

Friday's Fade

BY **ISMAIL "ISH" RASHAD**

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Dedication

For the silenced, the forgotten, and the unheard.

For those who never got justice.

For those whose pain was dismissed, whose truth was doubted, whose cries were met with silence.

For the ones too afraid to speak, and the ones who did—only to be ignored.

For the survivors who walk with unseen scars, carrying the weight of a world that chose to look away.

This story is for you.

I may not know your exact pain, but you are not alone.

You are not forgotten.

And though the world may try to erase your truth—

You still matter. You always will.

Acknowledgement

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Introduction: The Birth of a Legend

What if the person you trusted most—the one who knew your deepest fears, your wildest dreams, and the secrets you thought were safe—was the one who led you to ruin? This is the question that haunts Astrid Draven Evers, a rising young model with everything to lose. Charismatic and ambitious, Astrid is drawn to the glittering promise of success, unaware that beneath the surface of her world lurks something far more sinister.

At Blackwell University, excess is an unspoken tradition, and secrets are a currency more valuable than money. But nothing is more exclusive—or more dangerous—than Friday's Fade, an underground party whispered about in dorm rooms and behind locked doors. A place where the rules don't apply, where pleasure and power blur into something far darker.

Astrid thought she was going to a party. She thought Julian, the boy she trusted, was leading her into something thrilling. Instead, she walked into a nightmare. Drugged, violated, and discarded, she became just another girl lost to the shadows—a story no one would believe, a tragedy that would be swept under the rug like all the others.

But Astrid refuses to be forgotten.

With her best friend Hanna by her side, she claws her way back from the abyss, driven by a hunger for justice—no, for revenge. One by one, she will hunt down the men who stole her voice, her trust, and her body. They thought they could take everything from her and walk away unscathed. They were wrong.

This is a story of betrayal, survival, and retribution. Of a girl who was broken but refused to stay that way.

They ruined her life. Now, she's going to ruin theirs.

Welcome to Friday's Fade. Not everyone makes it out.

Chapter 1: The Lost Reel

Blackwell University's film archives smelled of damp paper and stale ambition. Dust motes floated in the sickly glow of a single yellow bulb, casting shadows across rows of forgotten reels and tapes. The labyrinth of shelves loomed over Astrid, the air thick with an eerie stillness that seemed to hum with stories untold.

Dressed in yoga pants and a sports bra, she shivered against the chill as she worked her way down the aisle. She was on a mission: to find inspiration. A prestigious national contest had called for models to create short films showcasing their creativity and charisma. The grand prize: a starring role in a major television commercial. Astrid, ever ambitious, was determined to win. Her fingers traced the faded labels on the shelves, searching for a spark to ignite her imagination.

As she delved deeper into the archives, she stumbled upon an unmarked box tucked away behind neatly labeled film reels. Curiosity piqued, she pulled it free, surprised by its weight. Inside, nestled amongst faded photographs and brittle documents, was a battered camcorder.

Intrigued, Astrid connected the camcorder to an ancient television set, her pulse quickening as the screen flickered to life. Static gave way to a grainy image—a young woman, her face etched with fear, trapped in a dark, claustrophobic room.

Astrid's breath hitched. The woman was Valentina Reyes, a fellow model who had vanished two years prior. The footage was a chilling reminder of the darkness that lurked beneath the glamorous facade of the industry.

"Lost in thought, Astrid?"

She gasped, spinning around. Julian stood behind her, his sharp jawline softened by the dim light. He wore a long coat over a button-up shirt, his dark hair slightly tousled, as though he had just rolled out of bed.

"Julian," she said, exhaling sharply. "You scared me."

"Sorry," he replied, his lips curving into an amused smile. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you." He glanced at the television. "What are you watching?"

"Just... old footage," she lied, fumbling to turn off the camcorder.

But Julian wasn't so easily brushed off. He tilted his head, his sharp eyes studying her face. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Astrid hesitated. She had only known Julian for a few weeks, but something about his presence made her feel both at ease and unnerved. He was a graduate student in film theory with a reputation for his brilliance, creativity, and his effortless charm had made him a fixture in the department.

"I'm researching Valentina Reyes," she lied after a pause, her voice barely above a whisper.

Julian's brow furrowed, and his smile faded. "The girl who disappeared?"

Astrid nodded.

His gaze flickered to the camcorder, then back to her. "I've heard the rumors. A tragic story. But why are you looking into it?"

"I... I don't know," Astrid said, struggling to articulate the pull Valentina's story had on her in the past. "I just feel like there's something people missed. Something important."

Julian's eyes softened. "Well, if you're looking for answers, maybe I can help. Two heads are better than one."

Astrid hesitated. Something about his eagerness set off alarm bells in her mind. "Actually, I have to meet up with a friend," she said, trying to let him down gently.

But Julian was insistent. "Come on, just a quick look. I might be able to point you in the right direction." He wouldn't take no for an answer.

Finally, Astrid relented, scribbling her number on a scrap of paper. "Here," she said. "Text me tomorrow, and maybe we can compare notes."

Julian's smile was dazzling. "It's a date," he said, tucking the paper into the inner pocket of his coat, close to his heart.

Astrid hurried out of the archives, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. Julian was undeniably charming, but there was something about him that made her uneasy. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had just stepped into a dangerous game.

Back in her dorm room, Astrid tossed her phone onto the unmade bed, the screen illuminating the cluttered space with a harsh, unwelcome light. She hadn't bothered unpacking much since arriving from London – clothes overflowed from suitcases, books lay scattered across the floor, and a half-eaten bowl of salad sat precariously on her desk. The room, a stark contrast to the minimalist aesthetic she cultivated online, reflected the turmoil within her.

Astrid peeled off her clothes, the fabric clinging to her sweat-dampened skin. She stepped into the shower, the hot water a welcome assault on her senses. As the steam filled the small bathroom, she closed her eyes, the image of Valentina's terrified face flashing behind her eyelids.

What if it's real? The thought, a chilling whisper, snaked its way into her mind. What if the footage isn't just some cruel prank?

Astrid shivered, the water suddenly feeling too cold. She quickly finished her shower, wrapping herself in a fluffy towel. As she walked back into her room, her phone buzzed with a message from Hanna.

"Party at my place tonight! Come on, you deserve a break from all that studying."

Astrid hesitated, replying back "It's Thursday Hanna!"— Parties weren't really her scene, especially not tonight. Her mind was still reeling from the discovery of the footage, the encounter with Julian.

But Hanna was insistent. "Come on, Astrid, it'll be fun! You need to get out of your head for a while."

Astrid sighed. Hanna was right. She couldn't spend the rest of her life hiding in her dorm room, obsessing over a myth, a whisper of a secret, a chilling ghost story that might be nothing more than elaborate gossip.

"Okay, fine," she texted back. "But just for an hour. I have a mountain of work to do, and I have something to tell you."

An hour later, Astrid found herself surrounded by the pulsating energy of Hanna's party. The music throbbed, the lights flashed, and the laughter of her friends filled the air. But Astrid couldn't quite shake off the feeling of unease that had been lingering since her encounter with Julian. She spotted Hanna by the makeshift bar, her laughter echoing above the music.

"Hanna!" Astrid shouted over the din, grabbing her friend's arm. "I need to talk to you. It's important."

Hanna raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow, a playful smirk on her lips. "Ooh, important? Do you finally have an idea for your masterpiece? Do you have a part for me?"

Astrid shook her head, her expression grim. "No, it's not that. This is serious! It's about Valentina Reyes."

Hanna's smile faltered. "Valentina? What about her?"

"I found something," Astrid said, her voice barely above a whisper. "In the archives. A tape."

Hanna's eyes widened. "A tape? Astrid, what kind of tape?"

"A tape of her," Astrid clarified, her voice trembling slightly. "Before... before she disappeared."

Hanna's face paled. "Are you serious? What was on it?"

"I don't know," Astrid admitted. "I only saw a few minutes of it. But it looked... bad. She was scared, trapped. I think... I think something terrible happened to her."

Hanna's expression softened, and she pulled Astrid into a hug. "Oh, Astrid, I'm so sorry. That must have been awful to see."

Astrid clung to her friend, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. She had been carrying this burden alone for too long.

"I'm worried, Hanna," she confessed, her voice muffled against Hanna's shoulder. "I think she might have been... raped. Or worse."

Hanna pulled back, her eyes filled with concern. "Astrid, you need to calm down. It's probably just a hoax. People make up all sorts of stories about Valentina."

Astrid shook her head. "No, it felt real. Too real. I could see the fear in her eyes."

Hanna sighed. "Look, I know you're worried, but you can't let this consume you. You haven't even watched the whole tape yet. Maybe there's a logical explanation."

Astrid knew Hanna was trying to comfort her, but her words did little to ease her anxiety. She had a feeling that the tape held a dark secret, a truth that could shatter the illusion of safety and glamour surrounding their world.

But for now, she pushed those thoughts aside. She needed to focus on the present, on her friend, on the party that swirled around them.

"You're right," she said, forcing a smile. "I'm probably overreacting. I'll watch the rest of the tape tomorrow and see what's really going on."

Hanna nodded, her smile returning. "That's the spirit. Now, come on, let's get drunk! Forget about Valentina and all that mystery stuff for tonight."

Astrid let herself be pulled onto the dance floor, the music and the laughter washing over her. But even as she danced, a part of her mind remained fixated on the image of Valentina, trapped and terrified, a haunting reminder of the darkness that lurked beneath the surface.

As she nursed a drink, her phone buzzed with a message. It was Julian.

"Thinking of you," he wrote. "Would love to see you again soon."

Astrid smiled, a warmth spreading through her chest. She hadn't expected him to text so soon.

"Who's that?" Hanna asked, noticing Astrid's smile.

"Oh, just a guy I met today," Astrid replied, tucking her phone back into her pocket.

"Ohh mystery man! Is he special?" Hanna teased.

Astrid blushed. "He's... interesting," she admitted.

Hanna's curiosity was piqued. "Tell me more!"

Astrid hesitated. She wasn't sure why, but she felt reluctant to share too much about Julian. "Maybe later," she said, changing the subject.

But Hanna wouldn't let it go. She kept pushing, her playful persistence wearing down Astrid's resistance. Finally, as they stood by the kitchen counter, sipping their drinks, Astrid relented.

"His name is Julian," she confessed. "He's a film student. And he's really... dreamy."

Hanna's eyes widened. "Dreamy, huh? And charming, I bet."

Astrid nodded, a smile playing on her lips. "He is. But he's also kind of mysterious. He never actually told me how He knew my name."

Hanna, ever the curious one, snatched Astrid's phone. "Let me see these texts," she demanded.

Astrid hesitated, but Hanna's playful insistence won out. She handed over her phone, watching as Hanna's eyes scanned the messages.

"Wow, he's definitely into you," Hanna said, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "You should invite him over."

Astrid shook her head. "No way. It's too soon."

"Come on, it'll be fun!" Hanna insisted. "Besides, I want to meet your mystery man."

Astrid held firm. She wasn't ready to introduce Julian to her friends, not yet.

Two hours passed, and the party showed no signs of slowing down. Hanna, fueled by the music and the energy of the crowd, urged Astrid to stay longer. But Astrid was exhausted and needed to get back to her studies.

"I really have to go," she said, her voice firm.

Hanna finally relented, but not without a parting shot. "Fine, go see your mystery man," she teased, a knowing smile on her face.

Astrid rolled her eyes, but a warmth spread through her chest. She couldn't deny the pull she felt towards Julian, despite her initial reservations.

As she stumbled down the stairway, she pulled out her phone and texted him. "Had fun tonight. Thanks for the messages."

Almost immediately, her phone rang. It was Julian.

"Hey there," he said, his voice warm and inviting. "I heard you were at a party. Having fun?"

Astrid laughed. "Yeah, it's been a good night. How did you know?"

"I have my ways," Julian said with a chuckle. "So, tell me, young lady, have you been drinking?"

Astrid blushed. "Maybe a little," she admitted. "But I'm fine, I will get a ride."

"It's late. You shouldn't be alone," Julian said, his voice laced with concern. "Tell you what, I'm not too far away. Why don't I come pick you up?"

Astrid hesitated. She rarely let anyone pick her up, especially after a night out, but there was something about Julian's offer that made her feel safe.

"Okay," she agreed. "But I'm waiting around the back. I'll send you the location."

Within minutes, Julian's car pulled up beside hers. He stepped out, a smile spreading across his face.

"You look beautiful," he said, his eyes sparkling.

Astrid laughed, a little self-consciously. "I'm probably a mess."

"C'mon," Julian said, gently guiding her towards his car. "You're perfect."

He opened the passenger door for her, his touch sending a shiver down her spine. Astrid slid into the seat, her heart pounding.

Julian closed the door behind her, then walked around to the driver's side. As he started the car, he turned to her with a playful grin.

"So, you're a bit of a party animal, huh?" he teased.

Astrid laughed. "Not usually. But Hanna can be persuasive."

"Well, I'm glad she was," Julian said, his eyes twinkling. "I'm happy I got to save your night."

Astrid smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. She had a feeling this was just the beginning of something special.

