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**Intro:**

*I’ve fucked more strangers than I’ve had birthdays. Each one a poor substitute for the truth I refused to swallow. I told myself I liked the taste of men. I told myself being loved didn’t mean being known. I told myself if I came hard enough, fast enough, loud enough—I’d drown out the voice in my head that still sounded like him.*

*But the worst part?*

*That voice used to sound like my own.-Atlas*

**CHAPTER ONE: The Night My Mother Went Hunting**

I was twelve when my father died, which meant I was twelve when I started dying too.

No one tells you how easy it is for everything to rot quietly behind a white picket fence. Our house looked like a Sears catalog exploded on the outside—trimmed hedges, blue shutters, porch swing—but the inside? The inside reeked of whiskey breath, old grudges, and secrets no one dared to name.

The night it happened, Marla was getting ready for one of her “manhunts”—what she lovingly called her Thursday wine-soaked expeditions. She stood in the hallway mirror, boobs hoisted like sacrificial offerings, hair sprayed so hard it could stop a bullet. She applied her lipstick like it was war paint and dabbed a little perfume between her thighs.

I stood there, back pressed to the wall, watching her like a child would watch a tiger in its cage.

“You good?” she asked, not turning around. “Delilah’s in charge. I better not come home to chaos.”

My voice caught in my throat, and I nodded.

She didn’t kiss me goodbye. Didn’t even look at me. Just smacked her gum, fluffed her hair, and disappeared into the night with heels clicking like gunshots on the driveway.

Twelve hours later, my father was found facedown behind the garage with soil in his teeth and one boot missing.

They said heart attack. I said bullshit.

He was 42, in shape, and still mowed the lawn shirtless like a goddamn cowboy. He didn’t just fall over and die with his arms tucked politely under his chest. No—his jaw was locked, his face twisted in rage or fear, and there was a bruise shaped like a high heel blooming beneath his left ear.

But no one wanted to ask questions. Not the cops. Not my sisters. Not the coroner who scribbled "natural causes" like it was a grocery list.

Except me.

I asked. And got slapped across the face by my mother so hard my tooth cut into my cheek.

“Careful,” she whispered. “You don’t want to turn out like your father.”

The thing is, I *did*. Because my father saw me.

He didn’t understand the weird way I flinched at dresses, or why I insisted on cutting my hair with his beard trimmer when no one was looking. But he let me be quiet. Let me be strange. Let me exist.

Marla didn’t want a child. She wanted a prop. A little girl she could dress up, show off, and toss aside like an accessory when men came knocking. And after he died, I became just another piece of furniture in the Granger House of Horrors.

Delilah, the oldest, immediately stepped into Mom’s role—except her idea of “raising” me was quoting scripture and slapping the queer out of me with a leather-bound Bible. Miriam, the middle sister, had a martyr complex so big it needed its own bedroom. She cried more than she spoke, always overwhelmed, always tragic. And Cassie... sweet, wide-eyed Cassie... just wanted someone to notice her. Anyone. Even Damien.

Especially Damien.

Damien Granger was the golden boy.

Oldest sibling. Football captain. The one who smiled just right in family photos and always got the biggest piece of cake. My mother practically worshipped him. He could do no wrong.

Not even when he cornered me in the laundry room and shoved his hand down my pants.

“It’s just curiosity,” he whispered, fingers bruising me. “Don’t make it weird.”

I made it weird. I screamed.

They didn’t believe me.

Delilah said I was lying. Miriam said I was confused. Cassie cried and cried and cried. And Marla?

She poured a glass of Chardonnay, stared me down, and said, “You ruin everything.”

So I stopped talking.

Stopped crying.

Stopped being.

And somewhere along the way, I became Atlas. Not the birth name on my report cards. Not the girl they all insisted I was. Just Atlas. No explanation. No permission. Just a new skin I grew in the dark and wore like armor.

I started binding. Started writing “he” on my college applications. Started sleeping with women—and men—and people who didn’t care what was under my clothes so long as I didn’t ask them to stay.

Because I didn’t want love.

I wanted proof.

Proof that I could still feel something. That someone might look at me—really look at me—and not see a broken girl or a liar or a problem. Just a person.

But every time they left, I felt more hollow. Like I was building a man out of dust and trauma.

Then I saw her.

Fifteen years later, in a gas station on the East Side.

