in his skin.

He hisses at the pain but doesn't slow down. If anything, his thrusts become more violent, more desperate. The sound of my moans fills the forest, echoing off the trees. I'm pinned between Knox and the pine, helpless and powerful all at once.

My hands find purchase in his hair, yanking his head back so I can see his face. His eyes are wild, almost black with desire, his jaw clenched tight. Blood—Brad's, mine, his—smears across his cheek where I've touched him. He looks like a god of war, beautiful and terrible.

"Harder," I demand, voice breaking as he hits a spot deep inside me that makes stars burst behind my eyelids. "Make me feel it tomorrow."

He shifts his grip, hands moving to my ass, fingers digging into the flesh hard enough to leave bruises. The new angle lets him go deeper, each thrust bottoming out inside me, the head of his cock hitting that spot inside me with exquisite pain.

"You'll feel me for a week," he promises, voice raw. "Every time you move, you'll remember who you belong to."

The orgasm builds fast, a tidal wave I can't outrun. It crashes over me without warning, my body convulsing around his cock. I scream his name, unable to stop myself.

Knox follows me over the edge, his rhythm faltering as he drives into me one last time, holding himself deep as he comes. I feel the hot pulse of him inside me, filling me up, marking me from the inside out. His forehead drops to my shoulder, his breath coming in harsh pants against my skin.

For a long moment, we stay like that, locked together, my legs still wrapped around his waist, his cock still buried inside me.

Then, slowly, he pulls out, lowering me until my feet touch the ground.

My legs are shaking so badly I can't stand.

Knox catches me as I stumble, and we slide down together, collapsing in a heap at the base of the tree.

I curl into him, my head on his chest, listening to the thundering of his heart. He wraps an arm around me, pulling me closer, his hand stroking my hair with unexpected tenderness.

"You're fucking magnificent," he murmurs against the top of my head. "Do you have

any idea what you've done to me?"

I look up at him, studying the sharp angles of his face in the moonlight. There's something new there, something I haven't seen before—a vulnerability beneath the strength, a need that goes beyond the physical.

"I think I do," I whisper, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw with bloodstained fingers. "Because you've done the same to me."

He captures my hand, bringing it to his mouth, kissing each fingertip with reverence. "You're mine now," he says, voice low and intense. "Body and soul. There's no going back from this."

I know he's right. What we've done tonight has changed everything.

The old Gianna—the one who bent and broke to please others, the one who hid her darkness behind smiles and apologies—she's gone.

In her place is someone new, someone who understands that power comes in many forms, and that sometimes the most honest thing you can do is embrace the monster inside.

"I don't want to go back," I tell him, pressing my lips to the pulse point in his throat. "This is where I belong."

We stay there, blood cooling on our skin, bodies entwined on the forest floor. Above us, the stars blink brightly, indifferent to the small deaths and rebirths happening beneath them. Brad's body lies forgotten a few yards away, already beginning the long process of returning to the earth.

I should feel something—regret, maybe, or horror at what we've done. But all I feel is

a strange, peaceful clarity, as if I've finally stepped into the person I was always meant to be.

Knox's arms tighten around me, his breath warm against my hair. "My little bird has grown talons indeed," he rasps.

Chapter Sixteen

Knox

The walk back is slow and we're riding a high.

I sling her over my back, piggyback style, her thighs bracketed against my hips, her arms looped tight around my throat like she wants to squeeze the life out of me or maybe keep me forever.

I'm fine with either. Her weight is nothing.

I could carry her through hell and not break stride.

Blood still streaks her skin, the black-red drying into warpaint.

Her breath stirs my hair at the nape, hot and unsteady, and every time I feel it, I get hard again.

I didn't even let her put her pants back on and the wetness from her pussy is seeping through my shirt. I want to drown in her.

Gianna's lips graze my ear, a shudder running through her that isn't from the cold. Her legs flex around me. Sometimes she laughs, but it comes out shaky, like the muscles in her throat don't remember how to make joy.

Halfway back, I slow down just to see if she'll complain. She doesn't. She tugs my

hair and says, “You smell like wet dirt and violence,” and I laugh so hard I almost drop her.

“You love it,” I tell her. I want to turn and see her face, but instead I just keep moving, cutting a path through the black until the trees thin and the lights from the cabin bleed through the mist.

She shifts her grip, arms cinching tight enough to choke. “You think I’m a monster now?”

I shrug, her body moving with the motion. “No. I think you’re finally honest.”

She goes quiet after that. The rest of the trip is just the hush of needles underfoot, her heartbeat slamming against my spine.

When we break through the last line of trees, the night splits open: porch light buzzing like a drunk wasp, but the promise of what’s inside was the true prize.

Heat, a shower and whiskey. She doesn’t let go until I shoulder through the door and stand in the middle of the living room, our breath hanging like smoke.

“Down, little bird,” I say, but she doesn’t move. I have to pry her off, finger by finger. When I set her on her feet, she staggers, then grabs my wrist for balance.

Her face is feral. Blood and mud and sweat streaked together, her hair a wild snarl. Her shirt is torn open, one nipple peeking through the fabric and she’s naked from the waist down, and I don’t look away, not even when she catches me staring.

“You’re a fucking god, did you know that,” she says, voice low.

“So are you.” I grab her by the waist, my hands spanning the bruises I left. “You want

a drink?"

She nods. I can see the tremor in her jaw, the way her teeth chatter, not from fear but from whatever it is we're building between us.

"You can go put on one of my shirts, but leave that pussy free for me."

She giggles and runs down the hall before coming back a minute later. I go to the cabinet and pull the only decent bottle I own: cheap whiskey, brown as old teeth, but it burns clean and that's all I care about. I set out two glasses, pour them deep. She watches my hands as I slide her a glass.

"To endings," I say.

She lifts hers and clinks it to mine. "And to beginnings," she adds with a small smile.

We drink. The first swallow scorches its way down, and she coughs, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. I want to take her hand and suck it off her fingers, one at a time.

"You're still staring," she says, half-accusation, half-dare.

"I like what I see." I don't blink. "I always have."

We sink onto the couch, the ancient springs giving way under our combined weight.

She curls her legs under her, her thighs denying my eyes the pleasure of seeing between her legs.

There's a cut across her shin that gives me pause.

I'm not gentle about it—I yank her ankle up, resting it across my knee, and inspect the wound.

She tries to pull away, but I hold her still, running my thumb around the edges of the cut.

“Does it hurt?” I ask, and the way I say it makes it clear I'm not just talking about her leg.

She laughs, but it's soft. “Everything hurts. But I like it.”

“Yeah?” I meet her eyes, and I know what she's thinking. The pain is a reminder. The pain means she's real.

I let her go and refill our glasses. The bottle's already half gone, but she doesn't slow down. She drinks like she's trying to forget about who she was and step into this new version of her.

After a while, the buzz settles in, smoothing the edge off her tongue. She leans back and stares at the ceiling, the lines of her throat elegant even under the mess of blood. “Tell me something,” she says softly.

“Ask.”

She turns her head, her eyes dark. “Do you ever dream? Like, have you ever wanted something so bad it made you sick?”

I swallow, not ready for this kind of interrogation. “Not really.”

“Liar,” she says. She grins, then takes another gulp. “You wanted me.”

She's right, but I don't say it. I reach for her hand instead, tracing the lines in her palm. She sighs.

"Dreams are for people who think they'll live long enough to see them come true," I say. "I never did."

She sits up, sudden and fierce. "What would you do if you could have anything?" Her voice is urgent, like the question is burning her from the inside out.

I think about it. I think about a hundred things I could say, but all I want is what's right in front of me.

"I'd keep you," I answer. "Forever."

The silence that follows is thick enough to choke on. She holds my gaze, and I see something bloom in her that wasn't there before.

"Good," she says, voice rough. "Because I'm not going anywhere."

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, her legs trapped in the little triangle it creates, the whiskey burning a hole through my ribs. "Your turn," I say. "What do you want, Gianna?"

She bites her lip, chewing it raw. "I want to see the world. All the places I never thought I'd be brave enough to go.

I want to swim in every ocean, climb every mountain, eat every disgusting street food until I puke.

"She stops, laughs at herself. "I want to be the kind of person who takes what she wants, instead of waiting for permission."

I nod. “That’s easy. We’ll do it. I’ll take you everywhere.”

Her eyes are glassy, but not from the whiskey. She wipes at them, embarrassed.

“You’re really fucking weird, you know that?” she says.

“Yeah,” I answer, grinning. “But you love it.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “God help me, I do.”

The truth is, I have never once in my life believed I’d survive long enough to want anything.

Even now, with the wild animal warmth of her curled up against me, the quiet tick of the clock and the aftershocks of violence still buzzing in my teeth, I can’t picture a tomorrow. Not in the way she means it.

The last half an hour she’s grilled me on my future goals, and all I could say with certainty is what she already knew. I wanted her.

She’s now half asleep on my chest, eyelids at half-mast, lips parted, breathing slow and deep. Her hand rests on my stomach, fingers twitching with the dream she’s about to drop into. I could let her sleep, but I don’t want her too.

I tip my glass, let the burn coat my throat, then say, “You ever hear the story about the kid who watched his father strangle his mother to death?”

She doesn’t move, but I feel her pulse speed up where her wrist lies across my belly.

“I’ll take that as a no,” I go on. “I was eight. My father was drunk. My mother tried to hide me, but it was already too late. He’d always been an asshole, but that night he

was a fucking devil in a cheap suit.

” I flex my fingers around the glass. “He killed her in front of me, slow and careful. She fought hard. You ever see someone try to survive something they know is inevitable?”

She shakes her head, just the tiniest bit, but I know she’s listening.

“I pissed myself,” I say. “I remember it clear as anything. The shame of it. The dark stain down my leg. My father didn’t even see me.