As they approached her dorm, Julian pulled over. "Here you go, safe and sound," he said.

Astrid reached for the door handle, but Julian stopped her. "Wait," he said. "I want to make sure you get inside okay."

He pulled out his phone. "Here's what we'll do. Call your number from my phone, stay on the line with me until you're safely in your room."

Astrid laughed. "You're so cute," she said, her cheeks flushing.

She did as he instructed, dialing her number and handing his phone back. Julian held it to his ear as Astrid stepped out of the car.

"I had a really good time tonight," he said, his voice low and sincere.

"Me too," Astrid admitted, her heart fluttering.

She walked towards the dorm entrance, her phone pressed to her ear. Julian's voice, a comforting presence in the quiet night, followed her every step.

As she reached her room, she turned to him, a smile on her face. "Thanks for everything, Julian."

"Anytime," he replied. "Get some rest. We'll talk soon."

Astrid hung up the phone, a warmth spreading through her chest. She had a feeling she wouldn't be getting much sleep that night. Her mind was filled with thoughts of Julian, his charm, his intelligence, his mysterious aura.

And as she drifted off to sleep, a single thought echoed through her mind: she couldn't wait to see him again.

Over the next three days, Julian became the center of her world. They skipped classes, holed up in his apartment, poring over old newspapers, and scouring online forums for any mention of Valentina. Astrid couldn't deny his brilliance—he had a way of uncovering details that others might overlook, connecting seemingly unrelated pieces of information with ease.

They spent most nights watching obscure films that seemed to hold hidden messages, films that Julian claimed had influenced his own artistic vision. He would pause the scenes, dissecting the symbolism, the camera angles, the subtle nuances that revealed the director's intent. Astrid, captivated by his passion and insight, found herself seeing the world through a different lens.

He was a fountain of ideas, and soon, they were brainstorming concepts for her short film, bouncing ideas off each other with an enthusiasm that bordered on manic. Julian, with his keen eye for detail and his knack for storytelling, helped her shape those ideas into a captivating narrative, a masterpiece in the making for the prestigious national contest. He even volunteered to help her shoot the film, his expertise proving invaluable as they navigated the technical challenges and brought her vision to life.

He shared his own vulnerabilities with her, confessing a troubled past, a yearning for something more than the mundane. Astrid, captivated by his intensity and the way he seemed to see something profound in her, opened up to him as well, sharing a deeply personal story about her own struggles with body image and the pressures of the modeling world.

But the deeper they dug, the more sinister the mystery became.

Rumors began to surface about a secret party—Friday's Fade. Whispers of its existence had floated around campus for years, but no one could confirm its reality. The tales painted a dark picture: a gathering shrouded in secrecy, where masked figures indulged in forbidden pleasures and unspeakable acts. Some whispered of disappearances, others of dark rituals and unspoken consequences.

Astrid's stomach churned. Was Valentina a victim of Friday's Fade?

Their connection deepened with each passing hour. They would lie on his worn-out rug, discussing philosophy, art, and the complexities of the human condition. He was a whirlwind, sweeping her off her feet, leaving her breathless and intoxicated by his presence. The line between friendship and something more blurred with each passing day.

Late into the night, Julian leaned back in his chair, his eyes gleaming with a strange intensity. "We're close," he said, his voice low. "I can feel it. If Friday's Fade is behind this, we might finally have the proof to expose them."

Astrid's heart pounded with a mix of fear and exhilaration. For the first time, she felt like Valentina's story might not be forgotten.

One evening, under the soft glow of a single lamp, their conversation drifted towards more intimate territory. Julian's gaze held hers, his eyes dark and intense. He leaned in, his breath warm against her skin, and kissed her. The kiss was slow, deliberate, an exploration of senses, a taste of something forbidden. Astrid, lost in the moment, responded instinctively, her body trembling beneath his touch. He tasted of dark chocolate and something else, something raw and primal.

Astrid melted into him, her breath hitching as his lips trailed lower, mapping a path down her throat, her collarbone. His hands moved over her like he was memorizing every inch, savoring the moment as though he had all the time in the world. His touch was confident, practiced—almost too perfect. A flicker of something cold whispered through her mind, a primal warning, but it was gone before she could grasp it. She exhaled, let him pull her closer, let herself be consumed by the intoxicating haze of his presence. His weight pressed her into the mattress, the heat between them intensifying. The world beyond the walls of that room ceased to exist.

Much later, Julian's breathing had evened out beside her, his arm draped over her waist in sleep. Astrid lay still, her eyes tracing the cracks in the ceiling, her body warm but her mind restless. Carefully, she shifted out from under his arm, slipping from the bed without waking him. She pulled on his shirt, the fabric swallowing her frame, and padded barefoot to her desk.

As she stared at the flickering screen of her laptop, the grainy image of Valentina etched into her mind, a nagging feeling of unease crept in. A whisper of doubt, a shadow of suspicion about Julian clouded her thoughts. He was magnetic, almost too perfect in his support.

Could she trust him? Or was he leading her into a trap she couldn't escape?

She pushed it aside, telling herself she was being foolish. Julian was her friend, her partner, her confidante. He would never betray her.

Chapter 2: The Valentina Effect

Astrid's room was dimly lit, the glow of her laptop casting shadows on the walls as her fingers danced across the keyboard. She leaned forward, a crease forming between her brows as she dove deeper into the labyrinth of Valentina Reyes's digital life. Instagram, Facecard, TikTok, obscure modeling forums—she scoured them all with the relentless focus of someone on the verge of discovering a hidden truth.

Valentina's online presence was a masterpiece of curation, a portrait of a young woman who seemed to have everything for a teenager. Exotic beaches, high-end fashion shoots, and candid shots that felt effortlessly authentic filled her feeds. Her captions ranged from playful to introspective, with hints of vulnerability peeking through. But Astrid couldn't shake the feeling that something darker lingered beneath the surface. The glamorous facade felt too perfect, as if it were carefully designed to obscure something.

A message notification blinked on her screen, breaking her concentration. It was from a user named EternalFlame, someone whose name she recognized from frequent comments on Valentina's posts. Astrid hesitated before clicking.

The message was brief, unsettling: "She flew too close to the sun. They burned her wings."

Her pulse quickened. Who was this person? What did they know?

She clicked on their profile, only to be met with a blank page. No profile picture, no posts, just a bio that sent chills down her spine: "Beauty fades. Obsession lasts forever."

Astrid's hands hovered over the keyboard, unsure whether to respond. Was this a harmless fan with a flair for the dramatic, or something far more sinister? The cryptic nature of the message felt like a warning—or a threat.

Determined not to be deterred, Astrid pressed on. She unearthed fragments of deleted posts, comments scrubbed clean, and a trail of interactions that abruptly ended in digital dead ends. It was as though someone had meticulously erased pieces of Valentina's life, leaving behind only a carefully controlled image.

Late one night, while browsing an old forum for aspiring models, Astrid stumbled upon a thread titled "Twisted Euphoria." The posts were anonymous, written in a mix of fear and confusion. They spoke of a secret party—Friday's Fade—a gathering shrouded in mystery, whispered about in hushed tones. The details were vague, fragmented, but a chilling picture emerged: a night of masks and anonymity, where the lines between pleasure and pain blurred, and the consequences could be deadly.

Astrid's blood ran cold. Could this be connected to Valentina's disappearance? Was this the "They" that EternalFlame had warned about?

She tried to find more information about Friday's Fade, but the online trail was cold. The party, if it even existed, was a closely guarded secret, its existence known only to a select few.

Frustration gnawed at Astrid. She was so close, she could feel it. But the truth remained elusive, hidden behind a veil of whispers and shadows.

Astrid slammed her laptop shut, the sudden movement echoing in the quiet room. She glanced at her phone, the screen dark and lifeless. No new messages. No missed calls. Just the same old notifications from social media, a constant reminder of the life she was trying to build, the image she was trying to cultivate.

She opened her messaging app, scrolling through the endless stream of texts, most of them unread. A pang of guilt twisted in her gut. She had been neglecting her friends, her family, even her agent. Her obsession with Valentina's case had consumed her, isolating her from the world around her.

A new message notification blinked on the screen. It was from Sofie Martinez, her agent. Astrid's heart sank. She had been so focused on the Valentina mystery that she had forgotten about the upcoming campaign for the youth brand. She had been so sure she had it in the bag, but now...

With trembling fingers, she opened the message.

"Astrid, I'm so sorry to tell you this, but they've decided to go with another model for the campaign. I know how much you wanted this, and I'm truly disappointed. Don't give up, though. I will have other opportunities for you."

Astrid stared at the words, her stomach plummeting. She had been so close, so sure. This campaign was supposed to be her big break, her chance to finally make a name for herself. And now, it was gone.

A wave of despair washed over her, threatening to drown her in a sea of self-doubt and disappointment. She had worked so hard, sacrificed so much, and for what? To be rejected, overlooked, forgotten.

Astrid closed her eyes, willing the tears back. She couldn't afford to fall apart now. She had to stay strong, focused. She had to find out what happened to Valentina, to expose the truth, to bring those responsible to justice.

But the weight of the world felt heavy on her shoulders. The pressure of her career, the mystery of Valentina's disappearance, the whispers of Friday's Fade – it was all too much.

Needing to clear her head, Astrid glanced at Julian, still asleep in her bed, his dark hair tousled against the pillow. She grabbed her gym bag and headed to the university fitness center. The rhythmic pounding of her sneakers on the treadmill, the burn in her muscles, the sweat stinging her eyes—these were the things that helped her focus, that brought her back to the present.

Astrid's disappointment over the campaign results was quickly forgotten as she entered the locker room. A flash of crimson caught her eye – a small, ornately carved wooden box tucked near the lost-and-found. Intrigued, she picked it up, surprised by its weight and the strange energy that seemed to emanate from it. Inside, nestled on a bed of dark velvet, lay a single black feather, its tip stained a deep, unsettling crimson. Astrid's breath hitched. It was identical to the one Valentina had worn in her last Facecard post.

A shiver of excitement, not fear, ran down her spine. This was it. This was her invitation to Friday's Fade. She tucked the box into her gym bag, a grin spreading across her face. Tonight, she wouldn't be drowning her sorrows; she'd be stepping into the unknown.

Back in her dorm, she bounced on the balls of her feet, barely able to contain her anticipation. She had to tell someone. Hanna! She snatched up her phone and dialed her best friend's number.

Had she been paying closer attention, she might have noticed the small note resting on her pillow. Julian had woken to an empty bed, the sheets cool where her body had been. Her gym bag was gone, and so was she. A flicker of disappointment crossed his face, quickly replaced by a knowing smile. Before slipping out, he grabbed a piece of paper from her desk, scrawling a message: "Last night was incredible. Thank you for trusting me. Call me when you're free—I'd love to see you again. -J"

"Hanna! You'll NEVER guess what happened!" Astrid burst out the moment Hanna answered. "I got it! I got an invitation to Friday's Fade!"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down!" Hanna laughed. "What are you talking about? What invitation?"

Astrid explained about the box, the feather, the connection to Valentina. "It's gotta be their way of inviting people to their... whatever it is they do," she finished breathlessly.

There was a pause on the other end. Then—"Astrid, are you sure about this? It sounds... off. Like something you don't just walk into."

"It's exclusive, Hanna. Mysterious. Valentina was there. I need to know why."

Hanna exhaled sharply. "Just promise me you'll be careful. This doesn't sound like your scene."

"I have to," Astrid insisted. "This is our chance to find out what Friday's Fade is all about. Come with me!"

"Oh, honey, I wish I could, but my mom is stopping by tonight," Hanna said apologetically. "But you know what? You should take Julian. It'll give you two a chance to, you know..."

Astrid rolled her eyes playfully. "Hanna!"

"What? He's cute, and he clearly likes you. Besides, it's safer to go with someone you trust."

Astrid paused, considering. Hanna was right. Julian was the perfect person to bring along. "Okay, you've convinced me. I'll give him a call."

She ended the call with Hanna and quickly dialed Julian's number, the thrill of adventure coursing through her veins. Tonight, she was stepping into a world of secrets, and she couldn't wait.

Chapter 3: Twisted Euphoria (Neon Nights)

The club throbbed with life, its walls pulsing to the rhythm of the bass. A kaleidoscope of neon lights bathed the crowd in shifting hues—deep violets, sultry reds, electric blues. The air was thick with the scent of spilled cocktails, designer cologne, and something floral and smoky—weed mixed with expensive incense. Laughter echoed through the cavernous space, mingling with the clinking of glasses and the murmur of conversations.

Astrid felt the weight of the night pressing down on her, but Julian's touch at her waist was light, confident. He guided her through the chaos like he belonged here. Maybe he did. He was dressed the part—tailored black-on-black, silver jewelry flashing in the strobe lights. He looked like money, like trouble, like every bad decision wrapped in a perfect smile.

The moment they stepped inside, she felt it—the energy of a place that didn't just host parties, it created legends. The music washed over her, a hypnotic blend of electronic beats and pulsating rhythms that vibrated through her very core.

