CHAPTER 4: THE HARNESS AND THE HALO

The motel room wasn’t quiet. It breathed in sweat and old perfume, the air thick with the damp ghosts of every orgasm, lie, and low sob it had ever held. It exhaled slowly through the broken vent in the ceiling, wheezing heat and mildew like lungs collapsing after prayer. Like it had been holding its breath for decades, and finally gave out.

The man knelt on the mattress, hands flat, ass lifted, cock already half-hard and twitching. He had asked her to fuck him. Said it like a dare. Like he thought that kind of surrender was brave.

Vivien Vale didn’t speak. She just turned her back to him, knelt beside the red velvet bag she’d laid out with slow deliberation, and unzipped it like a reliquary.

Inside: black leather, glinting buckles, lube already catching light. The strap-on she pulled out was thick, weighted, veined with cruel detail—a cock made for contrition, not pleasure. Each strap tightened with intention. Her breath was steady. Her movements ritualized. She wasn’t getting dressed. She was preparing the altar. Somewhere—faint, quiet, wrong-skin familiar—she felt a breath not her own. Not Ellis. Not this man. Something watching. Something wet with want. She didn’t turn. She didn’t need to. Whoever it was… they’d feel this too. The leather cinched tight across her hips, grounding her. There was a heaviness in her chest, like the pressure before a sob that never came. Her belly was hot, coiled—not arousal, not quite—it was need sharpened by grief, a holy ache begging for release.

“On your knees,” she said.

He obeyed, naked and eager, bracing himself on trembling hands. His back curved downward, offering himself up with the kind of practiced desperation that made Vivien almost bored. But not quite. His ass was already slick with sweat. His cock, flushed and twitching, hung heavy between his thighs, dripping onto the motel bedspread.

She climbed onto the bed behind him, one gloved hand on his lower back, the other guiding her mouth between his cheeks. She rimmed him gently at first—soft, exploratory licks, more ritual than tease—but when he gasped, she didn’t stop. Her tongue pressed deeper. He whimpered. His fingers clenched the sheets.

She entered him slowly. The cock moved inside like it belonged there. His body shook, then adjusted, and he groaned into the mattress, a low, raw sound that spread through the room like incense. Her rhythm was crueler than her voice. Each thrust deliberate. Hard. Punishing. He sobbed by the fourth. Begged by the sixth.

Vivien didn’t answer him. She wasn’t fucking a man—she was unmaking a memory. Every thrust was a conjuring. She timed them to the cadence of Ellis’s breath the night he died—sharp inhale, held tremble, broken exhale. She didn’t just remember it. She was inside it again, rewriting it with every inch she drove into this stranger. This was resurrection. This was revenge.

When she pulled the silk scarf from the headboard, he looked up. “Please,” he whispered. But he didn’t resist.

She looped it around his throat. Tightened it with one hand. Her other stayed on his hip, holding him still. She kept thrusting. She wrapped the silk around his throat the way she used to tie her robe the night Ellis died. Same fingers. Same calm. Same breath that didn’t know what was about to be taken.

“Say his name,” she said.

He tried. Maybe. It didn’t matter. The breath left his lungs before the sound did. His orgasm hit mid-asphyxia—his body convulsed, his cock spasmed, semen splattered across the sheets.

Then silence. He collapsed. His eyes stayed open.

She held the scarf a moment longer. Let the quiet settle. Then let go.

She unbuckled the harness, slipped out of it with a quiet grace, and wiped her thigh with the scarf before tossing it onto his body. She looked at his face—still caught in a look of stunned gratitude—and touched her own lip. The smear of Crimson Psalm was still there.

She walked to the window. Her palm rested on the sill, leaving a faint smudge in the condensation. Just for her.

She lit a cigarette with blood still on her fingers. Inhaled slow. Exhaled slower.

“That one’s for Ellis,” she murmured.

For a second, she thought she heard his voice. Not loud. Not real. Just a breath behind her ear.

“Still angry, baby?”

She didn’t answer. Just stared at the smoke curling in front of her, remembering how it once rose from the sheets when he laughed into her thighs.

That was before.

This wasn’t about remembering.

This was about replacing.

She waited for something to shift. For the ache to lessen. For the guilt to retreat.

Nothing did.

She didn’t bother closing the door behind her.

Her body felt untouched, despite everything. No ache had left her. No hunger eased.

The room still smelled like latex and silk and something gone when Cruz arrived. Cruz knew that smell. Knew what it meant. It clung to the walls like a confession half-whispered and never answered.

The victim was already zipped up, but the outline of his death remained. A ghost in posture, in suggestion. The silk scarf rested on a side table like a relic. The condom—tied, full—had been placed at the foot of the bed like an offering. The pegging harness lay nearby, coiled beneath a chair, straps soft and still faintly warm.