When he was done, he wiped off his hands on her dress, went out and never came back.

Not for a year anyway. I’d been shipped off to live with my aunt, but when he came back, they gave me back and I had to watch him drink himself half to death until finally he succeeded in dying. I was the only one left.”

Gianna’s hand goes rigid on my stomach. For a second, I think she’ll get up and leave. Instead, she moves closer, curling in like a question mark, face pressed to my chest.

“I grew up in state care after that. My aunt didn’t want me around.

Too many mouths to feed, she said,” I continue, because now that I’ve started, I can’t stop.

“Bounced from one shithole to another. Learned to take a punch and how to swing a meaner one back. Learned that love is just another word for who gets to hurt you the most.”

The room is so quiet I can hear the blood roaring in my own ears.

“I never thought about dreams,” I say, and my voice is so flat it doesn’t sound like me at all. “Never made sense to, when the next minute was always a question.”

Her breathing is shallow now, her hand curled into a fist against my side. I hate that she’s hurting, hate that I put it there, but I need her to know. I need her to see the bones under the skin, the dark under the paint.

“I wondered,” she whispers, her voice so soft it’s barely more than a ghost. “How you learned to hold on so tight.”

I stare at her, the crooked line of her nose, the bruised swell of her mouth, the blood caked under her nails. She looks like a fucking disaster, and I love her more than anything in the world.

“Because if I let go,” I tell her, “I’d disappear.”

She shakes her head, defiant even now. “You’d never disappear. You’re too much.”

I almost smile. “No such thing as too much.”

She sits up, the blanket pooling around her hips, and her eyes are wet. I hate that I made her cry. I reach for her face, thumb catching the tear as it slides down. Instead of wiping it away, I drag my tongue over it, tasting salt and skin and the sharp, bright edge of something new.

“Don’t cry for me,” I say, voice barely more than a rumble. “You taste delicious.”

She laughs, the sound broken but perfect. “You’re such an asshole,” she says, but her eyes never leave mine.

I lean in, forehead to hers, breathing her in. “Yeah,” I whisper. “But I’m your asshole.”

She wipes her nose on the back of her hand, then kisses me, the move awkward and messy and exactly right.

We sit there, holding each other, the silence thick but not uncomfortable. I run my hands down her back, slow and easy, mapping the ridges and valleys of every curve.

She’s still whimpering a little when I pull her into my lap, but it doesn’t make her soft. If anything, it sharpens the line of her jaw, makes the blue in her eyes starker, brighter. She blinks at me, confusion and awe warring with some new, bottomless hunger.

I watch her like a cat watches a half-crushed mouse. The urge to finish her off is matched only by the thrill of watching her realize how much she loves being with me.

“Do you understand what this is?” I ask her.

She hesitates. Then she shakes her head. “No,” she whispers. “I’ve never—” Her breath hitches. “I don’t know if I want to understand.”

I smile, slow and sure, and let her sit in the silence until it hurts.

“I’ll tell you,” I say, hand sliding up to grip her chin, forcing her to meet my eyes. “It’s obsession, Gianna. It’s need. It’s fucking violence, dressed up as love. You don’t run from that. You run to it.”

Her tongue flicks over her lips. She’s shaking, but she’s not afraid.

I bend her head, exposing the long white stretch of throat. “You never will, you

know,” I murmur, lips just below her ear. “Not unless you’re running from me.”

Before she can answer, I bite her. Not hard enough to draw blood—this time—but enough to mark her, to bruise the flesh and make her feel it every time she swallows.

She gasps, whole body arching into mine, hands clawing at my back for something to hold on to.

I let her squirm, let her fight, let her writhe on my lap while I taste her salt and sweat. I don’t stop until I feel the heat pulse through her, a wet, beautiful surrender.

When I let go, she’s panting, dazed, eyes wide and glassy.

She laughs, shaking her head like she can’t believe how much she loves it. “You’re going to eat me alive,” she says, half fear, half prayer.

I wipe the tear track from her cheek, licking the last drop from my fingertip.

“Yeah,” I say, mouth full of her. “And you’ll beg for more.”

That’s what love is, when you strip it down: hunger and hurt, locked in each other’s jaws. I want her like a wound wants closure, like a starved lion wants meat. I want her to never, ever forget that she’s mine.

And she finally gets it. She finally understands what it means to be loved by a monster. She finally understands what it means to become one, too.

That’s what makes us perfect. That’s what makes us work.

The darkness that creeps into the light without extinguishing it whole.

Chapter Seventeen

Gianna

After a while, the fire burns down to fat, red coals.

The bottle of whiskey is empty and I am more than buzzing.

I'm draped over Knox, the stretch of his chest under my cheek, breathing in the faint stink of sweat, smoke, and blood that always seems to hover around him.

His fingers are tracing lazy circles over my skin, dipping between my thighs before trailing back up and over in a big, looping pattern.

He's been quiet for a long time. I think he likes it that way, the slow scrape of the clock and the hiss-pop of the last log splitting in half. I think he could sit like this for years, holding me, going nowhere, being nothing.

I fidget, picking at the bandage he stuck on my knee. "This is a problem, you know."

He grunts. "What is?"

I gesture at the room, at the mess of two lives smashed together in the crucible of trauma and bad whiskey. "This. We can't stay in your little mountain love-shack forever."

He lets that hang for a second. "Why not?" He says it soft, but his jaw flexes. He

knows why. He just wants to hear me say it.

“Because someone is going to come looking for me eventually,” I say. “Because I still have a job, you do too, probably. Because I have to, I don’t know, give notice before I can run away and become a cave woman.” My laugh is ugly. “You ever hear of two people less equipped to be a real couple?”

Fear is clawing its way up my spine. But I always do this. Anytime something gets real, I want to run. Except with Brad. Because I knew exactly what he was and what to expect.

It’s the ones I can’t predict that scare the fuck out of me.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he peels me off his chest and sits up, tossing the blanket off us.

I yelp as the chill air prickles over my skin, and cross my arms over my chest. I’m pretty sure I look like hell.

He looks like a fucking MMA hero—lean, bruised, shirtless, but every scar making him more of what he’s always been.

“Here are your options,” he says, and now his voice is sharp, cutting through the buzz.

“Option one: I build us a cabin farther out, somewhere no one will ever find. We go full hermit, live off the land, raise little monsters. Option two: we go back. To the city. You do your job, I do mine, we see if we can make it work in the real world.” He pauses. “You get to choose.”

I stare at him. It’s the most he’s ever said about the future, and it stings that both

options are binary—either I become his wild woman in the woods, or I chain myself to the grindstone and hope to God I succeed.

“What if I don’t want either?” I say, quieter than I mean to.

He tilts his head. “You don’t want me?”

My chest knots. “That’s not what I said.” I try to laugh it off, but it comes out as a whimper. “I just... I don’t know if I know how to want anything anymore.”

The room is silent for a long time. Then he leans forward, elbows on his knees, eyes on the embers. “What did you want before you met me?” he asks.

The question is a sucker punch. I want to say I had dreams. I want to say there was a time I could see more than five feet in front of my own face.

I want to say I was happy, or at least functional, or at least something.

But all I can think of is the slow, sinking dread of waking up alone, day after day, hating myself a little more every time.

I shake my head. “I think I just wanted not to die,” I say.

He sits back, and for a moment I think he’s going to be cruel, to tell me I’m weak, or broken, or a waste. Instead, he just says, “Same.”

It shouldn’t feel like a confession, but it does.

We sit in that for a while, the ugly truth of it crawling around in my head. Maybe we were more alike than different, after all. Eventually, he breaks first, which is a new record.

“You want to go back,” he says, and it’s not a question.

I stare at my hands, at the blue-black fingerprints circling my wrists, at the mess of scabs on my knuckles, at the dried blood I start picking away at.

“I should go back,” I say. “But I don’t know if I want to.”

He’s right next to me now, all heat and gravity, his arm heavy over my shoulders. He smells like burnt pine and old sweat, and it’s the first thing that has felt like home in years.

“People are going to think this is Stockholm syndrome,” I say, and try to make it a joke. “Hell, I think it is Stockholm syndrome. You kidnapped me, Knox.”

His eyes go dark. “I call it fate.”

I almost roll my eyes, but then I see the way he’s looking at me—like I’m the last thing on earth that matters. I want to laugh, but I also want to cry, so I do neither. I just curl into his side, pressing my nose into the hollow above his collarbone.

“Did you ever wonder if we’re just two broken people who found each other at the exact wrong time?” I ask.

His fingers find the spot at the base of my skull, rubbing slow circles. “No. I think I waited my whole life for you.”

I should make a snide remark, should tell him that’s the most manipulative thing anyone’s ever said to me, but I can’t, because he means them. Instead, I trace the white scars running across his ribs, kissing each one like it’s a secret only I get to know.

He shivers, just a little.

“You know I’m never going to stop coming after you, right?”

If you try to leave me,” he says, and I know he means it.

I know it in the way his hand holds me just tight enough to bruise, in the way his voice goes rough around the edges, in the way he never lets me out of his sight for more than a second.

I smile, letting my lips brush over his skin. “Good,” I say. “Because I think I’d kill myself if you did.”

There’s nothing left to say after that.

Just the sound of the fire, and his breathing, and the slow, terrifying certainty that I have finally, truly given up on ever being safe again.

I’m okay with that.

I think he is, too.

He says nothing more, just sits with me in the half-light, the weird peace of people who have accepted their own extinction.

I watch the movement of his hands—callused, dirty under the nails, a scar running the length of his index finger—and I want to put my mouth on every inch of him.

Maybe it’s a trauma response. Maybe it’s just that I am, at the core, a greedy little whore.

I don't know and I don't care. I slide off the couch and onto my knees, right there on the fur rug.

Knox raises an eyebrow but says nothing, just watches me with that quiet patience.