The people were obnoxiously beautiful—glistening bodies pressed together in a heated mass of music and motion. Girls in glittering dresses and boys with sculpted physiques danced with abandon, their movements fluid and sensual. The rich and reckless perched on plush velvet lounges, sipping cocktails that glowed under the neon haze, their laughter echoing through the club. On the upper level, a private VIP lounge loomed like a temple, its occupants watching the crowd below with a kind of detached amusement.

This was it. The world of the untouchable.

Astrid's pulse quickened—not with fear, but with adrenaline. She felt a surge of excitement, a sense of liberation. Tonight, she would leave her worries behind and embrace the intoxicating energy of Friday's Fade.

Julian leaned in, his breath warm against her ear. "Welcome to Friday's Fade," he murmured, his voice melting into the music.

A girl in a tiny sequined dress passed them a drink—something cold and fizzy, pink like crushed petals. Astrid hesitated, then took a sip. It was sweet, deceptively smooth, with a hint of berry and something she couldn't quite place. Julian grinned as if he had won something.

"Come on," he said, tugging her toward the dance floor.

The music swallowed her whole.

Astrid lost herself in the movement, in the rush of bodies that felt like they were moving as one. The beat was hypnotic, the world nothing but light and heat and pulsing energy. She laughed—really laughed, for the first time in weeks. The campaign, the stress, the exhaustion—it all faded in the haze of the music and the intoxicating atmosphere. She felt weightless, free.

Somewhere in the chaos, Julian pulled her closer, his hands sliding along her waist as they danced. She didn't stop him. It felt good—to be wanted, to be admired, to be part of something bigger than herself.

A tray of gold-rimmed shot glasses passed through the crowd, and Astrid took one, toasting with a group of girls who welcomed her like she belonged. One of them had a cigarette holder like an old Hollywood starlet, the smoke curling around her face in a seductive haze. Another had diamonds sparkling on her tooth and nails, her fingers tracing patterns in the air as she moved to the music. They smelled like money and mischief, their laughter infectious.

"Drink, babe," one of them giggled, linking her arm through Astrid's. She did.

The heat in her veins deepened. Everything blurred at the edges, but in a way that felt delicious, liberating. This was fun.

Until it wasn't.

The lights flickered, and for a moment—just a moment—Astrid swore they weren't alone. A shadow moved in the corner, watching. But when she turned to look, it was just more partygoers, their faces too beautiful, too sharp, too hungry.

Her drink tasted different. Bitter. She shook her head, tried to focus. When had she started swaying? The room seemed to tilt, the music warping into a dissonant drone.

A hand—Julian's?—gripped her wrist, his fingers digging into her skin. The faces around her were blurring, their smiles stretching too wide, their laughter too loud, too eager.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

She tried to speak, but her tongue felt thick, her words slurring. She tried to pull away, but her legs wouldn't cooperate.

She took a step back—or maybe she fell.

Strong arms caught her. Voices murmured, their words indistinct, their tone laced with a predatory excitement.

The world tilted. The lights spun. The music faded.

Darkness swallowed her whole.

Chapter 4: The Cult of Beauty

Astrid awoke to an aching body and the suffocating silence of the room. Her mind struggled to orient itself, the scent of incense still clinging to her clothes, a sickening reminder of the nightmare she had endured. Her body ached, violated and betrayed. The cold, damp stone beneath her reminded her this wasn't a bad dream—this was real.

A dull throbbing pulsed in her head as fragments of the night filtered through her foggy mind. Chanting voices. Blinding flashes. The masked figures encircling her. And Julian... The memory of his voice—once a lifeline of comfort—now laced with cruelty, sent a shudder down her spine.

Turning her head slightly, Astrid froze. Her own hand was clamped tightly around a dark feather, its tip stained a deep crimson. The sight of it sent a wave of nausea through her, the memories of the night flooding back in a torrent of pain and fear. Astrid's breath hitched. She recognized the feather—identical to the one she had found in the wooden box. A wave of nausea rolled over her as realization sank in. Valentina must have gone through the same nightmare.

Her stomach twisted violently. She scrambled backward, pressing herself against the cold wall as bile rose in her throat. The memories came flooding in faster now, vivid and unbearable. The chanting, the masked faces, the searing pain... and Julian. She recalled Julian's hands on her, his weight pinning her down, his voice whispering words that made her skin crawl. She remembered the blinding flashes of multiple cameras, the harsh laughter, the clicking of phones capturing every moment of her humiliation.

He had been the first. The one who had orchestrated her drugging, who had offered her up to this depraved group like a sacrificial lamb. He had used her trust, her vulnerability, to deliver her into the hands of these monsters.

The others followed—their touches, their cruelty, a blur of faces and masked figures. Each act a violation, each touch a betrayal. The cameras never stopped flashing, the laughter never ceased. They documented her suffering, her degradation, as if it were some kind of perverse entertainment. They had used her, abused her, and then discarded her like trash. Just as they had done with Valentina.

The room swam before her eyes, and she fought to keep herself from passing out again. Where was Julian now? Where were all the partygoers, the beautiful people who had danced and laughed just hours before? Had they all been in on it? Had they all known what awaited her in this subterranean chamber?

Anger surged through her, hot and fierce, battling with the nausea and the pain that ripped through her body. Every muscle screamed in protest, every inch of her skin felt violated. She tried to sit up, but a searing pain in her lower back forced her back down with a whimper. She was broken, battered, and utterly alone.

"Help!" she croaked, her voice raw and weak. "Someone, please help me!"

Her cries echoed in the empty chamber, swallowed by the thick stone walls. Silence met her pleas, a crushing weight of despair. Tears welled in her eyes, blurring the already hazy images of the night before. She had been so stupid, so naive. She had trusted Julian, had believed in his charm, his concern. And he had betrayed her in the most horrific way imaginable.

She tried to crawl, to drag herself away from the still body beside her and towards the heavy door, but her limbs wouldn't cooperate. Pain shot through her with every movement, a searing reminder of the abuse she had suffered. She collapsed back onto the cold stone, her body trembling with exhaustion and fear.

"Please," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Someone, anyone..."

But there was no one. Only the echoing silence and the gnawing fear that she would die in this cold, dark place, another victim of the Cult of Beauty. She had to get out of there. She had to escape this nightmare and expose these people for the monsters they were. But first, she had to survive. And right now, survival seemed like an impossible task.

Astrid screamed until her voice was raw, until her throat burned and her lungs ached. But no one came. Hours crawled by, each one an eternity of pain, fear, and despair. Thirst gnawed at her throat, hunger twisted her stomach, but the agony in her body was far greater than any physical need. She drifted in and out of consciousness, the line between reality and nightmare blurring with every passing moment.

Finally, as the first rays of dawn crept through the cracks in the stone walls, she succumbed to exhaustion, falling into a restless sleep. She lay curled on the cold stone floor, her body a testament to the horrors she had endured.

Astrid's body lay motionless on the stone floor, her breathing shallow, her skin clammy from the damp chill that seeped into her bones. The night had hollowed her out, left her a shell—a body without will, a soul shattered beyond recognition.

The silence of the chamber was suffocating. No more laughter. No more music. Just the quiet aftermath of debauchery.

The heavy door groaned open.

A man stepped inside.

His faded blue uniform clung to his thick, sweat-stained body.

His boots scuffed against the floor as he shuffled through the wreckage left behind by the privileged and the cruel. Masks, half-empty bottles, broken glass, a feather dipped in something dark.

He sighed, shaking his head. "Fucking animals."

This wasn't new. He had cleaned up after these entitled students for years. The rich, the reckless, the sons and daughters of power who played with sin like it was their birthright.

He swiped a discarded vape pen, slipping it into his pocket. His fingers curled around a forgotten phone—new, expensive. A lucky find. He grinned, tossing it into his bag.

Then he saw her.

A heap of torn fabric and bruised skin.

At first, he thought she was a mannequin, discarded like the rest of the props they used in their games. But then he noticed the slow, uneven rise of her chest.

He nudged her with his boot.

No reaction.

A flicker of something sharp and hungry passed through his dark eyes.

He knelt beside her, his rough hand brushing against her wrist. Weak pulse. She was still alive.

A different man—a decent man—would have called for help. Would have covered her up, shaken her awake, gotten her out of this place.

But he wasn't that man.

His gaze lingered too long on her torn dress, the bruises blooming across her skin like violent flowers.

The door was still open.

He could leave. Pretend he never saw her.

But where was the fun in that?

Slowly, he stood and walked to the entrance. With deliberate movements, he grabbed a heavy chair and wedged it under the handle, ensuring no one could walk in.

Ensuring no one could stop him.

His breath quickened as he turned back to her, his footsteps slow and deliberate.

She was so still. So vulnerable.

He nudged her again with his boot, cruel this time.

Still no response.

He chuckled under his breath, a low, guttural sound.

"Shit, they just leave 'em like this?" He licked his lips, his eyes roaming over her limp form. "Ain't no sense in wasting a good thing."

He knelt beside her, his calloused fingers trailing along the ragged edge of her dress.

He laid on top of her, his weight crushing her already battered body.

Then, a sound.

A small, broken whimper.

Astrid stirred.

Her lashes fluttered against bruised skin, her breath hitching in sudden awareness. Her mind was slow, drenched in exhaustion and pain, but her body—her body knew.

A cold, gut-wrenching terror surged through her veins.

"No. No, no, no. Not again."

She tried to move, but her limbs were sluggish, unresponsive.

She felt him now—the heat of his breath, the weight of his gaze crawling over her.

His fingers curled into her hair, yanking her head up, forcing her to look at him.

"Please," she croaked, her throat raw, her lips split and swollen. "Please stop."

Michael exhaled, long and slow. He smelled of stale beer, cigarettes, and filth.

"Shh, sweetheart." His voice was thick, syrupy with indulgence. "Ain't no one here but you and me."

Astrid fought to lift her arms, her body screaming in protest. She was weak, so weak, but she still tried.

Still resisted.

That pissed him off.

His fingers tightened in her hair, wrenching her forward.

"Stupid little bitch," he growled. "Just take it."

She whimpered, fresh tears spilling down her bruised cheeks.

That only excited him more.

He grabbed her by the waist, hauling her beneath him, his weight crushing down. His hand clamped over her mouth, smothering her broken pleas.

She bucked weakly, her body instinctively rejecting the nightmare replaying itself.

Michael only laughed.

"Feisty little thing," he mused, shifting his weight, pinning her completely. "You ain't going nowhere, sweetheart."

Astrid felt the pressure in her chest, her ribs straining, her lungs screaming.

"My chest... I can't breathe..."

She sobbed beneath him, a sound so raw, so broken.

Michael growled in annoyance. "Then stop fighting."

Frustration flared in his eyes. He grabbed her head, his fingers digging into her hair, and slammed it against the cold marble floor.

The world exploded in a burst of pain and darkness. Astrid's struggles ceased, her body going limp beneath him.

He continued his assault, his lust fueled by her helplessness. But as he reached the climax, he noticed something that made his blood run cold. Blood. Bright red blood flowing from her nose, staining the marble floor.

His stomach dropped.

He scrambled off her, his pants still tangled around his ankles.

She wasn't moving.

Her lips were parted, her body slack, her eyes closed.

Michael stared at her in dawning horror.

"What the fuck...?"

His pulse thundered in his ears. He swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry.

Had he—

Had he killed her?

For the first time that morning, fear crept into his bones.

He had raped women before. But murder?

Murder was different.

Michael shook his head violently. No. She wasn't dead. She couldn't be.

She looked so lifeless.

His hands trembled as he reached forward, pressing two fingers against her throat.

A beat.

A faint pulse.

Relief washed over him, but only briefly.

Because now, he had another problem.

If she woke up, she would talk.

And that meant he had to make sure she never did.

He paced the room, his mind racing. He had to get rid of the body. He had to clean up this mess before anyone found out. But what to do? Where to hide her?

He glanced at the heavy door, the chair still barricading it. No one would come in here. No one would find her. At least, not for a while.

He had some time to think, to plan. But as he stared at Astrid's broken body, a wave of nausea washed over him. He had crossed a line, a line he could never uncross. He was no longer just a janitor, a witness to the city's darkness. He was now a part of it, a monster in his own right.

He glanced around the hallway, his heart pounding in his chest. He had to think fast. The sun would be rising soon, and people would start arriving. He couldn't risk being seen with Astrid.

He spotted a cleaning trolley laden with trash bags. An idea began to form in his mind. He quickly gathered the discarded bottles, cups, and other remnants of the party, stuffing them into the bags. He even added a few extra bags from the supply closet, ensuring everything was well concealed. Then, with a grunt of exertion, he hefted Astrid's unconscious form into the trolley, burying her beneath the refuse.

He pushed the trolley through the deserted hallways, his eyes darting nervously from side to side. He reached the back exit, a heavy metal door that led to the service alley. He fumbled with the keys, his hands shaking, and finally managed to unlock it.

He wheeled the trolley out into the alley, the cool morning air hitting him like a slap in the face. He hurried towards his beat-up sedan, its faded paint barely visible in the pre-dawn light. He popped the trunk, his heart pounding with a mixture of fear and adrenaline. With a final surge of strength, he heaved the trash bags, along with his hidden cargo, into the trunk. He slammed it shut, the sound echoing in the stillness of the alley.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing pulse. He had to get back to the room, clean up any remaining evidence, and get out of there before anyone noticed. He hurried back inside, his footsteps echoing in the empty hallways.