She was leaning against a pump, Gatorade in one hand, car keys in the other. Hair in a braid, eyes dark like coffee that could burn you. She looked older, harder, sharper—but still her.

**Ava Santiago.**

My high school sweetheart. My almost. My “what if.” The only person who ever kissed me and meant it.

And when her eyes landed on mine, she didn’t flinch.

She didn’t say, “Is that you?”

She just smiled and said, “There you are.”

**CHAPTER TWO: X + Ava = What the Hell Is This Feeling**

Ninth grade math class smelled like pencil shavings, BO, and hopelessness.

I had just transferred into the class after a “schedule conflict” that everyone knew was really Delilah’s doing—something about the math teacher I had being “too permissive” and letting “queer ideology” run wild in her classroom. Apparently, a poster that said *Math is for Everyone* was enough to call in the Holy Ghost.

So there I was: week three of the school year, clutching my worn-out spiral notebook, wearing a hoodie two sizes too big to hide the way puberty had betrayed me. My chest was just starting to do that thing my sisters celebrated and I quietly resented. Like my body was mutinying against me.

I walked in late.

The teacher, Mr. Hudson—gray-haired, lumpy, definitely tenured and counting down the years to retirement—barely glanced up from his attendance sheet.

“New seat... Ava,” he said, pointing at the only empty desk. “You’re on Atlas duty now.”

That was the first time anyone had said my name like it was a person and not a problem.

**Ava Santiago.**

She sat like someone who took up space on purpose. Legs splayed wide in black ripped jeans, Converse tapping to some internal beat. Hair braided, dark eyes rimmed in kohl like she didn’t give a shit—and you believed her. She had the face of someone who’d punch you and then carry your books to the nurse.

She didn’t look at me right away. Just slid her backpack over to make room.

“You chew gum?” she asked, chewing hers loud enough to be a rebellion.

“Not usually.”

“Start.”

She handed me a stick. I took it.

The next 45 minutes were torture. Not because of the equations—I was good at math. Numbers made sense. They didn’t lie. They didn’t tell you to smile more or ask why your voice was “so deep for a girl.” They just *were.*

No, the torture was her.

The way she twirled her pencil between her fingers, lazily biting the eraser. The way she leaned over the desk like the chair couldn’t hold her. The way she *smelled*—like something citrusy and electric, like she was halfway between a fistfight and a first kiss.

“You good at this?” she asked halfway through.

“At math?”

“No, at pretending you’re invisible.”

I blinked.

She smirked. “You sit like you’re apologizing to the chair.”

I stared down at my notebook, ashamed and weirdly flattered. “I don’t really do people.”

“Lucky for you,” she said, “I’m not a people. I’m a fuckin’ phenomenon.”

After class, she didn’t leave.

She waited for me.

“Where’s your next one?”

“World History.”

“Same,” she said. “Walk with me.”

I hesitated. She didn’t. She just started walking.

So I followed.

I didn’t know then that she’d be the first person to call me Atlas and *mean it*.

I didn’t know that one day, her hands would be the first to touch me without shame.

I didn’t know we were standing on the edge of something seismic.

But I felt it.

Right there, in the hallway between math and history, between who I was and who I would become, I felt it like a punch to the chest and a whisper in my ear.

*Her.*

We became inseparable that semester.

She’d call me “A” when teachers were near and “Atlas” when it was just us. She never asked questions about my body. Never made me explain why I flinched when someone said “girl.” She just *got it.*

We kissed once. Behind the gym, right after school. It was quick. Quiet. Hot like lightning in the rain.

“You feel like fire,” she whispered after.

I burned for days.

Then she moved away.

Vanished. No warning. No goodbye.

Just a new seat beside me the next week filled by some girl named Britt who liked horses and didn’t get my jokes.

I told myself it didn’t matter. That it was nothing.

But it was everything.

**CHAPTER THREE: Bruises, Boners, and a Girl Named Mandy Who Wouldn’t Take No**

After Ava disappeared, it felt like I was constantly walking into a room where something was missing.

A laugh that used to echo in my ear. A smell I couldn’t name but would’ve stabbed someone to smell again. A presence. Her. Gone like smoke, and I couldn’t even ask where she went without inviting suspicion. My sisters already thought I was weird enough.

So I filled the hole with girls.