His cock is already half-hard, the head poking out above the waistband of his boxers, angry red and glossy with pre-cum.

I lick my lips, the taste of cheap whiskey and salt on my tongue.

My hands are shaking, a tremor that makes everything feel both dangerous and precious.

I reach for him, running my palm along the thick length through the cotton.

He's so fucking big, I forget sometimes, forget until I see it again up close and remember how it splits me open every time. I love it.

He watches me, eyes hooded, face gone slack with the anticipation of violence.

"You want it?" he murmurs, voice low, almost teasing.

I nod. "Yes."

He grins, that slow, mean smile. "Then take it."

I do. I yank his boxers down, and his cock springs free, heavy and beautiful, veins standing out.

I wrap my hands around, one stacked above the other and work him slowly up and down.

The tip is already wet, a droplet running down the side.

I lap it up, tasting the salt. His eyes darken as he stares down at me, his hand working through my hair, ever so gently.

My mouth waters, a primal response to being wanted this much.

I start slow, licking up the underside, tracing every vein, every ridge.

He tastes like sweat and salt and something darker.

I hollow my cheeks, sucking just the head, letting my tongue swirl around the crown.

His breath catches, just a hitch, but I hear it and it's enough to make my whole body go hot.

I go deeper, taking more of him in, working my hand in time with my mouth.

I gag when he hits the back of my throat, but I don't stop.

I want to choke on him. I want to taste him for days.

My other hand drifts down between my legs, fingers slipping through my folds, finding myself wet and swollen.

I circle my clit in slow, messy circles, matching the rhythm of my mouth.

He threads his fingers through my hair, not rough, just possessive.

The touch is electric. I moan around his cock, the vibration making him hiss between his teeth.

He holds my head steady, watching as I bob up and down, spit leaking from the corners of my mouth, tears already stinging my eyes.

I love the way it feels—messy, obscene, real.

“You look so fucking beautiful like this,” he says, voice gone ragged. “You were born for this.”

I want to argue, make a joke, but my mouth is full and my throat is burning.

I swallow him down, again and again, until I can’t breathe, until my mascara is running in black streaks and my jaw aches.

He starts to thrust, slow at first, then harder, fucking my face with a desperation that makes me whimper.

He grunts, hips snapping, and I let him.

I want to be ruined. I want to be nothing but a hole for him to fill.

He holds me down, cock deep in my throat, and I fight not to panic, not to claw at his thighs.

I relax, let myself go soft, and the rush of power is almost as good as the pain.

He shudders, and I feel the pulse, the first hot spurt of come flooding my mouth.

I swallow it greedily, the taste sharp and sour, and he groans, the sound animal.

When he’s done, he pulls out slow, a string of spit connecting us. I gasp for air, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. My face is a disaster, streaked with tears

and snot and smeared come. I've never felt more alive.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

He yanks me up by the shoulders and kisses me, hard, tasting himself on my tongue.

The move is so sudden it knocks the wind out of me, but I don't resist. I kiss him back, biting at his lip, digging my nails into his arms. His hand pushes down, pulling up his boxers before coming up to wipe the tears that are drying on my cheeks.

He laughs, the sound vibrating in my chest, then pulls away and hoists me into his arms.

“What are you—” I start, but he's already moving, carrying me toward the door, one hand under my ass, the other braced around my shoulders.

He doesn't answer, just kicks the door open with his foot and steps into the cold.

The night air is brutal, sharp enough to make my lungs ache.

The world outside the cabin is blue-black, the sky a sheet of ice, eerie, but beautiful nonetheless.

He carries me down the steps, not slowing, not speaking, just walking for a while.

I wrap my arms around his neck, fingers digging into the muscle, trying to figure out if I'm scared or excited or both.

He sets me on my feet in the middle of the yard, the cold biting through my bare skin, my nipples going hard in an instant. He stands behind me, wrapping both arms around my waist, pinning me in place.

I shiver, not just from the cold. “What are we doing?” I ask, voice small.

He leans in, lips against my ear, breath hot. “Burning everything down,” he says. “So we can start again.”

He turns me to face him, and for a moment, his eyes catch the last light from the cabin. They look gold, inhuman. I don’t know if I want to run or fall to my knees again.

“Burning what?” I whisper.

He smiles, and it’s the saddest, wildest thing I’ve ever seen. “Whatever’s left of the old world,” he says. “Yours, mine, all of it. You ready?”

I nod, because what else is there to do? I came here to survive, but what I really want is to be transformed. If he needs to set me on fire to do it, I’ll fucking light the match myself.

He drags me deeper into the woods, feet crunching over brittle needles and old snow. My skin goes numb from the cold, but I barely notice. All I can feel is his hand, warm and sure, pulling me through the dark.

We walk until the cabin is a dim memory behind us, and the sky above is a riot of stars. He stops in a small clearing, ringed by birch and pine, the ground dead and silent. He lets go of my hand and turns in a slow circle, surveying the space like a general before a battle.

“This is where I found you. Watched you. Destroyed your ability to escape. I’m not sorry. I’d do it all again. But this... I want to burn this spot so we can watch the flames devour any trace of life before you were mine.”

“I should hate you,” I say, but my voice breaks on the words.

He moves closer, hands on my hips. “You don’t,” he says, and I know he’s right.

I reach for him, pulling him down to my level, kissing him with everything I have left. He responds in kind, grinding his mouth over mine, teeth and tongue and shared blood. I want to crawl inside him, tear my way through skin and bone until I’m safe in the hollow of his chest.

He breaks away, searching my face. “You ready?” he asks again.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He kisses me again, gentler this time, then steps back and lets the cold swallow me whole.

“Wait here,” he says, and disappears into the trees.

I hug myself, rocking on my heels, the adrenaline turning to a sick, sweet ache in my gut. I hear him rummaging in the dark, then the sharp metallic scrape of something heavy against stone. He returns, arms loaded with firewood and something else—an old gas can, battered and dented.

He stacks the wood in a heap at the center of the clearing, douses it with gasoline, then leans down and grabs a box of matches. The sulfur stings my nose as he strikes the first one, the tiny flare of yellow like a promise.

He drops the match, and the pile erupts, a tower of flame shooting into the air. The heat hits my face, driving back the cold in an instant. I step closer, mesmerized by the way the fire eats everything in its path, turning solid wood to ash and memory.

He stands next to me, shoulder to shoulder, watching the blaze with a solemnity that makes my chest ache. I wonder if he's thinking of his dead parents, his wasted childhood, all the things he had to burn just to survive. I wonder if he's thinking of me, of what I am now, and what I might become.

I wonder if he's thinking the same thing I am.

The old Gianna is dead and gone. And I like that more than I care to admit.

I reach for his hand, lacing my fingers through his. He squeezes back, so tight it almost hurts.

We watch the fire together, not speaking, not moving, until the last log collapses in on itself and the world goes quiet again.

He turns to me, eyes shining in the dark.

"We start over now," he says.

I nod, knowing that whatever happens, I'll let him set me on fire again and again.

Because this is what it means to be alive. Because this is what it means to be his.

Because after everything, I'd rather burn than be alone.

He takes my hand and leads me back into the dark. My breath mists out, and I try to keep pace, but his stride is longer, driven. My bare feet slap against the pine-needle carpet, gritty and cold.

He picks me up, a clean jerk under my arms, and slings me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. I squeal, more surprised than scared, and his palm comes down on my

ass, leaving heat in the shape of his hand.

“You like it rough,” I say, muffled against his back.

He grunts, “I like it real.”

It’s with startling clarity I realize... he’s the most real thing I’ve ever experienced, and that’s the moment when I finally understand. My world was different shades of gray until he cracked me open and poured himself into the spaces where I didn’t exist.

The world tilts, branches whipping past my face, the scent of moss and rain and something wild underneath.

I let him carry me, let myself be transported without resistance, because I trust him more than I’ve ever trusted anyone.

Even if it’s only because I know how easily he could end me. Maybe that’s what trust is.

“You’re not the little bird I watched anymore,” he says. “You’re my phoenix. My pretty little girl.”

And somehow, everything shitty that’s ever happened to me disappears and all I see is him.

Chapter Eighteen

Knox

She's still got blood dried along the curve of her jaw, mud crusted up her shins, hair tangled in thick, wet snarls. If she were anyone else, I'd tell her to clean up. But she's perfect like this. Raw. Real.

The walk home is a blur, like the forest has closed in around us, muffling everything but the slap of my feet and the faint, ragged sounds she makes.

Eventually I move her into a cradle position.

She buries her face in my shoulder and I can't tell if she's crying or laughing or just fucking wrecked.

Doesn't matter. I carry her the last half mile like she's a prize I just dragged out of the pit.

At the cabin, I kick the door open. My foot hits the splintered wood with a thud, echoes off the walls.

Inside is the same as we left it: cold, dark, smelling faintly of fire and rot.

I set her down gentle on the couch, and for a second, she just sits there, staring at her own hands like they don't belong to her anymore.

I want to say something, but what the fuck do I say?

She killed a man and then sucked my dick, and then I burnt her camping spot to the ground.

Pretty sure there's no real words to express how she's feeling right now.

Instead I go to the hearth, scoop last night's ashes into a tin, and build a fire the way my father taught me: crumple, stack, light, wait.

The flames catch quick, licking up the dry kindling, throwing weird orange shadows across the floor.

It's warm. Not hot enough to burn, but enough to thaw out bones gone brittle with cold.

It was short-sighted of me not to let us dress before going out, but whatever, we survived.

I strip out of my wet shirt, toss it over the back of a chair.

She watches, eyes following the movement, but there's no shame in it now.

I let her look. I want her to see all of me—the scars, the bruises, the map of violence that is my body and my history.

She's shivering. Not from fear, I think, but from the aftershock. The come-down after the kill. I know the feeling. You ride that wave until it spits you out, then you're left shaking, desperate for anything solid.