He scrubbed the floors, wiped down the surfaces, and emptied the ashtrays, his movements mechanical and unthinking. He didn't bother with a thorough cleaning; he just needed to make it look like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He finished his work, his hands shaking with exhaustion and fear. He glanced around the room one last time, then turned and fled, his footsteps echoing in the silence.

He jumped into his car, the keys jangling in his trembling hands. He started the engine, the roar a welcome distraction from the turmoil in his mind. He pulled out of the alley, his tires screeching against the pavement. He had to get away from this place, from the horrors he had witnessed and participated in. He had to disappear before the sun rose and exposed his sins to the world.

The rumble of the engine vibrated through Astrid's battered body, pulling her from the depths of unconsciousness. Disoriented and aching, she realized she was trapped in a confined space, enveloped by darkness and the stench of stale garbage. Memories of the night flooded back, a torrent of pain and violation. But something was different. She was alive. And she was moving.

Fear warred with a newfound determination. She had to escape. But how? She lay perfectly still, listening intently. The engine hummed, the tires thrummed against the pavement. She was in a vehicle, a moving vehicle. She had to stay calm, assess her situation, and wait for the right moment.

The car slowed, then came to a stop. The engine sputtered and died. Silence. Astrid held her breath, her heart pounding against her ribs. She heard the driver's door open, then close. Footsteps faded, then returned. The trunk creaked open.

Light flooded the space, blinding her momentarily. She squeezed her eyes shut, feigning unconsciousness. She heard a gasp, a muttered curse. Then, the slam of the trunk. The engine roared back to life, the car lurching forward.

He was taking her somewhere. But where? And why? Fear threatened to consume her, but she pushed it back. She had survived the night. She wouldn't let this monster break her. She had to fight.

The car swerved, the tires screeching. Astrid's body jolted against the hard metal of the trunk. She heard him cursing, his voice laced with panic. Then, music. Loud, pounding music that vibrated through the car, drowning out any sound she could possibly make.

He was trying to hide her screams. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction. She would save her strength, wait for her opportunity.

The car slowed again, this time coming to a gentle stop. Astrid heard a grinding sound, then the rumble of a garage door opening. The car rolled forward, then stopped again. The engine died. Silence, except for the faint hum of the garage door closing.

He was out of the car now, his footsteps echoing in the vast space. Astrid heard the click of a lock, the heavy thud of a metal door closing. Then, the creak of the trunk opening once more.

This was it. Her chance.

He peered into the trunk, his eyes widening in surprise. Astrid sprang up, a lug wrench she had found in the trunk clutched in her hand. She swung it with all her might, the metal connecting with his head with a sickening thud.

He crumpled to the ground, in pain. Astrid scrambled out of the trunk, her legs shaky but her resolve firm. She was free. For now.

Adrenaline surged through Astrid's veins. She was out of the trunk, but far from safe. The warehouse loomed around her, a cavernous space filled with shadows and the lingering scent of engine oil and metal. She sprinted towards the nearest door, a heavy metal thing bolted shut. She rattled the handle, kicked at the base, but it wouldn't budge.

Panic clawed at her throat. She raced to another door, then another, each one locked, each one a dead end. Frustration boiled over.

"Bastard! No!" she screamed, her voice echoing in the vast emptiness. "I won't die here!"

Her cry pierced the silence, reaching the ears of the man she had struck down. He groaned, his head throbbing, his vision blurry. He struggled to his feet, his hand reaching for the sore spot on his head. He stumbled towards the sound of her voice, his anger fueling his determination.

Astrid, meanwhile, had spotted a staircase leading down into the darkness. Hope surged through her. Maybe there was an exit down there, a way out of this nightmare. She didn't hesitate, her feet pounding against the metal steps.

The janitor reached the top of the stairs just as Astrid disappeared into the shadows below. A cruel smile twisted his lips. He lumbered towards the door at the top of the stairs, a heavy padlock dangling from his hand. He fumbled with the lock, his fingers clumsy and uncoordinated, but he managed to secure it.

Astrid was trapped.

He stood at the top of the stairs, his breathing heavy, the padlock dangling from his hand like a trophy. He could hear Astrid moving around below, her frustrated cries echoing up to him. He knew she was trapped, and a surge of power coursed through him.

But he was also wary. She had managed to knock him unconscious, and he wasn't sure what she was capable of. He wasn't going to risk another confrontation in that confined space.

He took a step back from the door, his voice booming down the stairwell.

"Hey! I know you're down there! Just listen to me!"

He paused, listening for a response. He heard her movements stop, her breathing ragged.

"Drop the weapon," he continued, his voice calmer now, almost soothing. "Just step away from the door, and we can talk about this."

He waited, his heart pounding in his chest. He heard a muffled sob, then silence.

"I... I just want to go home," Astrid's voice trembled from below.

"You can," he said, his voice laced with false sincerity. "Just do what I say, and I'll let you go. I promise."

He heard her shuffling closer to the stairs.

"Just... promise me you won't tell anyone about this," he pleaded. "About me. Just forget this ever happened, and you can walk away."

He held his breath, waiting for her response. The fate of both of them hung in the balance.

"What's your name?" he asked, his voice softer now, feigning concern.

"Astrid," she whispered back, her voice hoarse.

"Astrid," he repeated, savoring the sound of it. "My name is... Michael." He lied, not wanting to give her any real information about himself. Then he added "But my friends call me Mikey."

While he spoke, Astrid continued her frantic search for an escape route. She scoured the basement, her fingers tracing the rough stone walls, searching for a hidden passage, a loose brick, anything. But there was nothing. She was trapped.

Defeated, she returned to the foot of the stairs. "Okay," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I promise. I won't tell anyone. Just let me go."

"Good girl," he said, his voice dripping with false praise. "Now, just step away from the door."

Astrid did as she was told, her hands trembling as she lowered the lug wrench to the floor. She heard the scrape of metal against concrete as he slid the padlock aside. The door creaked open, a sliver of light cutting through the darkness.

"Now, just walk out slowly," he instructed, his voice deceptively gentle.

But as Astrid stepped towards the light, he lunged forward, his hand snatching the lug wrench from the floor. He flicked the switch on the wall, bathing the basement in a harsh fluorescent glow.

"You really thought I'd let you go?" he sneered, his face contorted in a cruel smile.

"You're too dangerous, Astrid. I can't risk you telling anyone about this."

He pushed the door open, stepping into the basement and blocking her exit. Astrid's eyes widened in fear, her heart sinking in her chest. She had been betrayed.

"Please," she begged, her voice cracking. "I promised! I won't tell anyone, I swear! Just let me go!"

He laughed, a harsh, mirthless sound. "You really think I'm that stupid?" he scoffed.

"You saw my face. You know what I did. You're a witness, Astrid. And witnesses..." He trailed off, the threat hanging heavy in the air.

Astrid's mind raced, desperately searching for a way out. But there was none. She was trapped, cornered like a rat. And this time, there would be no escape.

He advanced towards her, a predatory gleam in his eyes. In his left hand, he held out his cell phone, a cruel mockery of hope.

"Here," he said, his voice dripping with false concern. "I'm going to give you this. I'll drop you off somewhere safe, and you can call for help. Just don't mention my name, okay?"

Astrid's heart leaped with a flicker of hope. Could this be true? Was he actually going to let her go? She hesitantly reached out for the phone, her fingers brushing against his.

But in that instant, his right hand emerged from his back pocket, a pair of handcuffs glinting in the dim light. Before Astrid could react, he had clamped them around her wrists, securing them tightly to a rusty metal bar protruding from the wall.

"You bastard!" she screamed, her voice raw with fury and despair. "Let me go!"

He smirked, enjoying her helplessness. "You really are naive, aren't you?" he sneered. "Did you really think I would just let you walk away?"

He pocketed his phone, the false promise of freedom now a cruel joke. He turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing in the silence of the basement. He reached the stairs, pausing at the top to look back at her one last time.

"Goodbye, Astrid," he said, his voice cold and devoid of emotion. "It was fun while it lasted."

And with that, he disappeared up the stairs, the heavy door clanging shut behind him, leaving Astrid alone in the darkness, her cries of rage and despair swallowed by the cold, unforgiving walls.

Astrid was left alone once more, lost in the darkness, her fate uncertain.

Chapter 5: Fade to Black

The hours that followed were a blur of despair and defiance. Astrid raged against her confinement, her cries echoing unanswered in the cavernous warehouse. She tugged at the handcuffs, the metal biting into her wrists, but they wouldn't budge. Exhaustion eventually overwhelmed her, and she slumped against the damp wall, her body shivering in the cold.

Just as the first rays of dawn filtered through the grimy windows high above, the heavy door creaked open. The janitor stood silhouetted against the light, a plate in one hand and a small, threadbare blanket in the other. He approached cautiously, his eyes wary.

"Here," he said, placing the plate and blanket on the floor near her. "Something to eat and something to keep you warm."

Astrid glanced at the tray—a small loaf of bread, a piece of cold cheese, and a cup of water. The sight of food made her stomach churn. She hadn't eaten since the morning before, but the thought of consuming anything here felt impossible.

"I can't," she rasped, her voice raw and cracked. "Mikey, please let me go, I don't wanna die here." She used the false name he had given her, hoping to appeal to some shred of humanity within him.

He averted his gaze, his expression unreadable. "Just eat," he mumbled. "You need your strength."

He turned and walked away, leaving her alone in the cold, damp basement. The heavy door clanged shut behind him, the sound echoing in the silence. Astrid stared at the meager offerings, her stomach churning with a mixture of hunger and revulsion. She didn't know how much longer she could endure this nightmare.

Days bleed into nights. Astrid, chained in the cold basement, endures. She perfects the art of manipulation, her weapon against despair. "Mikey," she whispers, her voice laced with a manufactured tenderness that makes him squirm. She leans into the role of the helpless damsel, her every request a calculated move.

"Mikey, my head aches so much," she whimpers, and he scurries to bring her painkillers. "Mikey, it's my time of the month," she confesses, her cheeks flushed with feigned embarrassment, and he returns with sanitary products, his eyes averted. She even asks for his help with the most intimate of tasks, her vulnerability a carefully constructed facade.

He, starved for connection, laps it up. He finds himself drawn to her, to the twisted intimacy they share. He starts talking more, revealing snippets of his life, his loneliness, his frustrations. Astrid listens, her body weak but her mind sharp, absorbing every detail.

She learns about his work – the metal sculptures he creates, the tools he uses, the hours he spends alone in the warehouse. She expresses an interest, asking questions, feigning admiration. He, flattered, shows her his creations, explains his process. Astrid observes, her mind cataloging every potential weapon, every escape route.

"Mikey," she says one day, her voice small. "I look so awful. Could you maybe... buy me some clothes? I just want to feel... pretty again."

He hesitates, then agrees. He brings her clothes, simple things, but they are a lifeline. They offer a semblance of normalcy, a reminder of the life she once had, the life she is determined to reclaim.

Meanwhile, Astrid is biding her time, waiting for her opportunity. She knows she has three options: an outside chance, a desperate gamble, or turning the tables, a calculated risk. She studies the warehouse layout, memorizing every detail. She notes the small, high window, the only source of natural light in the basement. She observes the routine, the times he leaves her alone, the moments when he's most vulnerable.

The stage is set. The game is afoot. Astrid, the prey turned predator, is ready to make her move.

The air in the basement crackled with a tension thicker than the dust motes dancing in the single shaft of light filtering through the high window. Astrid, clad in the simple clothes he'd brought, stretched languidly, her movements deliberate, calculated.

"Mikey," she purred, her voice a silken thread in the oppressive silence. "Did you know I'm actually a model? I've always wanted to pose nude, you know, like those classic paintings. But I was always too scared." She tilted her head, her eyes wide and innocent. "Do you think I'm... good?"

She began to pose, her body a symphony of curves and angles. She arched her back, her breasts pushing against the thin fabric of her shirt. She ran a hand down her thigh, her fingers tracing the outline of her hip. Each movement was an invitation, a challenge.

He shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting away. He mumbled something about not being interested, about it being inappropriate. But Astrid saw the flicker of desire in his eyes, the way his gaze lingered on her body.

She continued her performance, pushing his boundaries, testing his resolve. Each day, she grew bolder, her poses more suggestive, her words more provocative. And each day, his resistance crumbled a little more.

Until one day, he couldn't resist any longer. He succumbed to her seduction, his desire overwhelming his caution. Astrid welcomed him, her touch practiced, her moans a carefully orchestrated symphony.

But even in the throes of passion, her mind remained sharp. She watched him, her eyes missing nothing. She noted the way his keys jangled against the floor as he undressed,

the way he tossed them carelessly onto the nearby workbench. She memorized their location, their shape, their weight.

This wasn't about escape, not yet. This was about gaining his trust, about lowering his guard. This was about getting her hands on those keys.