The first one was **Leah Randall**. Cheerleader. Lip gloss junkie. Said I was “mysterious” because I didn’t talk much and wore the same hoodie every day. Our first kiss was in the janitor’s closet during lunch. She tasted like blue raspberry and desperation.

She liked that I didn’t try to touch her boobs. I liked that she didn’t make me talk about mine.

But when she tried to grind on me during prom season and I froze like my body hit an off switch, she laughed.

“Are you, like, gay or something?”

“No,” I whispered. “Just... not ready.”

She didn’t talk to me again until the yearbook signing. Wrote: *Hope you figure your shit out.* I drew a dick next to it and called it even.

Then came **Jules**, a theater kid who wore combat boots and once threatened to kick a teacher for calling me by my deadname. We got high in her bedroom, kissed until our lips went numb, and wrote terrible poetry in a shared journal we passed between classes.

She was the first one who saw the scars I carved into my thigh and didn’t flinch.

“You wanna talk about it?” she asked.

“No.”

“Cool. Just don’t fucking die, okay?”

I didn’t.

Not for her. Not for me. I stayed alive like it was a punishment I hadn’t earned yet.

Jules ended things when I couldn’t take my shirt off. When I told her I didn’t know if I was a girl or a boy or just a broken thing in a binder.

She cried.

Said, “You’re the saddest person I’ve ever loved.”

I told her, “Same.”

Then came **Mandy**, and oh—Mandy was a whole damn hurricane.

She worked at Hot Topic, smoked cloves, and had a tongue ring. Told me on the first date she liked her boys “a little fucked up.” I told her I wasn’t a boy.

She said, “Not yet. But I see it.”

That should’ve been beautiful. Should’ve made me feel seen.

Instead, it made my skin crawl. Like she was trying to be the sculptor and I was just clay she could mold into her fantasy.

She started showing up at my job. At my house. Left me notes in my locker that smelled like her perfume. Called me “her little project.”

I broke up with her after she carved our initials into her thigh with a safety pin.

She left a voicemail the next day: *If I die, it’s your fault, Atlas.*

I kept the message for years.

Just in case someone ever asked why I don’t trust people who say “I love you” too soon.

And yet, through all of them—every kiss, every mess, every awkward moment where I couldn’t let someone touch me without dissociating—I still thought about *her*.

Ava.

The way her lip curled when she was about to say something dangerous. The way she looked at me like I was real.

I remembered the kiss behind the gym like it was a movie I watched alone in the dark. I rewound it when I needed to feel something. Played it on loop when I didn’t want to cut. I wrote her name in my notebook. I wrote it under pseudonyms in short stories for class.

She was the ghost that haunted my sheets.

Every girl I kissed was a pale comparison. Every hand that tried to pull me in felt wrong.

Because none of them were her.

**CHAPTER FOUR: He in the Mirror**

It started with a hoodie.

Not just any hoodie. My dad’s.

Navy blue, frayed at the sleeves, smelled like sawdust and sweat. I stole it from his closet three weeks after he died and never gave it back. Wore it every chance I got, even when the sun beat down and the other kids in gym were peeling off layers like snakes.

In that hoodie, I disappeared.

And in disappearing, I felt like myself for the first time.

The bathroom became my hiding place. Not the girls’ bathroom—God no. That place was a war zone of gossip and mascara. No, I hid in the single-stall staff one on the second floor. No one ever checked. I kept a binder hidden in my backpack, rolled up tight in the bottom like contraband.

It wasn’t even a real binder. It was a pair of ACE bandages, wrapped too tight around my chest, making it hard to breathe—but *fuck* did it feel good.

Flat. Hidden. Clean.

I’d stare in the mirror, cheeks flushed, chest bound, hoodie zipped up over everything, and whisper:

“You’re a boy.”

Again.

“You’re a boy.”

Again.

“You’re a boy.”

The mirror didn’t argue.

I cut my hair in secret.

Used kitchen scissors while my sisters were out at church. Clumps hit the bathroom sink like dead animals. I didn’t care. I felt like I was slicing off someone else's skin, one lock at a time. When I was done, I looked like a scared little boy who tried to be brave.

Delilah screamed when she saw it.

Miriam cried.

Cassie stared at me like I was a ghost.

Marla didn’t even look up from her phone.

“You trying to be a dyke now?” she muttered.