I grab a blanket and drop it over her shoulders. She makes a noise, a soft huff of

surprise, then pulls the blanket tighter. Her face is a mess. Blood, snot, streaks of dirt. I want to clean her up, but I know better than to mother her.

Instead, I cross to the old side table, the one that she snooped in not too long ago. I reach in, and pull out what I've been hiding for days.

It's the bird.

Not just any bird. It's a little wooden thing, carved from pine, wings spread like it's about to take off. I spent hours on it, the kind of labor that would have made my father laugh. I sanded the edges smooth, hollowed out the eyes, burned her initials on the base. G.V. For her.

I was going to give it to her last week. But she wasn't ready. Hell, I wasn't ready. When she found it, she freaked. Rightfully so, I suppose. I could have given it to her then, but I didn't think it was time. Didn't want her to think I was some kind of creep with a hobby, or worse, that I cared.

Now I don't give a fuck. I walk over and set the bird in her lap, right on top of the blanket. I don't say a word. Just wait.

She picks it up, turning it over in her hands, running a finger along the underside.

When she spots the initials for the second time, her breath catches.

She looks up at me, and for a second, I see the old Gianna—the one with the sharp tongue and the shit-eating grin.

It flashes across her face, then it's gone, replaced by something I can't name.

"You made this, right?" she asks, voice hoarse.

I nod.

She giggles. “You really are a psycho, you know that?”

I shrug. “You’re the one who stabbed a man tonight.”

She sets the bird down, stares at it. The silence stretches until it almost hurts.

Then she says, “I’ve been thinking.”

The words are soft, but there’s a spine of steel in them.

I settle in the armchair across from her, sprawling out like I own the room. “You want to talk, talk.”

She hugs the blanket closer, knuckles white. “I’m going home, Knox.”

I frown. “Mmmm, I don’t think so.”

She flashes her teeth. “I’m not finished.” She takes a breath, lets it out slow. “If you want to actually be with me—and I don’t mean own me, I mean be with me—you need to understand something.”

I arch an eyebrow, waiting.

She holds my gaze, unflinching. “I can fight and claw and resist things I don’t want. I might be a little bird, but this little bird’s got a beak and claws and I’m not afraid to use them.”

For a second, I don’t move. Don’t speak. Just let the words tunnel into my chest, digging around for whatever heart I’ve got left.

Then I laugh, low and slow. “I expect nothing less.”

She looks surprised. Not much, but enough that I catch it. She was expecting a fight. She was expecting me to bark or snap or try to break her down.

Instead, I stand and walk over, kneel in front of her so we’re eye to eye.

The blanket slips down, pooling at her waist. Her legs are bare and trembling, but she doesn’t flinch when I touch her knee.

The t-shirt she’s wearing is dirty and wet, but I don’t move to help her out of it. I like the way it sticks to her skin.

“I want you because you’re dangerous,” I say. “I want you because you never let me win easy. I want you because when you look at me, you see what I am and you don’t run.”

She swallows, hard.

I put my hand over hers, covering it completely. “I could have anyone. But I want you. Even when you’re a mess. Especially when you’re a mess.”

She opens her mouth, maybe to argue, maybe to laugh, but I cut her off.

“And if you ever grow tired of me, you can leave. I won’t chase you. I’ll want to. But I won’t.”

She’s quiet for a long time. Then, “You’re full of shit.”

“Yeah, I am,” I say. “But it sounds good.”

We stay like that, my hand wrapped around hers, her other hand gripping the bird so tight I worry she'll crush it.

I look at her, really look. Mine .

But for the first time, I think: Maybe I'm hers, too.

She doesn't let go of the bird until I pry it gently from her hand. I set it on the table next to her, a totem for her to reach for if she needs it. Her skin's cold and clammy, so I wrap my fingers around her ankle, feeling the trembling in her calf.

She looks at me, frowning. "What are you doing?"

I don't answer. Just dig my thumb into the arch of her foot, slow, deliberate, right at the spot where the muscle knots.

I've never done this for anyone before. My hands are more used to breaking things than fixing them.

But I remember the way my mother used to press her fingers into my father's ruined hands after a fight, the way he'd go soft and quiet under her touch.

I want to see if Gianna will do the same.

Her eyes go wide when I start. She jerks her foot back, but I hold it, not hard, just enough to say: stay. I work my thumbs along the ridge of bone, up through the tendons, kneading out the tension one inch at a time.

She tries to fight it. "Seriously, what is this?"

I shush her, the same way I'd shush a child, and keep going.

I do her other foot, too, slower this time, tracing circles with my knuckles.

Slowly, I lean forward, brushing my lips over her skin.

Her breathing changes. It gets heavier, almost ragged, like she's about to cry or scream.

I knead up to her ankle, her calf, the long line of muscle that's still spattered with dirt from the woods.

She shifts on the couch, clearly uncomfortable with this kind of attention. She's used to being handled rough, thrown and fucked and bruised. But this—this is different. This is mine, too.

“Lie back,” I say, soft but with the kind of authority she knows not to question.

She hesitates, then lets herself fall into the couch, head lolling on the cushion. The blanket slips further, exposing the curve of her thigh, the fading bruises barely visible now. I want to mouth each one, taste the proof that she belongs to me, but I make myself wait.

Instead, I slide my hands up, one on each leg, kneading the knots out of her calves, her quads. She twitches when I hit a sensitive spot behind her knee, but doesn't tell me to stop.

The longer I do this, the more she melts. I can see it in her face—the way the lines go slack, the way her eyes drift closed. Her lips part and she makes these little noises, half moan, half sigh.

I could keep going forever. I want to. I want to spend hours mapping every inch of her, learning the way her body responds to every pressure point, every touch.

My hands reach her thighs. I squeeze, gentle at first, then harder, letting my fingers sink into the soft flesh. She bites her lip, trying to stifle a whimper.

“You like that,” I say, not a question.

She opens one eye, lazy, almost drunk. “It’s weird.”

“Why?”

“I’m not used to you being nice.”

I grin. “This isn’t nice. This is me taking what I want, just slow.”

She laughs, a real one this time, but it gets caught in her throat when I dig my thumbs into the line where her thigh meets her hip. She’s ticklish there, but she doesn’t pull away.

I keep going, slow, methodical, up and down, never breaking contact. Her skin gets warmer under my hands, color returning to her cheeks.

She’s breathing faster now, chest rising and falling in rhythm with the pressure of my touch.

I could fuck her right here, pin her down and make her come until she cries, but I don’t. Not yet. This is about patience, about making her want it so bad she begs.

I keep my voice low. “You trust me?”

She hesitates, then nods. “Yeah. I do.”

I move up, fingers skimming under the edge of her shirt, tracing circles on her

hipbone. She's wearing nothing underneath, just bare skin, hot and smooth. I take my time, working slow up to her ribs, back down to her knee, then up again, every pass a little closer, a little deeper.

Her hands are curled into the blanket, gripping tight.

"You can tell me to stop," I say.

She doesn't. She just shivers.

I lean in, mouth at her ear. "Say what you want, Gianna."

She's silent for a minute, then quietly, "Don't stop."

It's all I need.

I shift her on the couch, so she's sprawled out, arms above her head, legs open for me. I shift between her knees, hands gliding over her thighs, kneading, stroking, claiming.

She whimpers when I squeeze the inside of her thigh, and I do it again, harder, just to watch the way her body arches.

"God, Knox," she says, eyes half-shut, "you're killing me."

"That's the point."

I take her foot in my hand again, lift it to my mouth, and press a kiss to her ankle, then to the inside of her knee, then up, up, up. I kiss every bruise, every scratch, every place she's broken.

She's shaking by the time I get to the top of her thigh. Her hands are fisted in the blanket, white-knuckled.

"Relax," I say, and massage her again, gentler this time, coaxing her muscles to let go.

She does. She lets go so completely I think she might float away.

I don't let her.

I keep her right here, tethered to the earth by my hands.

This is mine. This is all I've ever wanted.

And I'm going to take my time with it.

Her body is pliable under my hands, all the sharp edges gone liquid. I watch her... the flush creeping up her chest, the slow roll of her throat when she tries to swallow her moans. I don't touch my cock, but it's throbbing, hard enough to hurt. Doesn't matter. She comes first.

Always.

I put her knees on my shoulders, spreading her open. She makes a noise, half-protest, but I smother it with my mouth.

The first taste of her is sinful and sweat and something so fucking sweet I almost lose it. I drag my tongue slow, from the soft cleft at the top of her thigh to the slick heat between her lips. I take my time, mapping her out, learning what makes her buck, what makes her cry out.

She's wild, squirming, trying to twist away from the pressure of my mouth. I clamp her hips in place, hands bruising into her skin, and keep going. I want to eat her alive. She's divine.

My tongue circles her clit, gentle at first, just teasing. She shivers, nails digging into the couch cushion. When I suck it between my lips, she yelps—sharp and bright—and tries to close her legs. I won't let her.

“Knox, fuck,” she gasps, voice strangled. “It's too much—”

I ignore her, working her harder, faster, then slow again just to watch her squirm. She's slick and swollen and perfect. I slip two fingers inside her, twist them up, and she damn near levitates off the couch.

Her eyes roll back, mouth falling open. I fuck her with my fingers, steady and deep, never letting up with my tongue. Her whole body goes rigid, then loose. She whimpers, breathless, a sound that's all surrender and disbelief.

She comes once, then twice. The first is a tidal wave, the second a desperate, gasping aftershock. I don't let up. I want her ruined, want her sobbing, want her to remember this every time she tries to come without me.

The third one breaks her. She screams, grabbing my hair and yanking, but I don't stop until she's slumped boneless, shaking, tears streaking her face.

Only then do I slow down, licking her clean with slow, careful strokes. I press soft kisses to her thighs, her stomach, the inside of her knee.