And she would. She had time, and she had patience. Astrid was playing the long game, and she was determined to win.

Astrid, ever the cunning manipulator, continued to weave her web of deceit. She learned to read his moods, to anticipate his desires. She discovered his love for the solitude of the warehouse, his passion for his art, and his deep-seated fear of the outside world.

One night, after another carefully orchestrated performance, as he was dressing, she casually mentioned the biting cold that seeped through the concrete floor. "Mikey," she murmured, her voice laced with a delicate shiver, "the floor gets so cold at night. Do you think... maybe... I could have a bed?"

He hesitated, surprised by her request. "It's the lake," he mumbled, "makes the whole damned place damp and chilly."

Astrid's ears perked up. "A lake? You have a lakehouse, Mikey?" she asked, feigning innocent curiosity. "Could we maybe go for a swim one day? I love swimming."

He scoffed. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, of course not," she said, her voice soft and reassuring. "I wouldn't leave you, Mikey. We could go together, at night. You can chain me up outside if that makes you feel safer. I just... I miss the water."

He considered her request, his suspicion battling with his desire to please her. Finally, he agreed.

The night of the swim arrived, a moonless night shrouded in darkness. He led her outside, a heavy chain wrapped around her waist, the other end secured to a thick metal post driven into the ground. The lake stretched before them, its surface a black mirror reflecting the star-studded sky.

Astrid plunged into the icy water, the shock momentarily erasing the grime and the fear. She swam, the feeling of freedom intoxicating. But as she explored the shoreline, she realized escape was impossible. The lake was surrounded by dense woods, the darkness impenetrable.

Defeated, she returned to shore, her body shivering uncontrollably. He led her back inside, the warmth of the warehouse a welcome relief. Astrid felt a pang of disappointment, but she quickly masked it. She had planted a seed, a possibility. And she knew, with chilling certainty, that she would find a way to make it bloom.

Astrid, ever tenacious, knew she couldn't let that opportunity slip away. The next day, she began her campaign anew. She played the role of the eager student, fascinated by his work, hanging on his every word. She laughed at his jokes, listened patiently to his ramblings, and offered him the companionship he craved.

And then, she struck.

"Mikey," she purred, her voice a silken whisper against his skin. "Can we go swimming again? Please? I promise... I'll make it worth your while."

He hesitated, the memory of their previous encounter still fresh in his mind. But her plea was laced with a promise he couldn't resist. He agreed.

That night, under the watchful gaze of the moon, he led her back to the lake. The air was crisp, the water a dark abyss. He unlocked the handcuffs, his fingers lingering on her wrists for a moment too long. Astrid, her heart pounding with anticipation, stepped into the cool water, a shiver running down her spine.

They swam, their bodies gliding through the darkness. They danced, their laughter echoing across the still surface of the lake. And then, she seduced him, her touch expert, her kisses intoxicating. He was lost in the moment, his guard down, his desires consuming him.

Astrid knew this was her chance. But what was her plan?

That night, under the watchful gaze of the moon, he led her back to the lake. The air was crisp, the water a dark abyss. He unlocked the handcuffs, his fingers lingering on her wrists for a moment too long. Astrid, her heart pounding with anticipation, stepped into the cool water, a shiver running down her spine.

They swam, their bodies gliding through the darkness. They danced, their laughter echoing across the still surface of the lake. She pulled him close, her arms snaking around his neck, her lips finding his. He responded eagerly, his hands roaming her body, his desire overwhelming his caution.

She led him deeper into the water, further from shore. He followed willingly, lost in the moment, oblivious to the danger lurking beneath the surface. Astrid felt the current tugging at her legs, pulling her away from him. She let herself be swept away, her body disappearing into the darkness.

He called out to her, his voice laced with panic. "Astrid! Where are you? Come back!"

But there was no answer. Only the gentle lapping of waves against the shore and the echo of his own fear in the stillness of the night. He searched for her, his desperation growing with every passing moment. But Astrid was gone.

Unbeknownst to him, she had swum underwater, circling back towards the shore. She emerged from the lake, her body trembling with cold and adrenaline. She raced back to the warehouse, her mind already formulating her next move.

She would give him a taste of his own medicine.

Astrid stood at the warehouse entrance, her body still damp from the lake, her breath fogging in the night air. She had moved quickly, her adrenaline drowning out exhaustion, her fury sharpening her focus. Inside, the workshop loomed in eerie silence, the scent of metal and oil thick in the air.

She reached for the tools. Mikey had been so proud of his craft, his precious metal sculptures, the weapons he had unknowingly laid at her feet. A hammer, its weight solid in her palm. A set of pliers, the ridged grip rough against her skin. And then—her fingers curled around the blowtorch, its promise of fire making her pulse quicken.

"Perfect," she mouthed silently, a sly smile playing on her lips.

She worked fast, the hours stretching into a fevered haze of preparation. Shackles. Chains. The basement where she had wasted away, suffocating in her own helplessness. It would all be his tomb now.

By the time she heard his footsteps approaching, the air in the warehouse was electric with expectation. Astrid positioned herself in the shadows, waiting, the hammer heavy in her grip.

The door groaned open. He stepped inside, dripping lake water, his breath ragged from panic. "Astrid?" he called, voice laced with worry.

Good. Let him worry.

She let him take a few more steps before striking. The hammer came down hard—a sickening crunch as it connected with his knee. He screamed, crumpling forward, his hands grasping at empty air. Before he could react, she was on him, slamming the hammer against his ribs, driving the air from his lungs.

He gasped. Choked. Crawled.

"Astrid—wait! Please—"

She ignored him. He hadn't listened when she begged.

Grabbing a fistful of his hair, she dragged him across the cold concrete, his nails clawing at the floor, leaving streaks of blood in his wake. She threw open the basement door and heaved him down the steps. He tumbled, his body twisting unnaturally, limbs flailing, bones snapping like dry twigs.

Astrid followed, slow and deliberate, savoring his broken sobs.

Click.

The shackles locked around his wrists, tight enough to grind against bone. His breath hitched. He recognized this.

"Too tight?" she mocked, leaning close. "I remember how that felt."

She kicked him onto his back, his body convulsing in pain. The dim light cast flickering shadows across his face—pale, terrified, helpless.

Astrid smiled.

She picked up the pliers, holding them to the light, inspecting the sharp edges. "You like making art, didn't you, Mikey?" she murmured. "You used these tools every day." She leaned down, grabbing his trembling hand. "I think it's time you lost a few fingers. An artist shouldn't have tools they don't deserve."

The first snap of bone was deafening. His screams filled the basement, bouncing off the walls, the same walls that had swallowed her cries days before.

It wasn't enough.

Astrid reached for the blowtorch. The hiss of the flame igniting was a song of cleansing fire, of rebirth. She hovered it over his exposed skin, watching his pupils dilate with terror.

"You wanted to keep me here forever," she whispered. "So now, you'll never leave."

She lowered the flame.

His howls filled the night.

By the time she left him there—broken, burned, drowning in his own agony—there was no humanity left in his eyes. Only the flickering reflection of the fire.

Astrid climbed the basement stairs, stepping out into the crisp air of her newfound freedom. Mikey would never escape that basement.

Just like she never had.

With one final glance at the warehouse, she shut the door, locking the past behind her.

Fade to black.

Chapter 6: Blood and Ink

Astrid's head pounded with the remnants of yesterday's nightmare. Her body felt like dead weight, but she pushed on, her feet carrying her through the unfamiliar streets of the village. Her muscles screamed with exhaustion, but her mind was already calculating—she needed to get out.

She hadn't asked for help, but a woman had approached her outside the dingy storefront where she'd stumbled after escaping the warehouse.

"Are you alright, honey?" The woman's voice was thick with concern, but her eyes held wariness—a silent assessment of Astrid's torn clothes, the bloodstains, the look of someone who had seen hell and barely crawled out.

Astrid had been too disoriented to answer at first.

"I'm fine," she muttered, brushing the woman off. No more trusting strangers. No more weakness.

But the woman didn't back down. "Are you sure? You look lost... Where are you headed?"

Astrid almost didn't respond. Then, she forced a tight, almost imperceptible smile.

"I don't know. I'm from out of town."

The woman frowned, stepping back slightly. "You're in East Aurora, New York. Upstate. A little far from the city. You don't look like you've been here before."

East Aurora. Upstate New York. Far from home. The village felt alien, quiet, too clean—a cruel contrast to where she had just come from.

"I'll be fine," Astrid lied.

But the woman persisted, pulling out a crumpled five-dollar bill. "Take it. Just... stay safe, okay? I'll be back to check on you again later."

Astrid almost took it. Almost. But she wasn't a beggar.

Her mind was already working—she had Mikey's cash, Mikey's keys. She didn't need help. She needed a plan.

"Thanks, but I've got it," she said coldly, turning on her heel and walking away.

She moved fast, avoiding glances from early risers. The quiet of the village unsettled her. There were no sirens, no blaring horns—just suffocating silence.

She kept walking until she found the mall. A place to disappear for a while.

Astrid sat on a bench for hours, staring blankly at the polished floors as people walked past without seeing her.

She had no phone. No way to reach out to Hanna.

But she had one thing: rage.

When the stores opened, she moved fast. Straight to the tech shop. A cheap phone. Paid in cash. She set it up immediately, logging into her cloud account. The first tether back to her old life.

Then, she mapped out her way home.

Her thumb hovered over the ride-share app. A trip from East Aurora back to campus? Nearly five hundred dollars.

She could afford it. But something felt... wrong.

She reached into her pocket, fingers closing around Mikey's keys.

It hit her like a jolt of lightning. Mikey's truck. It was still at the warehouse.

She didn't need to pay for a ride. She had his car, his gas, his money.

Without hesitation, Astrid slipped out of the mall and made her way back—retracing her steps to the warehouse.

She kept her head low, moving through back roads. The moment she saw Mikey's old, rusted-out truck sitting behind the warehouse, her heart pounded.

She climbed in. It smelled like him. Like cigarettes and beer.

Her fingers gripped the wheel. She turned the key. The engine roared to life.

Astrid let out a slow, shaky breath.

She was going home.

But this wasn't an escape.

This was a warpath.

The past didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was what came next. The face of Julian, the others at the party, the ones who had tried to break her—they were her prey now.

When she finally arrived, her feet hit the pavement outside the familiar campus gate, but it wasn't home anymore. It was a war zone. Her war zone.

She'd made it. But she wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

When she finally reached the familiar threshold of her room, she locked the door behind her, sliding to the floor as sobs wracked her body. This place, once her sanctuary, now felt foreign. The weight of what had happened—what she had survived—pressed down on her like a suffocating blanket.

She crawled towards her bed, the soft duvet beckoning like an escape from the harsh reality that clawed at her. But as she reached for it, a chilling realization struck her. Her laptop was gone. The sleek, silver machine that held her research, the video of Valentina, the messages from EternalFlame – all of it vanished. Even the small wooden box with the crimson feather was missing.

Panic flared in her chest, a suffocating wave that threatened to drown her. They had been here. They had taken everything. They were watching her, controlling her, erasing her every move.

Astrid buried her face in her hands, the weight of their power crushing her spirit. She was alone, exposed, and utterly powerless. The shame of her violation, the fear of their retribution, the despair of her lost evidence – it all coalesced into a suffocating wave of darkness.

She stayed inside for days, maybe weeks. Time became meaningless. She kept the curtains drawn, retreating from the world as if the light itself might expose her. Nightmares plagued her sleep, and flashbacks consumed her waking hours.

Valentina's footage haunted her relentlessly: her face etched with fear, trapped in the dark, her vacant eyes and the feather clutched in her hand a constant reminder of what Astrid had endured—and what she had escaped.

And then there was Julian. His twisted smile, the cold satisfaction in his eyes as he betrayed her, lingered in her mind like a festering wound. How had she been so blind? How had she trusted him?

She didn't realize how long she had been sitting by the window, staring blankly at the street below, until she saw the figure. A girl from the party, she was with a friend of Julian's, walking down the street. They all had masks on at the party, but Astrid remembered her, and she had seen her before walking with him. He was part of the party... She remembered his stature, even in the dark, he stood out anywhere—there was no doubt he had been there with her that night.

Astrid's heart leapt into her throat. What was she doing here? Was this a warning? A trap?

The sight of her stirred something deep within Astrid—a mix of fear, anger, and a desperate need for answers. She threw on a coat and stormed out of the dorm, her bare feet silent against the pavement.

"Why are you here?" Astrid demanded, cornering the woman in an alley. Her voice cracked with rage and desperation. "What do you want from me?"

The girl's eyes darted around, her body tense with fear. "Are you crazy? I don't know who you are."

Astrid's fury boiled over. "You didn't help me! You left me to die with them!" Her voice echoed off the brick walls.

The girl backed away, shaking her head. "Leave me alone! You crazy bitch!"

Astrid's patience snapped. She shoved the woman, her strength fueled by weeks of suppressed rage and grief. The woman stumbled backward, tripping over a loose brick, her head striking a sharp rock with a sickening crack.

Time seemed to freeze as Astrid watched in horror. The girl lay motionless, her eyes wide and unseeing, blood pooling beneath her head.