I told her no.

But the truth was, I didn’t even know what I was. Not yet.

I just knew I wasn’t her daughter.

I googled things late at night when the house was quiet.

**"Girl wants to be boy."**  
**"Born in the wrong body."**  
**"How to become a man without anyone knowing."**

I found Reddit threads, YouTube channels, Tumblr blogs. Trans guys talking about binding and testosterone and surgery. I devoured every post like it was scripture.

I cried the first time I saw a photo of a trans man with top surgery scars. Not because it scared me—but because it felt like looking through a window into my future.

I didn’t want to be pretty.

I wanted to be *real*.

The first time someone called me “he,” it was an accident.

Cashier at a gas station. I was in my hoodie, voice cracked from puberty’s twisted joke, and he looked at me and said, “You need a bag, sir?”

I nodded so hard I almost cried right there.

The second I left, I ducked behind the building and sobbed into my sleeves.

*Sir.*

It echoed like a heartbeat.

I didn’t correct him.

I *never* corrected anyone who made the same mistake.

And eventually, some stopped calling it a mistake.

But then came the shame.

The guilt.

The fear of being found out.

Of Damien laughing in my face. Of Delilah dragging me to a church revival to be "cured." Of Marla spitting the word *freak* through Chardonnay-soaked lips.

So I tried to be a girl again. For about three months sophomore year. Dresses. Makeup. Lip gloss that felt like poison.

I kissed a boy at a party.

Made myself moan.

Threw up in the downstairs bathroom and cut a line across my hip so sharp it took six butterfly stitches to close it.

That was the last time I tried to be someone else.

From that day forward, I was Atlas.

Even if I only said it out loud once a day, alone in my room, into a cracked mirror.

Even if no one else knew yet.

Even if the world still called me “she” and “her” and “that Granger girl with the attitude.”

*I* knew.

And knowing was a kind of survival.

Even if it hurt.

Even if I didn’t think I’d make it to 18.

**CHAPTER FIVE: God, Guns, and the Granger Way**

Delilah Granger believed in two things:  
Jesus Christ and being right.  
In that order.  
But barely.

She was twenty-six when our dad died and thought the second his body hit the dirt, her halo sprouted. She moved back in, quit nursing school, and started telling us how to breathe.

She cooked like a prison warden. Made casseroles that could kill a man, and forced us to sit down every night at 6:00 sharp like we were the fucking Brady Bunch.

So when she knocked on my bedroom door that Sunday afternoon, I already knew something was coming. She only knocked when she needed an excuse not to kick it down.

“Open,” she said, three hard knocks.

“No,” I called back.

She didn’t wait.

The door burst open with the full force of Evangelical rage.

And there I was: hoodie off, binder on, sitting in front of the mirror taping down the sides of my chest because the old ACE bandage had started cutting into my ribs again.

We locked eyes.

Silence.

I didn’t move.

She didn’t blink.

Then her voice—low, slow, dangerous. “What the hell are you doing?”

I turned. Stood up. My shoulders squared, even though my knees were shaking.

“I’m getting dressed.”

“For what? A sex change?”

There it was. The bomb. Dropped.

I didn’t answer.

She stormed in, snatched the tape off the desk, turned it over in her hands like it had betrayed her.

“You wanna explain this, Atlas?” she spat the name like it burned her tongue. “You playing dress-up now?”

“I’m not playing anything,” I said, voice flat. “I’m living.”

“Oh, *living*? You think this is life? Strapping your chest down like some perverted Halloween costume?” She stepped forward. “You think God made a mistake?”

“No,” I whispered. “But you did.”

She slapped me.

It wasn’t hard. Not like Marla used to hit. It wasn’t even the sting that hurt. It was the disappointment in her face, twisted with fear and fury, like I’d been replaced by some unrecognizable demon.

“I *raised* you,” she said through her teeth.

“You raised a version of me that was dying.”

Her hand dropped to her side. She looked at me like I was someone else. Like she was searching my face for the girl I used to pretend to be, and couldn’t find her anymore.

“She’s gone,” I said softly.

“I didn’t raise a *boy.*”

“You didn’t raise me at all, Delilah. You *controlled* me.”

She flinched. Just a bit. Enough.

“Your name is not Atlas,” she hissed. “You’re confused. You’re possessed. You need to come to church—”

“Church didn’t save me.”