She's a mess. She's perfect.

I sit back on my heels, cock throbbing so hard it's painful. But I wait. I want to see

her eyes.

She blinks up at me, dazed, cheeks stained with salt.

“Why—” she starts, but can’t finish.

I climb up over her, propping her head on my arm, and brush the hair out of her face.

“Because you’re mine,” I say. “Because I want you to remember who you belong to.”

She laughs, shaky and spent. “I don’t think I’ll forget.”

“Good.”

She stares at me for a long time, searching for something in my face. When she finds it, she smiles, slow and lazy.

“Come here,” she says, tugging me down. I let her. She kisses me, tasting herself on my mouth, moaning low in her throat.

I could fuck her now, split her open and fill her up, but I don’t. I just hold her, my hand cradling the back of her neck, her body melting into mine.

She runs her fingers through my hair, lazy and soft. “You’re something else,” she says, but there’s no bite to it.

I grin. “Yeah. But at least now you won’t forget me.”

She grins back, her eyes crinkling at the edges as she pulls me closer.

I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want her, and yet... if she were to tell me she wanted to walk away, I’d let her.

Not because I want to, but because I'd give her the fucking world, even if it meant putting an end to mine.

Chapter Nineteen

Gianna

The kitchen hums with a different energy now.

The air smells like the leftovers from the lunch we grabbed yesterday.

He moves around the kitchen like a wolf in a suit that doesn't quite fit, the sleeves of his t-shirt tight around his biceps, the muscles in his neck flexing every time he glances over his shoulder.

I watch him from the doorway, one hand clutching the edge of the flannel shirt I stole from his closet.

It drowns me, the hem brushing mid-thigh, the cuffs swallowing my hands.

If I let go, the whole thing would puddle at my feet.

But I keep holding on, knuckles gone bone white, like if I lose the fabric I might unravel right there on the peeling linoleum.

I can't pinpoint the moment it happened, but I've fallen for this tall drink of fucked up and couldn't imagine my life without his intensity in it.

He's got the stove light on, as he moves, grabbing plates.

It halos his hair, showing off the dark auburn in his brunette strands, catches the scar at his temple, softens the sharpness of his profile.

He's cut the chicken into even pieces and arranged it on two mismatched plates, taking more care with this than I've ever seen him take with anything except maybe me.

"You could have just microwaved it," I say, voice pitched just above the sizzle in the pan.

He doesn't look at me, just shakes his head, scraping the spatula in slow, controlled arcs. "Not the same," he grunts. "Ruins the texture."

"Jesus, who are you?" I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, my tongue fighting the urge to tease him harder.

He shrugs, but there's a tightness to the gesture.

"It's not like I have a lot to offer, but I can cook.

" The words hang there, naked and pathetic, and I want to go to him, but I don't.

Instead, I watch the way his hands move.

How he wipes them on the towel, fingers flexing and unflexing like he's prepping for a fight.

Something in me darkens every time I hear him talk about himself like that. He doesn't see himself accurately, and I don't think I do either. But I want to learn. I want to learn him.

He plates the food with weird precision, wiping a smear of sauce off the rim before carrying both plates toward the bedroom. I trail behind, all bare legs and nervous energy.

He sets the plates on the bed, then sits cross-legged on the far edge, leaving a gap between us. I crawl onto the comforter, balancing my plate on my knees.

We eat in silence at first. I watch him chase every crumb, methodical, eyes fixed on the food like if he looks up the spell might break.

The chicken is cold at the center but I don't care.

I swallow the first bite and it catches in my throat, like my body knows I'm not supposed to be here, not supposed to be happy. Yet, I am, anyway.

Halfway through his meal, he sets the plate aside and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His fingers drum a staccato on the ceramic, rat-tat-tat, a Morse code of anxiety.

"You're leaving soon, right," he says, so soft I almost miss it.

My pulse skids. I set my fork down, focus on the way it glints in the low light, anything to keep from looking at him. "I have to. I can't live here, Knox. Surely, you know that," I say.

He nods, jaw tight. "Will you come back?"

It's a simple question, but it lands heavy. He's never said it outright before, never let himself look needy. I glance at him, and for once, he looks human. There's a shine in his eyes that makes me want to crack a joke, but the words die in my throat.

“I don’t know,” I say, which is a lie. “I want to.”

He looks away, the corners of his mouth turning down. “You don’t have to,” he says. “If you want to be rid of me, just say it.”

I want to throw the fork at his head. “I don’t want to be rid of you, asshole.

” I say it too loud, the words bouncing off the walls.

“I just... I don’t know how to make you fit in my world.

My real one. With boats, and captains, and people who don’t eat dinner off a gun-cleaning rag.

Come with me. I know you have your own apartment, but you can come live with me in mine.

We can... we can try have something here.”

He laughs, sharp and sudden. “I’d ruin your life,” he says, almost proud.

“Maybe,” I shoot back. “But maybe it needed ruining.”

We go quiet again. He picks at the callus on his thumb, digging at it like there’s gold underneath.

“I’m not good at this,” he mutters, so low I have to lean in. “I don’t know how to want things without fucking them up.”

I slide my plate with me as I crawl towards him, closing the distance between us. I grab his hand—hard, like I’m trying to prove a point. His skin is rough, warm, real.

He flinches, before steadying himself. The only glimpse of weakness I've seen him have.

"I'm not leaving you behind," I say. "I'm just going to try and see if I can be a normal person again. Maybe I'll fail. Probably will. But I want you there when I do."

He snorts. "You really want to parade me around your friends? Take me to work parties, introduce me to your boss?"

I squeeze his hand tighter. "Let them see what you made me."

He looks at me, really looks, and for a second, I think he might kiss me. Instead, he just laughs, a low rumble that starts in his chest and works its way up. "No one will understand."

I brush my lips over his knuckles, one by one, tasting salt and chicken grease and the sharp tang of him. "They don't have to."

He's quiet after that. We just sit, hands clasped, the world outside shrinking down to the small space between our bodies.

The chicken goes cold, the silence goes warm, and for the first time I think maybe there's a version of this story where we both survive. Maybe even together.

Maybe that's enough.

When the last word dies in the air, it's like the whole world is holding its breath, waiting to see if we're going to wreck this or just let it sit there and be sweet for a second.

I could let the silence take over. Could let us melt into the mattress and pretend we

aren't two fundamentally fucked-up people with a combined trauma history the length of the Mississippi. But I'm not that girl, and Knox is not that guy, so naturally he has to ruin it.

He clears his throat, staring at the bones of his dinner. "If we're going to do this," he says, "like, actually do it, you have to quit your job."

I blink at him, fork paused mid-air. "Excuse me?"

He shrugs, the motion tight. "It's not safe. That fucking cruise ship? If you go back there, I'll have to come with you, and nobody wants that."

I can't help it, I start laughing. Not a little giggle, but a full-on, snorting, chest-spasming cackle. He's so earnest, so determined to keep me under his thumb, but he doesn't even realize how much I want him to do it. How much I want to be wanted, violently, obsessively, completely.

"You're insane," I tell him, still laughing.

He leans back, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "I mean it, Gianna."

"That's the most romantic thing you've ever said to me," I say, voice thick with a happiness I don't quite recognize.

He grins, feral and proud. "Good."

The air between us goes soft, syrupy, sticky with unsaid things.

He reaches over, grabbing another bite of chicken with his fingers, and shoves it into his mouth.

I can't take my eyes off his hands, the way they flex, the veins, the scar on his middle finger that never healed straight. I want those hands everywhere, always.

I set my plate down, legs tucked under me, and tilt my head. "Okay, nutbar, I'll quit. Then what? You gonna make me a little housewife? Apron, pearls, fresh pie cooling on the sill?"

He chews, then swallows, the motion of his throat oddly hypnotic. "Yes. You want pearls, I'll find you the biggest one. Diamonds? Done. Just don't go telling me to buy you a fucking electric car. I know the shit batteries in those things because of the corners Kairo cuts with R&D."

I reach out, grab his wrist, pull his hand onto my lap and hold it there. His skin is warm, pulse steady.

"Fine," I say. "I'll be your little housewife. I'll bake cookies and scream at you from the porch when you don't mow the lawn."

He snorts. "You'll burn the cookies and forget to put on pants."

"I'll wear your shirts and nothing else," I say, eyes locked on his.

He doesn't respond, just stares at me like I'm the only thing in the room. His pupils go wide, and he's breathing harder, like he's already picturing it. The sexual tension is so thick it's practically a third entity, sitting there at the end of the bed, salivating.

I let my hand slide up his arm, fingers tracing the line of his bicep, up to the tattoo that snakes around his shoulder. I press my thumb into the flesh there, testing his strength, and he flexes in response.

"You'd get bored," he says, voice gone low. "You need chaos."

I lean in, close enough that I can feel his breath on my cheek. “I have you for that.”

He grabs me, sudden and rough, pulling me across the bed until I’m half in his lap. I squeak, then smack his chest, but I don’t move away. I wouldn’t even if he asked.

“Fuck, you’re trouble,” he says, but he’s smiling. Like he’s proud of me. Like he’s proud of us.

We eat the rest of the food together, stealing bites from each other’s plates, licking sauce off fingers, trading insults and dirty jokes.

He tells me a story about the time he and his cousin got caught shoplifting beer as teenagers, and I can see the kid he used to be, hungry and mean and desperate for approval.

I tell him about the woman on the cruise who got so drunk she slept through an entire port, then woke up convinced she’d been kidnapped by pirates.

He laughs, really laughs, and the sound makes something inside me loosen, like a knot I didn’t know was there finally coming undone.

By the time we’re done eating, we’re both so full we can barely move.

I toss the plates onto the nightstand and collapse back, arms flung over my head.