Astrid's breath caught in her throat. She knelt beside the body, her hands trembling as she pressed them to her temples. What have I done?

But the panic only lasted a moment. Slowly, a chilling realization washed over her. She had killed her. And yet, she felt no remorse.

Astrid's gaze fell on the woman's phone lying nearby. She picked it up, her fingers trembling. Her mind raced, scrolling through messages and photos. The phone was a treasure trove of information—perhaps names, locations, instructions. It was her key to answers.

Astrid's jaw tightened. She wouldn't let Valentina, or any of the others—be forgotten. Julian was going to pay.

A sense of clarity swept over her. She was no longer just a victim. She was something else now. Something sharper, deadlier. A predator.

That night, Astrid disappeared from campus, vanishing into the shadows. She left her old life behind, shedding her identity like a second skin. She became a phantom, stalking the streets, learning to fight, to manipulate, to blend into the darkness. Her almost perfect image was just a memory, trauma became her weapon, her pain her fuel.

Astrid sat in the dim glow of her motel room, her hands trembling slightly as she scrolled through her phone. She had spent hours combing through contacts, images, and messages, piecing together fragments of the night—the faces, the names, the ones who had hurt her. But it wasn't just Julian she wanted now. He was the mastermind, the one who had orchestrated everything, but his friends? They had all been complicit.

Her finger hovered over the contact she had been avoiding: Jordan.

The conversation, a string of sweet nothings between him and the girl, had been tucked away in the early messages of her phone. The girl... her boyfriend. The one who had been at the party, always close by, always too eager to keep up appearances. Jordan.

Baby, I can't wait to see you tonight... she read silently.

It stung in ways she hadn't anticipated—seeing the words of affection, of comfort. She had been so close, so ignorant to the reality of the situation. The trust she had put in them, only to be betrayed.

Astrid's mind raced. There was something darkly poetic about using his own weakness against him. The texts she had found between him and the girl had been innocent, but to her, they were a means to an end. A way to tear him from the life he knew, to strip him of the comfort that once belonged to his untouched world.

Come pick me up... she typed, her fingers still trembling as she added the location—a dark alley a few blocks away from campus. Her plan was simple: get him alone, make him see the truth of the monster he had been helping to feed. She didn't need to say much. The invite itself would draw him in.

A few minutes passed. The screen flickered with a new notification.

Hey, I'm on my way, baby.

He was too eager. Too trusting.

Her stomach churned. But it wasn't fear anymore. It was resolve.

She set the phone down with a cold, calculated gesture and grabbed her jacket from the back of the chair. She wasn't the same girl who had walked onto this campus months ago. She had become something else—a version of herself that didn't shrink from the darkness. She walked toward the door, taking a deep breath before slipping outside into the shadows of the night.

The alley was quiet, the shadows deep. Astrid leaned against the cold brick wall, waiting, listening. She could feel the weight of her actions hanging in the air. This wasn't just about revenge—it was about reclaiming something she had lost. She couldn't undo the past, but she could control the future. And Jordan? He would be her first lesson.

She heard the rumble of an engine in the distance, a car idling a few blocks away. Her heart thudded in her chest, but she didn't let it stop her. Her movements were deliberate, precise. Her mind was clear.

The headlights flashed in the alley as the car turned the corner. Astrid stepped forward, making sure her silhouette blended with the darkness, her eyes sharp as the vehicle slowed to a stop.

The passenger window rolled down, and there he was—Jordan, smiling like he had no care in the world, like he was walking into a reunion with an old lover.

"You lost?" His voice was casual, almost playful.

Astrid didn't respond at first. She let the silence settle, her gaze fixed on him. She could feel the pressure building in her chest, but she didn't blink. She had to see this through.

"You're a lot more confident in person, aren't you?" she asked, her voice cold.

Jordan chuckled, clearly confused. "Baby, what's wrong? You look... different. Get in!"

His words stung, but she didn't flinch. "You're too blind to see what's right in front of you, Jordan."

He looked at her, his smile faltering. "What do you mean? You—"

Before he could finish, Astrid moved in a blur. She yanked open the passenger door and slid inside, the knife already in her grip. Jordan barely had time to react before she drove the blade into his right shoulder.

He screamed, jerking against the seat, his body twisting in pain. Astrid didn't hesitate—she tore the knife free and plunged it into his right thigh.

"Ah! What the—" His scream turned into a growl of pain as he swung at her with his left hand. His fist connected with her chest, knocking the air from her lungs.

Astrid gritted her teeth, pushing through the sting. He swung again, this time aiming for her face, but she ducked. His knuckles cracked against the headrest.

Seizing the moment, she reached for his seatbelt, unfastening it in one swift motion. With a grunt, she shoved him sideways, his injured body toppling out of the car. He hit the pavement hard, groaning in agony.

Astrid took a breath, then pulled on a pair of gloves. Calmly, she scooted over into the driver's seat, gripping the wheel as she shut the door.

The engine roared to life.

Jordan writhed on the ground, his hands slipping in his own blood as he tried to crawl away. Astrid revved the engine, the sound slicing through the night like a warning.

Jordan's breath came in ragged gasps. "Astrid... please—"

She revved the engine again.

He flinched, dragging himself backward, his body shaking. "Please! I'm sorry! I didn't—"

"Do you really think you can be a part of their world and not pay for it?" she hissed, her breath heavy. Her hands were steady at the wheel.

Jordan's eyes darted to the tires, fear beginning to fill them. "Astrid... no, please—"

"Don't beg. Not from me. Not after everything you did," she spat, her words venomous.

Astrid made a sharp U-turn, the tires screeching against the pavement. Then, slowly, she rolled forward. The headlights bathed Jordan in a harsh white glow, his face twisted in terror as he slithered on the ground, begging for mercy.

But there was none left in her.

She pressed her foot down.

The tension in the alley was suffocating. The tires crushed over his body with a sickening crunch. Jordan tried to pull away, half of him disappearing beneath the weight of his own car.

But she didn't stop. She watched as his life drained away, the boy who had been complicit, who had stood by while she suffered.

It wasn't just his life she was taking. It was a symbol of everything they had stolen from her. Control. Power. The life she had been denied.

Blood splattered in every direction, painting the street in shades of red.

For a moment, there was nothing but the low hum of the engine and the final, fading gasps of a man who had never once considered what it meant to be powerless.

Astrid exhaled. Then, without another glance, she pulled away, leaving him broken in the street.

No regrets. Just clarity.

Justice had been served, but she wouldn't stop. Not now.

The nights grew colder as Astrid honed her pursuit. Her instincts had sharpened. She stalked the campus, weaving in and out of the shadows, following Julian from a distance. She observed him—his routines, his friends, his every move. She blended with the crowd, a silent observer.

He had no idea she was watching.

Julian spent his days acting like he was untouchable, roaming campus like a king in a kingdom of lies. But his arrogance, his indifference to what he had done to her, only fueled her determination. She knew he was involved in the darkness of that night. She knew he was at the center of everything.

Astrid moved like a ghost, invisible and unnoticed, hiding behind corners, slipping into doorways, always a step behind him, always watching.

She made her way to the student bar, the usual haunt for Julian and his crew. The night was their kingdom, and Astrid was learning the territory. She sat in the back, keeping her head down, her eyes sharp. She recognized a few faces—people who had been at the party, but she couldn't bring herself to approach them yet. They weren't her target. He was.

She waited until Julian finally stood to leave, his laugh ringing out with confidence, unaware that someone was hunting him.

Astrid slipped out the back door, trailing him as he disappeared into the night. She kept a careful distance, the hunt thrilling her in a way she hadn't expected. There was a sick

pleasure in the stalking, a twisted sense of justice building with every step closer she took to him.

But the world was watching, and things would never be the same for her. She could feel the weight of her pursuit—the quiet moments of doubt that slipped into her mind, the fear that she might fail. She hadn't been careful enough. Her focus was unwavering, but there were dangers ahead. Astrid's eyes were dark with purpose, but her body was already starting to feel the toll.

A sharp pain shot through her side as a figure appeared behind her in the alley, their grip tight around her wrist. She spun, throwing her elbow back in defense—but they were fast, stronger than her. The grip tightened as she struggled against the hold, a panic rising in her chest.

She wasn't ready for this. Not yet.

Before she could react, she felt a sharp, searing pain slash across her side. The cold steel of a knife slid across her skin, leaving a trail of agony. She gasped, her knees buckling as the pain intensified, her vision briefly blurring.

Astrid's hand instinctively reached for the wound, but the pain was overwhelming. Her breath caught in her throat as she stumbled back, clutching the bleeding wound, her legs shaking from the shock of it. She could feel the heat of her blood spilling from her side, but the pain only fueled her determination.

Julian's face loomed before her—fear, anger, and confusion all mixed into one. His eyes were wide as he stared down at her, but she didn't have the strength to strike back. The sharpness of the blade was too much, too quick. She didn't have time to react.

Julian's gaze flickered for a moment, and then something shifted. Panic took hold of him as he realized that she wasn't just another stalker. She wasn't here for answers. She wasn't here for anything but him.

With a final glance at Astrid—who was barely able to stay standing—Julian turned, his steps frantic. His shoes slapped against the pavement as he sprinted away, disappearing into the night, leaving her behind.

Astrid's breath came in ragged gasps, her hand still pressed against the wound. She was still standing, but the fight was leaving her. Blood trickled down her side, soaking her hoodie, but she couldn't stop now. She couldn't let him get away.

But the world was spinning. Her vision blurred as the weight of the injury dragged her to her knees.

In the distance, she heard footsteps. She tried to focus, tried to push through the pain. But Julian was gone, and she was alone in the dark alley, her blood pooling beneath her.

For a moment, it felt like everything was slipping away. But she wasn't done yet.

Astrid's head swam with dizziness as she staggered down the darkened campus pathways, her body weighed down by the pain that pulsed from her side. Blood seeped through her hoodie, staining the fabric, but she couldn't afford to stop. The night was still young, and the campus hummed with activity. She had to get back to her motel or dorm—whichever was closer. She needed to escape the danger and get the bleeding under control before it was too late.

She pulled the hood lower over her face, tugging it tight as she moved through the shadows, walking as steadily as she could manage. Each step was deliberate, measured, avoiding every visible sign of weakness. If anyone saw her, they'd know something was wrong. If anyone noticed the blood—or worse, if anyone recognized the ghost of who she once was—they might ask questions she couldn't afford to answer.

She couldn't be caught.

Her breath hitched with every step, but she fought it down. She kept moving, each step a silent promise to herself—she would survive. She had to.

The pain was getting worse, but she forced herself forward, rounding the corner to her dorm. The relief of seeing the familiar building made her heart thud faster, but she didn't slow. Not yet. Not until she was behind the locked door of her room.

As she reached the door, her hand shaking, she fumbled with the key, feeling the blood on her fingers. Panic gnawed at her chest as she pushed the door open, careful not to leave a trail. She stepped inside and locked the door behind her with a quiet click. The safety of her room wrapped around her like a shroud.

She leaned against the door, her heart hammering in her chest. Her body was shaking, her breath shallow as the pain from the stab wound became unbearable. She stumbled over to her bed, collapsing onto it, the weight of her blood-soaked hoodie pulling her down.

Her fingers were numb as she reached for her phone. She needed to talk to someone—needed help. There was only one person she trusted now.

Her hands shook violently as she dialed the number she had never hesitated to call before. The phone rang once, twice. Then, a breathless voice on the other end.

"Astrid?" Hanna's voice was laced with concern, the sound of her coming to life in an instant. "What's wrong?"

"Astrid?" Hanna asked again, her voice rising. "What happened?"

Astrid's voice cracked as she spoke. "I... I was attacked," she whispered, barely able to breathe through the words. "I need you. Please come over."

Hanna didn't hesitate. "I'm on my way." The line clicked dead, and Astrid fell back onto her bed, her face damp with sweat. She curled up into a ball, clutching her side as fresh tears slid down her face.

Minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

Astrid pushed herself up, barely able to stand, but she managed. She opened the door to find Hanna standing there, eyes wide with concern, her gaze darting over Astrid's pale, disheveled appearance. The blood on her clothes, the anguish in her eyes—it all said more than words ever could.

“Oh my god, Astrid...” Hanna whispered, rushing inside. She took one look at her friend and immediately crouched down beside her, her hands trembling as she touched her shoulders. “What happened? Who did this to you?”

“I—I don't know how to say it...” Astrid whispered, her voice breaking. “It was them, Hanna. Friday's Fade.” She choked on the words, the memory of everything coming back all at once. “I thought I was going to die.”

Hanna's face went pale, and her hand found Astrid's. “Friday's Fade...” Hanna breathed, her voice low, full of fear and disbelief.

Astrid squeezed her friend's hand, her grip tight and desperate. “They did... things. Things I can't—” Her throat tightened as the images of that night flooded her mind, the ritual, the laughter, the pain. She relived every second of the horror.

“I trusted him, Hanna,” Astrid's voice cracked. “I trusted Julian. I thought he was different. But he—he gave me to them. Like I was nothing. Like I wasn't even a person to him.”