“You need to be *fixed.*”

I laughed. Dry. Empty. “I’m not broken.”

Her face cracked. I saw it—the moment her rage turned to something desperate and pathetic.

“You are *not* a man,” she whispered.

“Then why are you so scared of me becoming one?”

That night, she called Marla.

Told her I was spiraling.

Told her I needed intervention.

Told her I was trying to mutilate myself, that I needed Jesus, that I was probably suicidal.

Which was true.

But not because I was trans.

Because I lived in a house where being myself felt like trespassing on sacred ground.

I packed a duffel bag the next day.

Took my binder, my dad’s hoodie, and the notebook I kept tucked under my bed full of journal entries I was too scared to say out loud.

Delilah stood in the doorway.

“If you walk out that door,” she said, “don’t expect to come back.”

I looked her straight in the eyes.

“I never belonged here anyway.”

And I walked.

No one followed.

Not Miriam. Not Cassie.

Not even God.

**CHAPTER SIX: Her Name Was Sydney**

She had green eyes and nicotine fingers.

The first time we met, she lit a cigarette with shaking hands and asked if I believed in fate. I said I believed in naps and cheap coffee. She laughed like I’d saved her.

I didn’t know she’d become my addiction.

I didn’t know I’d let her.

I met **Sydney** when I was nineteen, sleeping on a friend-of-a-friend’s couch in a roach motel of an apartment above a liquor store. I’d just left home. Had nothing but two duffel bags and a binder that left red marks across my ribs like a warning.

She was older. Twenty-six. A former addict in recovery, working night shifts at a 24-hour diner, covered in tattoos that looked like old promises. She had a laugh like a cracked bottle and a mouth that said *stay* before she ever did.

We were two bruises pretending to be whole.

So of course we fell in love.

At first, it was safe.

She liked that I was quiet. Said I was “mysterious.” Never pushed when I wouldn’t take my shirt off. Never asked why I panicked when she whispered “baby girl” in bed and I froze like my soul tried to leave my body.

She thought I was just shy.

I let her think that.

Because if I told her the truth—that I was a man, that I was trans, that every second in this skin felt like warfare—I didn’t know if she’d hold me or crucify me.

So I smiled. Faked moans. Bit my lip and took what I could from the illusion of intimacy. I carved out little pieces of myself just to make her feel whole.

I told myself it was worth it.

That this was love.

For five years, I lived in the cage we built together.

I called it safety. Called it shelter.

But it was survival on mute.

I wore the clothes she liked. Let her pick my haircuts. Laughed when her friends called me “soft butch” or “quiet femme.” Let it roll off my back like it wasn’t a knife every damn time.

I swallowed my name like it was poison.

Never corrected her when she said “she.”

Never asked for more.

Because the truth was, I didn’t think I deserved more.

She relapsed three days after our five-year anniversary.

I came home and found her curled on the bathroom floor, a half-empty bottle of vodka beside her and makeup smeared like a confession.

When she looked up at me, eyes glassy, mascara tears leaking down her cheeks, she smiled.

“I didn’t mean to,” she slurred.

I didn’t ask if she was talking about the drinking.

Or the girl in our bed the night before.

Her name was Danni.

She looked at me like she *knew*.

Called me “babe” like it was a threat.

Sydney said it wasn’t cheating because “it’s not like you’re a man anyway.”

That sentence should’ve broken me.

But it *freed* me.

I left the next day.

Took my two bags, my binder, and a name I hadn’t said out loud in years: **Atlas.**

Left a note that said:

“I loved you with everything except the part of me you refused to see.  
I hope the next person lets you drown.  
I’m done being your life raft.”

That night, I rented a room in a shitty motel with a flickering TV and water that smelled like rust. I stared in the mirror and whispered my name until it didn’t hurt anymore.

“Atlas.  
Atlas.  
Atlas.”

I was twenty-four.

Homeless again.

But this time, I wasn’t hiding.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: The Bone-Tired Rebirth**

Rebuilding isn’t beautiful.

It’s not a montage of triumph and clean victories.

It’s waking up on a pullout couch with a spring digging into your spine, piss from a toddler’s diaper in the air, and a text from your niece that says, “Can you pick up milk?”

It’s holding back tears at 4:43 a.m. because the floor creaked under your foot and you thought, for a second, you were back in your childhood home—about to get hit for existing wrong.