Knox stretches out next to me, one hand coming to rest on my stomach, fingers splaying out, thumb tracing lazy circles over the thin cotton of the shirt.

“We should probably shower before bed,” he says, but neither of us moves.

“We should probably do a lot of things,” I mumble, eyelids heavy.

He's already half asleep, mouth relaxed, breathing slow and deep. I shift closer, nuzzling into his side. His arm comes up, wraps around my waist, pulls me tight against him. Our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces—jagged, imperfect, but somehow just right.

I can feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, vibrating through my ribs. I match my breathing to his, slow and even, letting it lull me toward sleep.

The room is quiet except for the sound of our hearts, the soft hush of fabric against skin. The world outside could end and I wouldn't care.

For once, I don't have to think about survival. I don't have to wonder if tomorrow will be worse than today, or if I'll ever be enough. I don't have to do anything but lie here, safe in the arms of the man who ruined me, the man who made me whole.

Tomorrow, we'll probably fight. Tomorrow, I might hate him again. But tonight, I am his, and he is mine, and that's all that matters.

I drift off with his hand on my stomach and the scent of him in my hair, the taste of chicken still on my tongue.

Somewhere, in the inky dark between sleep and waking, I hear him whisper, "I love you, little bird."

I don't answer.

I just squeeze his hand, and hope he knows that's enough.

Chapter Twenty

Knox

The next morning, the decision is made. I make a few calls, get the boys to start moving some of my shit to her apartment and we pack whatever we have lying around and start heading to her car.

Yep. The same car I never fixed.

Her car is a joke—a powder blue hatchback with shitty shocks and a carburetor that's been dying a slow, miserable death since 2018.

How the hell it even got up here is a mystery.

She calls it the Egg. I get under the hood and fix what I damaged.

Clean the terminals, replace the spark plugs, slap some duct tape over the hose that keeps hissing antifreeze onto the manifold.

I offered for us to take my Jeep, but of course, Gianna being Gianna, huffed and puffed until I gave in.

I'll get Noah to drive it into town later.

She watches me from a stump, arms folded against the cold.

She's got my old flannel on, the one with the hole at the elbow.

It swallows her, makes her look like she's playing dress-up in the worst way.

I want to tell her she looks hot, but she'd throw something at me, so I just keep working.

The memory of her hands on my back last night is a fever under my skin.

When the Egg finally turns over, she claps. "You're a genius, you know that?"

"Least I could do since I was the one who fucked it up. Still gunna rattle though."

"Good. I like the noise." She's already smiling.

She slams the hatch and we load up, heading back down the path.

She sings along with the radio, off-key but loud.

I don't tell her to shut up. Her voice makes the hours pass like nothing.

The sky goes from black to blue to white, and by the time we hit the city limits, the sun is just a shadow behind the high-rises.

The city is always so dirty. The smell hits first—hot grease, old trash, ozone. I used to love it. Now it feels off. Wrong, somehow. Impure compared to the time we just shared together.

Her apartment is a converted warehouse, three stories, no elevator. The front door opens directly onto the street, which means any asshole with a crowbar and a bad idea could be inside in under five minutes. I make a mental note to fix that.

Inside, it's better. High ceilings, old brick, pipes that clang at night. Her couch is a lumpy red sectional, the kind that eats you if you sit wrong. There's a small kitchen with more bottles of liquor than food. Art on the walls—hers, mostly. Bright, angry colors that remind me of bruises.

She drops her bag in the bedroom, then comes out to the kitchen and leans on the counter, watching me unpack my own shit. I only bring have one bag until the guys drop my shit off. A change of clothes, a laptop, my knife, and the demon mask.

“So... what do you think?” she asks, half-mocking, half-hopeful.

“Mmmm, it'll do.” I say it flat, but I mean it.

She smiles, one side of her mouth higher than the other. “Make yourself at home, then.”

I do. First thing: cover the windows. She keeps the blinds half-open all the time, like she's inviting the whole world to stare in. I find some old sheets and tack them over the glass. Block out the sunlight, the neighbors, the prying eyes. It's better this way.

Next, the doors. I dig through her junk drawer and find a handful of mismatched screws, a flathead, and a length of chain.

I rig a deadbolt out of an old hasp and some deck screws, reinforce the frame with a piece of two-by-four I scavenge from the dumpster out back.

If someone wants in, they'll have to work for it.

She watches all of this with a kind of amused tolerance. “Jesus, Knox, you expecting a siege?”

I look at her. “Aren’t you?”

She shrugs, like it’s a game. “Not until next week. I’ll put it on my calendar.”

I don’t laugh, but I do touch her hair, just for a second. She leans into it before she even knows what she’s doing. “I’d start a war for you, Gianna. You’re my Helen of Troy.”

The blush that creeps over her cheeks is so beautiful I want to bottle it and carry it with me forever.

The first night in the city, I can’t sleep. My high rise is in the fancy part of town, away from the noise. It’s built like a community, with ponds and walk ways and shit. Like bougie. It’s quiet. But no, not here. This is loud and obnoxious.

She knocks out quick, wrapped in my shirt, her feet digging into my shins under the covers.

I stare at the ceiling, counting the pipes.

Every few hours, a siren starts up in the distance and echoes down the alley outside our window.

I picture the city as a kind of wound, never letting anyone forget that it’s dangerous, that it’ll eat you if you let it.

After spending time in the woods with my little bird, I realize that I fucking hate the city and I’d rather be anywhere but here.

After a week, my hands start to itch for the cabin. There’s nowhere to run here—no dark, no wild, nothing but concrete and the hum of too many lives stacked on top of

each other. I take to walking the block at night, circling the room, waiting for something to happen.

She notices. She always does.

“You’re gonna wear a path in the floor,” she says, voice muffled by the pillow.

I shrug. “Keeps the rats away.”

She rolls over, fixing me with those predator eyes. “You don’t have to be on guard all the time, you know. We’re safe here.”

I don’t answer. I don’t want to lie to her.

Some days, I work. Kairo is working on closing some deals for the cobalt mines, so my job right now is mostly emails and calls, shuffling numbers on a spreadsheet, pretending to care about whether or not a wind farm in Wyoming gets a new battery.

Kairo texts every couple of days, sometimes just dumb memes, sometimes a string of coordinates and a time, sometimes nothing at all. Slade messaged the group chat wanting guys night, but I don’t want to. I don’t give a fuck about that. I just want my girl.

Creed, though. Creed is a different animal. He calls at dawn, always. Never texts. Never emails. Just the flat, uninflected drone of his voice on the line, like he’s reciting a script written by someone who doesn’t believe in punctuation.

First time he calls, I almost don’t answer. I’m in the shower, steam pouring off me, water as hot as it’ll go. The phone rings three times. I let it. Fourth ring, and I can picture his face—expressionless, patient, waiting for the world to bend to his will.

I pick up. “Yeah.”

“You moved out,” he says, no preamble.

“Yeah.”

A pause. “Cabin’s empty?”

“It is.”

“Got someone I want to bring up there,” he says. “You sure you’re not going back?”

I think about it. Honestly, I want to go back, but the deal was we shared it. “Don’t kill her, ight?” I say.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, but I know he’s smiling, even if I can’t see it.

He hangs up first.

After I dry off, I tell Gianna. She’s making coffee in the kitchen, her hair tied up with a pen, wearing nothing but panties and my old t-shirt. She pours me a cup, adds too much sugar, hands it over.

“Creed’s taking the cabin for a spin,” I say, watching her reaction.

She raises her eyebrows. “You okay with that?”

I nod. “I don’t have a choice. Besides we aren’t there, are we?” I can’t help but add a slight bite at the end.

She sips her coffee, licking foam off her upper lip. “Who’s he bringing?”

“Didn’t say. Probably a girl.”

She smirks. “Good for him. Hope she doesn’t give him too much trouble. Cassidy was right, it is easier to just let you take care of me.”

I watch her, watch the way her eyes linger on my hands, the way her fingers tap out a silent code on the rim of her mug. I want to ask her if she misses it—the woods, the quiet, the feeling of being completely alone together. I don’t. I already know the answer.

At night, I sit on the windowsill, watching the city breathe.

Cars slide by in slow procession, headlights painting the walls with thin bars of light.

Sometimes, if you look hard enough, you can see the patterns—who’s coming, who’s going, which buildings never turn off their lights, which people never sleep.

I think about the future. I think about whether or not this is sustainable.

I think about whether or not I can make her happy here, surrounded by all this noise and rot.

I think about whether or not she’ll wake up one day and realize that, no matter how much you love a monster, it’s still a monster.

Most days, she seems fine. Better than fine. She’s settled into being a good little house wife.

But we both know something is missing and it’s the foundation of our relationship.

One night, after too much wine, she slumps against me on the couch, feet in my lap,

blanket around her shoulders.

“You hate it here,” she says, not a question.

I consider lying. “Yeah.”

She closes her eyes, like she’s waiting for something.

“Why stay?” she asks, voice gone soft. “You could go anywhere.”

I don’t answer right away. I watch her for a while, the slow, steady rise and fall of her chest, the way her hand tugs at the edge of the blanket like she’s worried it’ll slip.

Finally, I say, “Because you’re here.”

She opens one eye, gives me a look like I’m the biggest idiot on earth. “That’s not a good reason, Knox.”

“It’s the only reason.”

She laughs, but it’s a sad sound. “You know what I want?”

“Tell me.”

She leans in, her breath warm on my neck. “I want to disappear. I want to run away and never look back. I want to live in a place where no one can find us.”

I nod, because I want the same thing.

She kisses me then, soft at first, then hard enough to hurt. My little bird has some tension to work out and I’m more than happy to oblige.

We fuck on the couch, her hand clamped over my mouth, her hips grinding down with a fury that almost scares me. She's trying to make it real, trying to make it stick, trying to prove that we belong here, now, in this moment. It's not me that needs convincing.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:40 pm

After, she falls asleep on my chest, drool pooling on my ribs. I don't move. I just listen to her breathing, and I think about the cabin, and Creed, and the animal that lives inside me and what happens when it runs out of space.