The words broke free in a rush. She described it all—the drinks, the chants, the darkness. She told Hanna about the party, about how Julian had betrayed her. Every word felt like a wound, each sentence leaving her more exposed than before.

Hanna's face hardened as she listened, her eyes flashing with both rage and sorrow. “I am so sorry, Astrid,” she whispered. “I had no idea.” She pulled Astrid into her arms, and for the first time since the attack, Astrid let herself cry. She let herself break.

“I thought... I thought it was my fault,” Astrid sobbed, her breath catching as the guilt and shame poured out of her. “I thought I was weak for letting it happen.”

“No,” Hanna said firmly, her voice filled with raw emotion. “No. None of this is your fault. You were manipulated. You were betrayed.” She paused for a moment, her voice softening. “Just like me.”

Astrid's gaze met Hanna's, a tear sliding down her cheek. In that moment, they understood each other completely.

Astrid swallowed, guilt rising in her chest. “Hanna, I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you—back then. When it was happening to you—”

"Don't," Hanna interrupted, her voice quiet but firm. "You were there." Astrid remembered the nights she'd held Hanna while she cried, her body trembling with rage she was too young to unleash.

"Every time I ran to you, you opened the door. Every time I couldn't say it out loud, you didn't push me. You saved me, Astrid. Even if I couldn't save myself."

The memory was vivid in both their minds. The way Hanna had stumbled into Astrid's room late at night, her body shaking and her voice trembling as she begged to sleep over—just one more night. The way Astrid had sat by her, holding her hand as the unspoken truths suffocated the air between them. And the day Hanna had finally said it out loud: "My stepdad won't leave me alone." Astrid's reaction hadn't been outrage—it had been love. A steady, unwavering love that gave Hanna strength.

"I should have come to you," Astrid whispered. "I should have trusted you."

"I'm here now," Hanna said firmly, squeezing her hand. "And we'll get through this together."

Astrid clutched Hanna's hand tightly, her resolve growing stronger. "We'll stop them. We'll make them pay for what they did to Valentina. For what they did. For every girl they hurt."

Hanna's eyes blazed with determination. "We'll get them. I swear it."

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Astrid believed her.

Chapter 7: Echoes of Valentina

The nights in Hanna's apartment were silent, save for the steady rhythm of the rain against the window. Astrid lay motionless in bed, the dull throb of her wound a constant reminder of how close she had come to death. Hanna had stitched her up, her hands careful and precise, but Astrid could see the pain in her friend's eyes—the guilt that festered beneath the surface.

"You should rest," Hanna murmured, sitting beside her with a damp cloth, pressing it against Astrid's forehead. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

Astrid exhaled, staring at the ceiling. "You know the police never believe girls like me, Hanna."

Hanna looked away, her grip tightening on the cloth. "I should've seen it sooner. I should've known—"

"Stop." Astrid turned to her, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

Hanna's jaw clenched. "Then whose is it? The system? The people who turned a blind eye?" She shook her head. "It shouldn't be on you to make this right, Astrid."

But Astrid wasn't listening anymore. The fire inside her had long since burned away any hope she had in justice. If the system wouldn't stop them, she would.

A few weeks passed. Hanna had gone to the hospital for her biology class, leaving Astrid alone in the apartment. Bored and restless, she picked up Jordan's phone again, scrolling through his messages. Her eyes landed on a photo from that night— Jordan, Julian, Kyle Barkley, and Zayn, grinning like kings of their own sick empire.

Her pulse quickened.

Zayn.

Julian's best friend. The one who had always carried a camera, the one who had laughed the most as she screamed.

She tracked him to his dorm. He was alone.

The campus was alive outside, laughter and music spilling from dorm windows, oblivious to the horror unfolding within. The lock clicked shut behind Astrid as she entered Zayn's room, her breath steady, her pulse a slow, predatory rhythm.

He was asleep—bare-chested, sprawled on his mattress, his phone still unlocked beside him. The soft glow of the screen illuminated his face, peaceful, unaware. She took a quiet step forward, studying him.

Astrid moved with practiced precision, slipping the handcuffs onto his wrists before he could even stir. The first click made his body twitch, a groggy hum escaping his lips. By the time his eyes flickered open, his limbs were already bound—stretched to each corner of the bed, his wrists and ankles pulled tight.

He thrashed instinctively, the mattress creaking beneath him. "What the f—?" His voice was thick with sleep, confusion bleeding into panic as he tugged against the restraints.

Astrid stood over him, hood up, mask covering the lower half of her face. She wanted him to see her eyes.

She wanted him to know.

Zayn's breathing quickened. "Who the fuck are you?" he barked, trying to buck his hips up, but the cuffs held him firm. "Let me go!" He shouted.

Astrid didn't respond. Instead, she turned away, grabbed her phone, and scrolled through her playlist. A moment later, heavy bass and sharp beats blasted through the room—louder than the music already pounding through the other dorms, loud enough to drown out anything else. Satisfied, she began setting up the mechanism beneath the bed—a deep metal bucket positioned perfectly beneath him, rigged to a weighted pulley system. Every ounce of blood that dripped from his body would pull the cuffs tighter.

A soft whimper of realization left his lips as she returned with a knife.

Astrid climbed onto the bed, straddling his chest, pressing the cold blade against his throat. "You like to watch, don't you, Zayn?" she murmured. "You like having control. Making sure the camera catches everything."

He stiffened, his pupils blown wide with terror. "Wh—what the fuck are you talking about?!"

She reached beside the bed, grabbed his laptop, and flipped the screen open. A collection of videos. Some hidden in deep folders, others out in the open—untouched, untouched because he never thought he'd have to hide them.

There it was. The footage of her.

Of Valentina.

Astrid inhaled sharply, her vision tunneling into pure, blistering rage.

"Let me go!" He screamed.

Astrid ignored him, scanning the room. And then she saw it—her laptop. The one that had been stolen from her dorm after that night. Her hands clenched into fists.

"You filmed everything," she whispered. "You stole my laptop. You—" She cut herself off, her hands trembling.

Zayn shook his head wildly, panic thick in his voice. "I—I didn't do anything, I swear! Julian, he—he's the one who—"

She cut him off with a sharp glare. Then, without warning—"Wrong answer."

Astrid flipped the knife in her hand and plunged it into his side.

He howled, back arching against the mattress, blood blooming instantly beneath him. His body jerked, the cuffs biting into his skin as he struggled.

Astrid pulled the blade free. The first cut wasn't fatal. It wasn't supposed to be.

She leaned in close, her lips nearly brushing his ear. "You record pain? Let's see how long you can endure it."

With a surgeon's precision, she made a second incision along his inner arm, deep enough for the blood to spill freely into the bucket beneath the bed. Zayn gasped, his body convulsing as warm crimson dripped from his wounds—each drop tightening the cuffs, pulling his limbs further apart.

He screamed, bucking wildly, realizing too late that every movement only made it worse.

Astrid sat back, watching the panic settle in.

"I hope the camera's catching this," she murmured, holding up his own phone—streaming the entire thing.

Zayn's breath hitched. His body trembled violently as the weight beneath the bed grew heavier, the restraints pulling his joints to their limits. His fingers twitched, his mouth opening in desperate, wheezing cries.

"Please," he whimpered.

Astrid tilted her head, considering him.

Then, without a word, she stepped off the bed and turned away.

Leaving him there.

Leaving him to bleed. To struggle. To break.

Leaving him to suffer, just as Valentina had.

And as she slipped out into the night, the only sound left in that room was the slow, steady drip of blood hitting metal—each drop dragging him closer to agony.

The news exploded the next morning. A third body. The police finally acknowledged that there was a pattern. A serial killer.

Julian was spiraling.

"It's not a coincidence," he hissed to Kyle Barkley, pacing in his apartment. "First Jordan. Now Zayn. Someone's coming after us."

Kyle, ever the cocky athlete, scoffed. "Man up. No one knows shit. We covered our tracks. You're being paranoid."

Julian wasn't so sure.

Hanna wasn't either.

When she returned home that evening, she found Astrid curled up on the couch, staring blankly at the wall. The smell of bleach clung to the air.

"Astrid," Hanna said slowly, "what did you do?"

Astrid looked up, her expression unreadable. "I did what had to be done."

Hanna exhaled sharply. "You need to stop before you get caught. Or worse."

Astrid tilted her head, something dark flickering behind her eyes. "You think I can stop now? After what they did?"

Silence stretched between them. Hanna's hands curled into fists.

She knew the answer.

And deep down, a part of her agreed.

Hanna stood in the doorway of their small apartment, watching Astrid from across the room. The blood on Astrid's hands—literal and otherwise—was beginning to drown her. The bodies, the destruction, the weight of vengeance pressing down on both of them.

Astrid sat on the couch, staring blankly at Jordan's phone, scrolling through images she had already memorized, footage she had already watched a thousand times. The ghosts of Valentina, of herself, flickered on the screen, and yet Astrid did nothing.

Nothing but plan the next kill.

Hanna clenched her jaw. This has to stop.

"I have to go take care of something," she said, pulling her coat off the chair.

Astrid barely looked up. "Where are you going?"

Hanna hesitated. If she told the truth, Astrid would stop her.

She forced a small smile. "I'll be right back. I will get you some coffee."

Astrid replied back with a smile "Chai latte."

And then she left.

She had no intention of coming back, until her best friend was safe.

The gym was nearly empty by the time Hanna slipped inside. The scent of sweat and steel filled the air, the dull hum of overhead lights casting a cold glow over the weight racks and punching bags.

Julian was alone.

He was at the bench press, his hoodie damp with sweat, completely unaware of the storm approaching him.

Hanna moved fast.

She shoved him hard, sending him stumbling back against the metal rack. Weights clattered to the floor. Julian barely had time to regain his balance before Hanna was in his face, gripping his shirt with white-knuckled fists.

"You need to come clean," she snarled, her voice shaking with fury. "Tell the truth about what you did to Astrid. To Valentina. Say it."

Julian's expression went from shock to something dark. He searched her eyes, looking for weakness.

Then he spoke.

"Where is she?" His voice was eerily calm. "You know where she is, don't you?"

Hanna stiffened.

Julian grinned. "Where is she?"

She didn't answer.

Instead, she pulled out Astrid's gun.

Julian's smirk faltered.

Hanna raised her phone in her other hand, camera rolling. "Confess," she ordered, her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her chest. "Tell the world what you did, or I swear to God, Julian, I'll put a bullet in you."

His lips parted, his confidence cracking for the first time. He took a slow step back. "Hanna, think about what you're doing."

Her hands didn't shake. "I have. Now start talking."

Julian's breath was uneven, his gaze flicking from the gun to the phone. Hanna could see the war inside him. The weight of the truth.

A dumbbell flew through the air.

The impact was immediate—the heavy metal slammed into Hanna's head, the crack of bone against steel like a gunshot in the silent gym. She crumpled to the floor.

The gun skidded across the floor. The phone landed beside her, the screen still glowing. Still recording.

Kyle Barkley stepped out from the shadows of the locker room, breathing hard, his face twisted in shock.

He stared at Hanna's motionless body, eyes wide with horror. "Is that—" He turned to Julian, voice shaking. "Is that Astrid?! How the fuck is she alive?!"

Julian stumbled forward, heart hammering. "It's not her. It's Hanna." His voice cracked. "She knew. She knew everything. She was trying to get me to confess."

Kyle didn't hesitate.

He bent down, grabbed the gun off the floor, and pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed through the gym.

Hanna jerked once, her body seizing—then went still.

Kyle concealed the weapon. Julian was shaking.

They froze for a moment, both staring at the girl on the ground.

And then Kyle grabbed Julian by the shirt and yanked him up. "We need to go. Now."

Julian nodded numbly, his hands bloodied as he stumbled to his feet.

Without another word, they turned off the gym lights, exited through the back, and disappeared into the night.

The first thing Astrid noticed was that Hanna's phone had stopped moving.

She had waited. Hours passed by.

And now, as she stared at the screen—Hanna's location frozen at the campus gym—a sick feeling curled in her stomach.

Something was wrong.

She threw on her hoodie and left, moving fast, her steps soundless, her breath shallow.

The moment she entered the gym, she smelled blood.

And then she saw her.

Hanna.

Lying on the cold floor, her body still, blood pooling beneath her skull.

Astrid dropped to her knees, her breath catching, the world tilting around her. She grabbed Hanna's limp hand, pressing it against her cheek, as if she could will warmth back into her skin.

She had been alone when she died.

Alone.

Because of Astrid.

A sob tore through her chest—one of guilt, of grief, of unspeakable rage.

Then, her gaze flicked to the phone on the floor, screen still glowing.

Still recording.

She picked it up.

And watched.

She saw Hanna confronting Julian. Saw the gun, the demand for a confession.

Heard Kyle Barkley emerge from the shadows.

Heard the dumbbell smash into Hanna's head.

Saw them kill her.

Her hands tightened around the phone.

The world went silent.

Then, with a scream that shattered the night, Astrid picked up a nearby weight and hurled it into the mirrors. The glass shattered on impact, shards exploding around her like deadly stars.