But I was safe now.  
Safe-ish.

I lived with my niece **Tori**, her husband, and their two kids in a two-bedroom trailer with walls so thin I could hear every cough, every curse, every moan through drywall that might as well have been paper.

She let me sleep in the living room.

Gave me a key. A toothbrush. A quiet look that said: *I don’t get it, but I love you anyway.*

I would’ve died for her.

Instead, I lived.

I got a job at a plastics factory three towns over. Eighty hours a week. Hands raw. Back screaming. Lungs full of chemical stink that clung to my skin like punishment.

They called me “ma’am.”

Called me “sweetheart.”

Laughed when I asked for different overalls.

I corrected them the first few times.

Then I stopped.

I needed the paycheck more than the respect.

Sometimes survival means swallowing poison and pretending it tastes like water.

By year two, I had saved enough for my own place.

A studio apartment above a laundromat. The air conditioner rattled like a dying animal, and the walls were yellow with nicotine ghosts, but it was *mine.*

I had a mattress on the floor, a mirror I didn’t hate yet, and a small corkboard covered in goals written in Sharpie:

* “Top surgery?”
* “Maybe HRT.”
* “Stop cutting.”
* “Find something that feels like love.”

That last one stayed pinned for years.

I downloaded **Grindr** on a night I couldn’t sleep.

Told myself it was just curiosity. Just boredom.

But it wasn’t.

It was a wound begging to be touched.

I filtered my profile. Didn’t list that I was trans. Just said: *Masc-presenting. Discreet. Looking for connection.*

But they never wanted connection.

They wanted a hole.

I let them.

Men came and went. Some rough. Some polite. Some who refused to look at me. Some who whispered, “You’re not like other girls,” and made me want to claw my skin off.

One cried afterward.

One tried to kiss me and I flinched.

One called me Atlas.

I didn’t sleep for three days after that.

I told myself it didn’t matter.

That it was just a phase. A habit. A need for control, for validation, for *something.*

But the truth was: I felt like a ghost fucking strangers to prove I was still alive.

I went numb.

So I logged into Facebook.

Just to scroll.

Just to remind myself of who I *used* to be.

That’s when I saw her.

**Ava Rowe.**

Profile picture: her on a beach somewhere, hair longer, eyes sadder.

But I knew it was her.

I knew it the way you recognize a favorite song by the first second of the beat.

Her name punched me in the chest.

We weren’t friends. I hadn’t added her.

Not yet.

But I watched.

Every birthday post.

Every tagged picture.

Every relationship status that changed and then didn’t.

I watched her laugh with friends, hold a niece, stand on a cliff in California with wind blowing her hair wild.

I wondered if she ever thought about me.

If she remembered that kiss behind the gym in ninth grade.

If she knew I was still alive.

I stared at her profile for an hour.

Then I clicked *Add Friend.*

And I waited.

**CHAPTER EIGHT: The Space Between Us**

She accepted the friend request two days later.

I was on break at work, sitting on a milk crate behind the factory, fingers stained with grease and sweat, scrolling through old messages I never had the courage to send.

And then, there it was:

**Ava Rowe accepted your friend request.**

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

My thumb hovered over the screen like it might explode.

I stared at her name, at her profile picture — her smile softer now, eyes darker like they’d seen too much — and felt something hot crawl up my spine.

I typed:

**Hey… it’s been a long time.**

She replied five minutes later.

**Too long. How’ve you been, Atlas?**

She used my name.  
My real name.  
My soul cracked open.

The first messages were light.  
Safe.

Memories about high school.  
Mrs. Kane’s math class.  
That time we both got detention for passing notes.  
I told her I still had one folded in my journal from freshman year.

She said, “You always were a hoarder of emotions.”

She called me funny.

Said I’d aged like wine.

I told her she looked like a storm — wild and beautiful and untouchable.

She sent a heart emoji.

Then it got deeper.

One night we messaged until 3 a.m.

She told me her marriage had ended.

That he wasn’t a good man. That there were bruises. Ones she couldn’t explain to her family without making excuses for him. That sometimes the worst cage is the one that looks like safety.

I told her I understood.  
That I’d lived in cages too.

We didn’t say *love*, but it danced in the spaces between our words.

She asked if I was seeing anyone.