In the morning, there's a text from Creed. All it says is, "She's better than yours."

I laugh, for real this time, and toss the phone on the floor. Fucker.

She stirs, eyelids fluttering, then grins at me like she knows every secret I've got.

"Good morning, monster," she says.

"Morning, little bird."

And for a minute, it feels like home.

The mask stares at me from its perch on the bookshelf. The face is lacquered, black, painted with red lines that cut down the cheeks and end halfway down. I miss it. I miss what it makes me.

She's making breakfast, for dinner. Eggs and something else that's starting to burn. The air smells like ash and pepper. She's humming, but there's a hardness under it.

When I stalk into the kitchen, she doesn't look up. Just cracks another egg, the shell splitting in her palm like it's nothing.

"You want to talk about it?" she asks.

“Talk about what.”

She flips the eggs. “You’re pacing again. Last night you walked the whole block twice. You’re gonna get a reputation.”

I lean against the counter. “I don’t care.”

She doesn’t smile. “You’re not sleeping, either.”

She slides the eggs onto a plate and shoves them in front of me. I don’t bother with a fork. The yolk bursts under my fingers, hot and bitter.

She leans in, close enough that I can smell her shampoo, the way it never fully washes out the scent of me. She kisses my cheek, slow, then whispers in my ear:

“Put it on.”

I blink.

She says it again, softer: “Put on the mask.”

She walks away, hips moving slow, every step a dare. She heads for the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. The lock clicks.

I finish the eggs, not wanting to eat them, but knowing I probably should. I look at the mask again. It looks back.

I wait for the sound of the shower, the hum of pipes. Then I get dressed—black jeans, boots, the old grey hoodie with the fraying cuffs. I slide the mask into my backpack, next to the coil of rope and a roll of duct tape. Always be prepared.

When she finally emerges, hair wet and braided, she's wearing a short black skirt, running shoes, and loose white t-shirt. She tosses me a look over her shoulder.

"Meet me at Ellison Trail," she says. "I'm taking the Jeep, have fun with Egg."

She grabs her keys, and then she's gone. The door slams, and the apartment is silent.

I let the quiet sit for a second. Then I smile, slow and mean, and grab the bag.

The drive is a blur—traffic, billboards, the ugly sprawl of the city peeling away into a strip mall wasteland and then, finally, the trees. My blood starts to fizz.

Ellison Trail is a joke of a hiking path, three miles of groomed dirt with benches every quarter mile and signage warning about poison ivy and "natural hazards." But just past the main entrance, the land falls away into a tangle of scrub and shadow, a real forest lurking behind the safety rails.

I park the car, kill the engine, and just breathe for a second. It's better out here. The air is colder, cleaner. The sky is gunmetal, thick with clouds and the promise of rain.

I pop the trunk, grab the bag, and walk.

She wants me to hunt her. She's been begging for it, in all the ways she knows I can hear.

I pick up her scent before I even see the first sign—her perfume, the cheap floral kind she buys by the gallon, cut through with sweat and the faintest hint of blood.

She's clever, but she always underestimates how good I am at this.

The first marker is a pink thong, knotted around the branch of a dead tree. I laugh,

can't help it as I grab it and shove it in my pocket.

The second is a lipstick trail on the back of the trail sign, the word "Slow poke" scrawled in shaky red.

The third is her.

She's running ahead, hair loose and wild behind her, legs slicing through the undergrowth. She glances back, once, and catches me watching and bursts out giggling. She slows down, just a little, and I know she wants me closer.

I let her run. I want her tired, I want her desperate. I want her to feel the way I do—heart pounding, mouth dry, vision tunneled down to a single point.

I cut off the path, moving through the brush, every step calculated. I know these woods better than she does, even if it's my first time here. The city is behind me now. Out here, the rules are mine.

It doesn't take long to catch up. She's moving slower, watching her own back, not seeing the trap I'm building around her. I step on a branch, snap it loud, and she jumps, eyes wide. She looks right at me, and for a second, she smiles—real, unguarded, bright.

Then she bolts.

I chase, not run, just moving steady, patient, the way a predator should. I close the distance in five minutes.

She trips, falls, scrapes her knee on a rock. She scrambles up, bleeding and laughing.

"You're getting old," she taunts, voice echoing between the trees.

I don't answer. I just slip the mask over my face, the world narrowing to a perfect, silent tunnel.

She stops when she sees it. Her breath fogs in the air. Her mouth is open.

I close the rest of the distance in three steps, and then she's mine.

I drag her to the ground, pushing her face in the dirt.

She thrashes, wild at first, then goes limp as the zip of the rope bites her wrists.

I work fast, looping the cord around her ankles in an X so they're spread wide open, cinching it tight so she can't kick.

The forest floor is cold and wet, leaves sticking to her bare thighs, but she's not complaining—she's laughing, breathless, eyes gleaming under the curtain of hair.

So different to the first time we did this.

I flip her onto her back and yank the mask off. I want her to see my face. I want her to know who caught her.

Her smile is a red gash, hungry. "Took you long enough, old man."

I don't answer. I grab her by the jaw, thumb pressing against her pulse. It's frantic, racing. I could choke her out if I wanted to. Instead, I let her feel the pressure. Let her remember.

"You want to run again?" I ask, low.

She shakes her head, hair falling across her face.

“Didn’t think so.”

The rope is rough against her skin, making red welts where it rubs. I drag the knots tighter, double loop the ends, then run a palm over her hip, testing the tension. She shudders, biting her lip. She’s so fucking wet, the smell of it is a pulse in the cold air.

I put my mouth on her. She arches, nearly bucks me off. I keep her down with one hand, tongue working her clit in slow, lazy circles. The taste of her is sharp, sweat and salt and the faint copper tang from the scratch on her thigh. She screams when I suck, the sound splitting through the trees.

“Knox, fuck—” She tries to wriggle out, but she’s not going anywhere.

I keep at it, slow, steady, until she’s sobbing, until the sound of her voice is half pain and half plea. Then I shove two fingers in, curling them to hit the spot that always makes her lose it. She spasms, clenching around me, the orgasm hitting so hard it cuts off her scream mid-word.

I pull back, licking her off my lips. She’s crying, but she’s laughing, too, helpless, every inch of her shaking.

“You’re an asshole,” she manages.

“Yeah,” I say. “But you love it.”

I undo my jeans, cock already hard, aching.

Flipping her over, I admire my rope work.

She’s beautiful, the lines cutting red into her skin, opening her to me like a flower.

I line up and push in slow, letting her feel every inch.

She's so fucking tight like this, the rope pulling her knees up, making the angle brutal.

She moans, low and raw, the kind of sound that makes my head go white.

I fuck her hard, not holding back. The ground scrapes her back, dirt smearing her ass, but she doesn't care. She's begging for it, every thrust making her scream louder. I feel the wave build, the need to mark her, to fill her up, to own her completely.

She comes again before I do, body seizing, toes curling, fingers clawing at the leaves. I keep pounding, chasing my own high, until the pressure breaks and I'm emptying into her, hot and sharp and perfect.

For a minute, I can't breathe. My head spins. I collapse onto her, letting her feel the weight, the truth of me.

She kisses my neck, slow, almost gentle.

"You're never going to let me go, are you?" she whispers.

I shake my head, not even bothering to smile. "Not a chance."

She grins, then head-butts me in the chin. "Good. I'd be bored as shit without you."

We lie there after I untie her and check the marks, slowly rubbing sensation back into her. We're tangled in rope and sweat and each other, the city just a shit blip on the horizon.

I roll over, sit up, then pull her into my lap. She curls up, arms around my neck, face

buried in my shoulder.

“You ever get tired of this?” she asks.

“No.”

“Me neither.”

She laughs, softer this time, almost sweet. “Next time, you run. I’ll hunt.”

I consider it, then nod. “Deal, but I doubt you’ll catch me, little bird.”

We sit like that, the two of us, until the sun starts to rise. I don’t think about the city, or the future, or what happens when we have to go back. All I care about is the feel of her against me, the memory of her voice, the way her body fits so perfectly in my arms.

Epilogue

Gianna

I used to love the city. I used to think it was alive—churning, electric, a million stories all crammed together just waiting to be uncovered.

Now, every time I look out my window, all I see is sadness.

Desperation. Being a housewife for the last two months has been great, only... I know Knox isn't happy.

The blinds are drawn so tight you'd think the sunlight was a stalker. The glass is sealed with duct tape—Knox's handiwork—to keep out "the bugs," which is code for neighbors, traffic, and whatever else he feels we need protecting from.

He's sitting at my old kitchen table, hunched over his laptop, typing so hard the keys sound like they're groaning in protest. He's been working for Kairo's business the past few weeks, some kind of hush-hush security gig that involves a lot of encrypted spreadsheets and not a single second of fresh air.

His face glows blue from the screen; everything else is shadow.

He hasn't shaved his face in a week. His beard is growing out, along with the hair that's now falling in his eyes, almost hiding the color that used to knock me dead.

I watch him from the hallway, arms crossed, weighing whether it's worth starting

another fight about “the cave.” That’s what I call our living room now, since the sun hasn’t touched the floor since we moved in together.

My old paintings—flaming reds and screaming blues—look faded in this light, like they’re embarrassed to still be hanging up.

I’m not one to judge a man for losing his edge, but I can’t help cataloging the difference.

In the woods, Knox was an animal. All sinew and muscle, eyes flicking to every movement like he was starved for it.

He was violence in a shirt that barely fit, and it turned me on more than I care to admit.

Here, he’s a ghost of himself—pale, sullen, quick to irritation and slow to everything else.

I don’t know how to make him whole again.