She destroyed everything in her path—punching lockers, throwing weights, flipping benches. The sound of destruction filled the gym, but it wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

Astrid stood among the wreckage, chest heaving, Hanna's blood staining her fingertips.

Her friend was dead.

And Julian—Julian was still breathing.

Her lips parted, a single whisper slipping through her bloodstained lips.

"I'll kill them all."

And then she left.

She had work to do.

Astrid stumbled back into Hanna's apartment, her breath coming in sharp gasps. Her hands were still stained with Hanna's blood.

She locked the door behind her and dropped to the floor, her body shaking as the weight of everything crashed down on her.

Hanna was dead.

Hanna, the only person who had given a damn about her after the Fade, was gone.

Her eyes burned, but she didn't fight it this time. The sob ripped through her chest like a knife. She curled into herself, her forehead pressed against her knees as the grief swallowed her whole.

She cried for hours. For Hanna. For Valentina. For herself.

When the sun began to rise, she sat up, her face hollow, her eyes dead.

She contemplated calling Hanna's mother.

Her fingers hovered over the contact.

But she couldn't. Not yet. Not until Julian was dead.

Only then could she tell Hanna's mother the truth. Only then could she say, I'm sorry.

Only then could she let herself grieve.

Astrid wiped her face, then stood.

It was time to finish this.

She packed quickly, grabbing everything she needed—her laptop, clothes, the last traces of her old life.

She was never coming back here.

There was only one place to go.

East Aurora.

The place where she had been broken.

The place where she would finally bury them all.

She pulled out Jordan's phone and typed the message.

"I have the footage.

I have all of Zayn's files.

Every disgusting thing you've ever done, Julian.

And I'm going to expose you.

Come find me first.

Address: 412 West Killian Road, East Aurora, NY."

She hit send.

Then, she took a deep breath, grabbed her bag, and walked out the door.

Julian sat on the edge of his bed, his body still trembling, his head spinning.

He hadn't slept. Not after what happened to Hanna. Not after Zayn was found drained of blood.

Now, as he stared down at his phone, his stomach clenched with horror.

The message from Astrid.

He read it over and over, his vision blurring.

She had the footage.

She had proof of everything.

How the fuck is she still alive?

Julian felt like he was suffocating. His mind raced. What do I do? What the fuck do I do?

His hands shook violently as he showed the text to Kyle Barkley.

Kyle read it, and his entire face twisted with rage.

With a roar, he threw his phone against the wall, shattering it on impact.

"This is all your fault, Julian!" he shouted, his voice shaking with fury.

Julian flinched. "I—"

Kyle grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him up, nearly choking him. His eyes were wild, murderous.

"I will NOT let this bitch ruin my chance at the NFL!" Kyle roared, spitting every word with venom.

Julian couldn't breathe. Kyle shoved him back onto the bed, then stormed to the closet.

He pulled out the gun.

Hanna's gun.

The same one he had used to kill her.

Kyle cocked it, his grip tightening around the handle.

"Let's move," he snarled.

Julian swallowed hard, his pulse pounding. "Kyle, maybe we should—"

Kyle grabbed him again. This time, Julian saw death in his eyes.

"We end this," Kyle growled. "Tonight."

Julian nodded. He had no choice.

They got in the car and took the long, dark drive to East Aurora.

They thought they were heading to silence Astrid.

But Astrid had other plans.

And the warehouse?

It would be their grave.

The drive to East Aurora was filled with static silence.

Kyle's grip on the steering wheel was tight, his knuckles white. His jaw was clenched so hard his teeth ached.

Julian sat beside him, his leg bouncing, his fingers twitching. His stomach twisted in knots as the dark outline of the warehouse came into view.

The place where Mikey had kept Astrid.

The place where everything started.

Kyle killed the engine. They sat in silence.

Then, Kyle handed Julian the gun.

"You go first." His voice was cold, dead.

Julian swallowed hard. His fingers curled around the grip as he stepped out into the cold night.

The warehouse stood in front of them like a tomb.

And they were walking straight into it.

The second they stepped inside, the doors slammed shut.

Darkness swallowed them whole.

“Fuck—” Julian spun around, his heart hammering in his chest.

Then, music exploded through the warehouse. A twisted, distorted version of “Blue Moon.”

Kyle swore, his hands flying to his ears.

The speakers blasted the sound, drowning their voices.

Then came the whispers.

Astrid’s voice, crawling through the darkness.

Do you feel it now, Julian?

The fear?

The helplessness?”

Shadows moved in the dark. Figures darting past them.

Julian spun, panicked, raising the gun. “Show yourself, you bitch!”

Something rushed past him, brushing his shoulder.

He fired.

Kyle ducked, the bullet barely missing him.

“What the fuck, Julian?!” Kyle roared.

Julian’s breath came fast and ragged. His head was spinning. His grip tightened on the gun.

Then, another shadow moved.

Kyle lunged, grabbing at it—

And tackled Julian instead.

Kyle’s hands wrapped around Julian’s throat.

Julian gasped, struggling.

He fought back, trying to claw Kyle off, but Kyle was stronger.

His vision blurred. His lungs burned.

He reached blindly—

His fingers brushed metal.

The gun.

With the last of his strength, he fired.

The shot ripped through Kyle's side.

Kyle howled in pain, rolling off of him.

Julian gasped for air, clutching his throat. The taste of blood filled his mouth.

He fired again.

The second shot grazed Kyle's arm.

Then—

The lights snapped on.

Julian froze.

Kyle groaned, clutching his bleeding side.

And standing before them, in the middle of the warehouse, was Astrid.

Smiling.

"You two put on quite a show," she said softly.

Kyle's face twisted in rage.

"You bitch—"

The tackle dummy dropped from the ceiling.

The impact slammed into Kyle's ribs, knocking him onto his back.

His scream ripped through the warehouse as the spikes inside the dummy punctured his flesh.

Kyle's scream tore through the warehouse as the spikes drove into his ribs, pinning him to the cold concrete like an animal caught in a trap. Blood seeped through his shirt, his chest heaving with ragged, panicked breaths.

Julian coughed, dragging himself back against the wall, his throat raw. But neither he nor Kyle moved.

Not with her standing there.

Astrid stepped forward, calm, composed. The dim warehouse lights cast jagged shadows across her face, but the only thing Julian could focus on was her smile.

She crouched beside Kyle, tilting her head as she watched him struggle.

"You always wanted to be a star, Kyle," she murmured. "Now look at you."

Kyle snarled, pain contorting his face. "Y-you crazy fucking—"

She drove her boot into the spikes already embedded in his ribs.

Kyle howled.

Astrid didn't flinch. She reached down, grabbing the gun from the ground — the same one he used to kill Hanna.

Her fingers wrapped around the handle, familiarizing herself with its weight.

Kyle's eyes widened. Fear bloomed.

Astrid's smile sharpened.

"This is for Hanna."

She pulled the trigger.

The first bullet tore through his right kneecap.

Kyle's scream cracked in the air, raw and guttural. His body jerked, convulsing against the spikes.

She reloaded.

The second bullet shattered his left knee.

He wouldn't run. Ever again.

Kyle's breath hitched, his body trembling. He knew. He knew what she was doing.

Astrid took her time.

She moved around him, circling her prey. She let the barrel of the gun drag along his skin, teasing, promising.

Kyle whimpered. Begging now.

"You— you don't have to—"

The third shot blew through his right shoulder.

His arm fell limp.

Another.

The left shoulder.

Kyle's sobs choked him. Astrid puts the gun back in his hands — the gun clattered from his useless fingers.

She picked it up again. Refilled the chamber.

"I'm not done."

The final shots—one to each hand.

No football. No fame. No future.

Kyle Barkley was finished.

Astrid exhaled, tilting her head as she looked down at him. Broken. Bleeding. A shell of the golden boy he once was.

She knelt beside him, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"You took my best friend from me," she said. "So I took everything from you."

Kyle shuddered, his eyes rolling back as pain consumed him.

Astrid stood, a final look at Kyle's ruined body, and turned to Julian, tossing the gun at his feet.

Her smile was gone.

"Your turn."

Julian's breath came in shallow gasps.

His hands trembled as he raised the gun.

Astrid tilted her head. Unbothered.

Then—

Something yanked Julian off his feet.

He screamed as a thick metal hook pierced through his shoulder, lifting him into the air.

The pain was excruciating. Blood dripped down his arm, soaking his clothes.

Astrid stepped closer, watching him squirm.

She reached for her phone.

Turned on the camera.

"I want you to say it," she whispered.

Julian groaned, his body jerking against the hook.

"Say what?" he gasped.

Astrid's eyes darkened.

"The truth."

Julian's body convulsed with pain. His vision blurred.

"I—I can't," he stammered. "Astrid, please—"

Astrid's grip tightened around the phone.

She turned to Kyle, who was still writhing under the dummy.

Blood pooled around him, but he wasn't dead.

Not yet.

She knelt beside him, watching his chest rise and fall in sharp, painful breaths.

"I have one question for you, Kyle."

Kyle's bloodied lips curled into a snarl. "Go to hell."

Astrid smiled.

"I'm already there."

She pressed down on the dummy.

Kyle screamed, his back arching as the spikes drove deeper.

"Tell me," she whispered. "What do you fear most?"

Kyle's body shook.

But it was Julian who spoke next.

"Astrid." His voice was hoarse, desperate.

She turned to him, raising an eyebrow.

Julian's head hung low. His body trembled violently.

"I know where Valentina is."

Astrid froze.

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

"She's still alive," Julian choked out. "I—I can give her to you. You can save her."

Astrid's eyes darkened.

"You're lying."

Julian's breath hitched. "I swear. I swear on my life."

Astrid considered him.

Then, slowly, she lowered him from the hook.

He collapsed onto the floor.

Before he could move, Astrid grabbed him by the hair, dragging him toward the basement.

Julian gasped, his hands clawing at the floor.

"Astrid—please—"

She kicked open the door.

The basement.

The place where she had been beaten, starved, broken.

Julian's eyes widened.

His breathing turned ragged as he saw what was inside.

Mikey's rotting corpse.

Cuffed to the wall.

Julian whimpered.

Astrid shoved him inside.

The cuffs clanked as she locked Julian to Mikey's lifeless body.

Julian's body shook violently.

Astrid crouched beside him.

"You don't deserve love," she whispered.

Julian's breath hitched.

"You are just a coward."

With that, she stepped back.

And locked the door behind her.

Leaving Julian alone in the dark.

With a corpse.

And his own fear.

The basement was damp and suffocating, thick with the stench of rotting flesh. Mikey's decomposing body sat slumped in the corner, his hollow eyes fixed on Julian like a silent judge.

Julian was barely conscious, his body wrecked from hours of bleeding, his wrists raw from the restraints. His own screams had turned hoarse, fading into choked sobs.

Then, the sound of boots—her boots.

Astrid crouched before him, her face hidden in the dim light, a shadow of vengeance.

"I could let you die now, Julian. But you don't deserve that mercy."

She grabbed his matted hair, forcing him to meet her eyes. Tears streamed down his face.

"Please... Astrid, please—"

She shoved a filthy rag into his mouth, muffling his cries.

She set up her phone, hitting 'Live.' A dark screen flickered to life, broadcasting Julian's bloody, ruined form to the entire world.

Then, she lifted the rusted hunting knife.

Julian's eyes bulged in horror, his muffled screams becoming feral, primal.

Astrid unbuttoned his pants, reached and grabbed his manhood — she sliced slowly, the blade digging into his flesh with excruciating precision.

The pain shattered him. He bucked against the restraints, body convulsing violently. Blood pooled beneath him, dripping through the cracks in the floorboards.

And then came the rats.

Drawn by the smell of warm, fresh blood, their tiny claws scratched across the cement. One skittered onto his exposed thigh, sniffing, tasting.

Julian sobbed—or tried to. The rag in his mouth was soaked with his own spit and vomit.

Astrid softly said to him, "This is what you deserve."

She tossed his severed penis onto the floor—right in front of the gnawing rats.

Astrid turned the camera toward herself, her face hidden by the shadows.

"This man—Julian Carter—drugged, raped, and destroyed lives. He took everything from me. But tonight, the world will see him for what he truly is."

She turned the lens back to him, zooming in on his tear-streaked, blood-splattered face.

She dropped the phone in the corner—letting it keep recording.

Then, she stood, her work complete.

Julian twitched violently, his body still leaking life. His eyes darted frantically to the floor, to the swarming rats inching closer.

"No, please—don't leave me like this!"

She turned away.

Astrid scattered the evidence across the room—Valentina's footage, the videos, the names, the faces.

Then, she pulled out a burner phone.

9-1-1, she dialed.

"There s a man bleeding out in the old East Aurora warehouse. He needs urgent medical attention."

She hung up. No name. No trace.

She walked out into the night, her silhouette dissolving into the darkness.

Somewhere in the distance, sirens wailed.

Julian was found.

Mutilated.

Exposed.

Destroyed.

His downfall was live-streamed, shared, and seen by thousands before the video was wiped from the internet. But the damage had already been done. The truth was out.

The world whispered Astrid's name, but she was never found.

Some swear she vanished into the night.

Others say she's still out there.

Watching. Waiting.