Cruz stood by the bed with her gloves on and her jaw tight, pretending her heart wasn’t racing, pretending the slick between her thighs was sweat and not something else. Her slacks clung. Her breath was shallow. She catalogued every object with too much care—every trace of the scene, every residue.

On the sill beneath the window, she spotted a partial handprint in the condensation. Smaller than the victim’s. Slender fingers. A smudge of lipstick near the knuckle.

Lipstick.

Not a fingerprint.

A brush.

Someone had paused there. Watching the street.

She didn’t say anything.

She bent down and picked up the harness. Her gloved fingers closed around the leather, but the warmth slipped through anyway. It smelled like sweat. Like lubricant. Like skin. She stared at it too long. Her mouth was dry. Her breath caught in her throat.

She dropped it into the evidence bag. Felt like she was burying a body. Her face didn’t change, but her pulse did—spiking, then sinking like a weight in water. Her stomach tightened, and for a breathless second, she thought she might be sick. Not from the scene. From how much she wanted to understand it. From how much she already did.

She didn’t speak again until the room was empty.

Her apartment felt sterile when she got home. Lit by dim lamps and the blue glow of nothing. The cross above her bed cast a long shadow against the wall. She stared at it like it had something to say.

Still dressed, she walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Her fingers shook slightly as she peeled off her jacket, then her blouse, her slacks, her panties—each layer slower than the last. Her skin burned. Her thighs ached. Her reflection was waiting.

In the mirror: parted lips, flushed cheeks, pupils dilated, a bruise on her inner thigh she didn’t remember getting.

Vivien’s scent still clung to her coat. Somehow. Lipstick and leather. Salt and something holy.

She stepped into the shower and didn’t wait. Two fingers. Immediate contact. Her back hit the tile. One hand flat against the wall, the other already between her legs. She spread herself with practiced shame.

Her breath hitched. The water was scalding.

She came fast—too fast—her orgasm crashing through her like a confession. Her thighs clenched. Her toes curled. Her mouth opened.

“Perdóname,” she whispered.

Then louder. “Perdóname, Dios mío.”

But her fingers didn’t stop.

The second one left her sobbing. Not from pain. From something deeper. From knowing this wasn’t going to end.

When it passed, she sank to her knees, letting the water beat down on her bare shoulders. Her arms wrapped around herself, not for warmth, but to keep from falling apart.

The water didn’t make her clean.

Later, lying in bed with wet hair and nothing on but the weight of what she’d seen, she stared up at the crucifix above her head. The rosary on the nightstand gleamed dully in the soft light. Crimson Psalm still haunted her lips, though she hadn’t reapplied it.

She didn’t pray.

She touched herself again.

Not out of hunger.

Out of obsession.

Out of need so deep it scraped the edges of who she thought she was.

She wasn’t chasing Vivien Vale anymore. Her jaw twitched. A bead of sweat traced down her temple. Her body clenched without asking her permission—tight and hot like prayer held too long.

She was begging to be claimed. Her breath hitched. A single tear traced a path into her hairline. She turned her face to the pillow, heart hammering, thighs still slick. Her whole body was a question now, and it had only one answer—Vivien.

She rose, unable to stay in bed, and padded barefoot back into the bathroom.

The mirror was fogged from earlier, but not enough to hide her.

She stared at herself.

Hair damp. Eyes bloodshot. A fine tremble in her jaw.

“You’re not supposed to want this,” she said softly.

Her voice didn’t sound like hers.

“She fucked him with a strap-on and kissed his throat like it was scripture.”

The mirror didn’t flinch.

“You came thinking about it.”

Her voice was steadier now.

“You didn’t pray,” she whispered. “You begged.”

She stepped closer. Her breath fogged the glass. Her fingertips hovered.

And suddenly she wasn’t here.

She was back in Ridgewood. Plastic couch. Candlelight. The smell of garlic and wax. Her mother in the other room, praying aloud to La Virgen. The crucifix above the mantle.

She was sixteen. Kneeling in the hallway after Mass. Fingers trembling between her thighs. Rosary beads in her fist. Shame riding her like heat.

She’d touched herself then, too.

And whispered, “Perdóname.”

The same way she did now.

She leaned closer to the mirror. Her breath fogged the glass again. For a second, she thought she saw Ellis there too—just behind her shoulder, not judging, not forgiving. Just watching. Like he always did when she tried to pretend she wasn't broken. She blinked, and he was gone. But the ache remained.

“If she told me to kneel…”

She didn’t finish.

She didn’t need to.

She turned off the light. Walked back toward the bed.

Tonight, she didn’t want to see a cop.

She wanted to see the woman Vivien Vale might keep.