I scratch at a bruise blooming on my forearm, a gift from last night.

We fucked like we were trying to kill each other, which, in a way, we were.

My thighs are still sticky from the after.

My neck’s got a half-moon of purpled bite marks that I traced in the mirror this morning, memorizing the pattern in case he ever stops leaving them.

But now, in the daylight, he’s different. Neutered. Tame.

I lean against the doorframe. “You gonna eat something today, or just mainline coffee

until you have a heart attack?”

He doesn't look up. “Not hungry.”

I wander in, kicking aside a mound of takeout containers.

Some are from last week, some older. The kitchen smells like sour sauce and the metallic tang of burnt plastic.

Sure, I'm a housewife, but even I need a break sometimes, and Knox is a difficult man to please on the best of days.

I open the fridge and laugh when I find an entire drawer devoted to Red Bull and nothing else.

I pull one, pop the tab, and take a long, gluttonous sip.

Knox pauses in his typing. “That's my last one.”

“Maybe if you left the apartment, you could get more.” I make it sound like a joke, but the words curdle in the air between us.

He slams the laptop shut and leans back, pinching the bridge of his nose. His fingers are stained from the wood polish he's been using on the old table, the one I insisted on keeping even though it's ugly as sin. “We're not doing this right now, Gianna.”

He always says my name instead of calling me little bird. It makes me sad.

“Fine,” I say, and wander to the living room.

It's worse here: pizza boxes stacked like failed Jenga, the couch slowly dying under the combined weight of our bodies.

The hunting knife he used to carry on his hip is propped on the coffee table, next to a copy of *Infinite Jest* and a half-empty bottle of Four Roses.

I pick it up, test the edge with my thumb. Dull. Just for show now.

There are days when I wonder if we made a mistake. Maybe we should have stayed feral, out in the wild, eating each other alive instead of melting down in a city that doesn't want us. Maybe Knox needs to kill something every now and then to feel right. Maybe I do, too.

I hear him pacing in the kitchen—back and forth, back and forth, like a zoo animal working a rut into the floor. When he thinks I'm not watching, he'll pace for hours. If I catch him, he'll freeze, go rigid, and pretend he was just stretching.

I flop onto the couch, legs splayed, and stare up at the ceiling. There's a new water stain above the light fixture, shaped like a face screaming. I try to count the cracks in the drywall but lose interest after three.

This is how most days go: me killing time, him killing himself by work. The sex is the only thing that feels honest, and even then, sometimes I catch him with his eyes closed, like he's picturing someone else. Maybe himself, as he used to be.

I rub the bruise on my arm, trace the outline with my fingernail until the skin raises in protest. I want to show it to him, see if it triggers anything in that dull animal brain. But I know it won't. He's too far gone for that.

I could fix this, probably. I could throw open the blinds, drag him out by the hair, force him to face the world until he remembers how to be hungry again. But I'm not his fucking therapist, and anyway, part of me likes him this way. Broken. Malleable. Easier to keep.

I shut my eyes and listen to the pacing. It's almost soothing, the regularity of it. Like

a heartbeat you can't escape.

If this is what forever looks like, I'll won't stand for it it. I'll be damned if I let it get boring.

Knox is in the shower, which means I have exactly twelve minutes to save his life.

He's always the same in the morning: up at dawn, a punishing run through the city streets, then a scalding shower long enough to turn his skin the color of boiled shrimp.

It's the only routine he hasn't managed to ruin yet.

I watch the bathroom door, steam crawling out under the crack like a living thing, and I count down the seconds.

His phone sits face-down on the counter, screen already splintered from last week's tantrum.

I pick it up, thumbprint override, easy.

He hasn't changed the passcode since we left the woods—one more little sign he's not really here, not really present.

I scroll past the calendar reminders, the texts from Creed and Slade and the rest of his feral support group, and land on the only number that matters.

Kairo Evans. The King of the Crazies.

I don't hesitate. I hit call.

He picks up on the first ring, like he's been waiting for this moment. His voice is low,

a rasp that makes my skin crawl. “Yeah?”

“It’s Gianna.” I keep my voice low, glancing at the bathroom door. “Knox is dying here.”

A pause, then a laugh, sharp and bright. “Took you this long to notice?”

“It’s not a joke.” I want to punch the wall, but I’d just break my own hand. “He’s losing it. I’m losing him.”

Kairo hums, considering. “You want out?”

“I want the woods.” I let the silence stretch, hang him with my need. “Is there somewhere we can go?”

He doesn’t answer for a long time. I hear a click—maybe a lighter, maybe a gun, maybe him pulling out the tweezers to masturbate.

Finally: “Cabin thirty-three is empty. Noah won’t notice, not for a couple months, at least.” The way he says Noah’s name is almost reverent, like he’s talking about a dead god.

“Will it be enough?” My voice goes thin, almost begging.

Kairo snorts. “Nothing’s ever enough for you two. But it’ll keep you alive. Just don’t get comfortable. You want to stay, you build your own. Creed is the one you want.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Thank you.” The words taste weird, unfamiliar.

He hangs up without saying goodbye.

The bathroom fan kicks on, drowning out the pipes.

I set the phone back down and press my hands to the counter, staring at the reflection in the microwave door.

I look like a raccoon who lost a fight with a lawnmower.

My hair's a rat's nest, and there's a bite on my collarbone that's already scabbing over. I poke at it, smiling despite myself.

The whole place smells like wet tile and old sex. I hate it, but I hate what comes after more. The usual routine of death and dying.

I slide open the junk drawer and start making a mental list. Knife, obviously. The one on the coffee table is dull, but the one in the bedroom—his favorite—is still sharp enough to shave with. And leave pretty little marks on my skin.

I glance at the clock. Seven minutes left.

I pull my shirt sleeve up, examine the finger-shaped bruises on my wrist from last night. They're already turning yellow at the edges. I drag my nail across them, feel the heat simmer underneath. I could have stopped him. I could stop him any time. But I like the marks. I like the proof.

I wonder if he ever looks at his own bruises and thinks of me.

I pace the apartment, counting steps. The Egg is parked outside, tank full, battery barely hanging on.

We could be out of the city by noon if I play it right.

Knox has a meeting at ten, something with Kairo and a bunch of other wolves in

sheep's clothing.

But if Kairo is half as smart as Knox says he is, he will understand that he will in attending, alone.

If I time it right, I can have us packed and ready before he realizes what's happening.

I check the phone again, just in case. Nothing. Kairo's always been a man of action, not words.

I run through the plan in my head—pack, drive, get to Cabin 33. The idea of being back in the woods makes my whole body ache. I can almost taste the air, sharp with pine and decay, wet earth under my nails. I imagine Knox there, eyes alive again, the predator instead of the pet.

The shower shuts off. I freeze, every muscle tensed, as if I'm about to be caught doing something dirty. Maybe I am.

I tuck the phone back where I found it and grab a towel from the dryer. He likes them warm, says it's the only thing that keeps him from breaking shit first thing in the morning. I hear the bathroom door creak, his feet bare and heavy on the tile.

He steps out, a cloud of steam following. His eyes are red, not from crying, just from existing. He looks at me, sees the towel, the bruises, the way I'm clutching the counter like it's the only thing holding me up.

"Everything okay?" he asks, voice still thick with fatigue.

I smile, slow and sly. "Yeah. Everything's perfect."

He takes the towel, wraps it around his waist. He's beautiful, in a way that's almost cruel—cut and sharp and just a little bit damaged. He tilts his head, studying me, like

he knows I'm up to something. Maybe he does.

He wanders back to the bedroom, leaves the door open. I watch him go, heart pounding with anticipation.

We're getting out. We're going home.

I glance at the clock again.

Four minutes to spare.

"We're moving," I say, interrupting his search for clothing.

He laughs, a single, bitter bark. "Right. I'll call the movers. Get a place with more natural light. Maybe a fucking balcony."

I shake my head. "No. Not the city. Not anywhere with a lease and a mailbox and a name on a deed."

He looks at me, really looks, eyes narrowing to the predator's slit I remember from the woods. "What are you saying?"

I stand up, stretch until my spine cracks, and walk to the window. I pull back the corner of the blackout curtain, let in a slice of dying sun. I turn to him, holding that gold in my palm like a dare.

"I talked to Kairo," I say. "Cabin thirty-three. Pine Ridge. We leave right now. Pack your shit baby, we're going home."

He's still for a heartbeat, maybe two. Then he's up, crossing the room in three steps, hands in my hair, mouth at my ear.

“You’re serious,” he says. Not a question.

I nod, and he makes a sound—a low, guttural thing that’s almost a growl. The city dies in him all at once. His eyes sharpen, his hands get rougher, and he presses his body to mine until my breath comes up hard against my ribs.

He laughs again, but this time it’s joy. “You fucking maniac. You want to run wild again?”

I dig my fingers into his shirt, bunching the fabric at his waist. “I want to see you alive again,” I say, and the words almost choke me. “I want to see you hungry.”

He kisses me, open-mouthed and brutal, teeth clashing. He tastes like beer and blood and the promise of something better than survival.

He lifts me, pins me against the wall. My legs wrap around his hips, and I can already feel the monster waking up under his skin, desperate to be free.

“We leave as soon as I’m done fucking you half to death,” he says, voice hoarse.

I nod, biting his lip until he shudders. “Fuck me until I forget my name.”

His hands go everywhere—waist, thigh, throat. He marks me with every touch, as if we didn’t already belong to each other in ways that can’t be undone.

We fuck against the wall, hard and desperate, like we’re already in the woods, like there’s no one in the world but us and the hunger that gnaws at our bones.

When it’s over, I let him hold me, even though neither of us will ever say the words.

His breath is ragged in my ear, heartbeat wild against my back.

I close my eyes and count the seconds until we're ready to get up and go.

I know he's doing the same.

God, I love that man.