I said no — not really. Not like that.

She asked if I’d ever thought about her.

I told her the truth:  
**Every fucking day.**

She didn’t respond for ten minutes.  
Then:

**Me too.**

And then, one day…

She was gone.

No messages.  
No typing bubble.  
No posts.

Her profile stayed, like a gravestone.

But she stopped answering.

I messaged once a week for three months.  
Then once a month.  
Then not at all.

Because silence can scream louder than any goodbye.

A year passed.

A whole year.

I dated a guy who said all the right things and made me feel absolutely nothing.

I went to work. I paid bills. I survived.

But every time I passed a redhead in the grocery store or saw a beach photo online, I thought of her.

The girl who vanished twice in my lifetime — once at seventeen, and now again as a woman.

I told myself it was over. That it never really began.

Until I got the message.

One year and five days after her last reply.

At 2:14 a.m., just like before.

From **Ava Rowe**.

**I’m sorry. I had to disappear. I had a baby. Then another. And a man I thought I’d never get away from.**

**I couldn’t bring my broken pieces to you. You deserved more than that.**

**But I’ve left. For good this time.**

**And I still think about you.**

My hands shook.

I stared at her words, not breathing, not blinking.

Then the next message:

**Can I see you, Atlas?**

**CHAPTER NINE: The Cards We Play**

When Ava said, *Can I see you, Atlas?*, my first instinct was to say no.

To tell her that I’d moved on. That I didn’t want to deal with all the painful mess we’d left behind in high school. That I wasn’t the same boy she kissed behind the gym. That I wasn’t the same man I pretended to be when I first found her on Facebook.

But I didn’t say any of that.

Instead, I agreed.

“Yeah. Sure. Let’s do this.”

But the question was… *What do we do?*

I didn’t know how to date anymore. Hell, I didn’t know how to talk to her without feeling like I was going to puke all over myself.

So I did what any awkward, terrified man with too many layers of emotional baggage would do: I invited her to my niece’s house for a game night.

**Cards Against Humanity.**

It was the perfect safe space. A little ridiculous. A little childish. A little *too real* in the most ridiculous way. But it was my comfort zone.

It was me.

The night she was supposed to show up, I got there early.

Tori, my niece, didn’t know who I was meeting. Just that I invited her over for *family game night*. And when I told her it was “just some old friend,” she gave me that sideways look of judgment she reserved only for me.

“Uh-huh,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “And what’s *his* name?”

“None of your business,” I said, trying to hide the nervous sweat creeping up my back.

She smirked. “Sure. Well, you two better have fun playing with the family. You’re not trying to fuck, are you?”

“Please don’t say that,” I groaned.

“I’m just saying, *I’m* not judging.”

“I’m judging,” I muttered.

It wasn’t long before the doorbell rang.

I opened the door and saw her standing there — a little older, a little softer, but unmistakably Ava. The same wild hair. The same deep-set eyes that always had a hint of sadness, like she carried a whole universe in them and still found space for me.

She smiled, nervously.

“Hi,” she said, voice low, unsure. "I, uh, brought wine."

I stepped aside, clearing my throat. “You’re... not the first person to show up with wine, but thanks. I’ll let you know if we need a refill.”

Ava chuckled awkwardly and stepped inside.

“Thanks for inviting me,” she said, glancing around the room, her gaze falling on Tori, who was already texting someone with an eye roll.

“I’m glad you came. I thought this would be, you know, less... *intense*.”

“Less intense?” She raised an eyebrow. “This is a *game night* with family. How intense could it get?”

“Well…” I glanced at Tori. “You never know with her.”

Tori looked up from her phone and waved without looking. “Hi, Ava. You good?”

Ava smiled faintly. “I’m good. Thanks for the invite.”

We sat down on the couch, awkwardly making small talk, while Tori poured us all glasses of wine and set up the game. For the first ten minutes, neither of us said much. Ava shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable, and I felt every muscle in my body tense like I might explode.

Finally, I asked, “How are the kids?”

Ava’s eyes softened. “They’re good. Busy. Exhausting. But they’re my everything.”

I smiled. “They should be. I bet they’re lucky to have you.”

“I don’t feel lucky some days.” She looked down at her hands for a second, but then her gaze lifted, like she was gathering her strength. “But I’m making it work.”

I nodded, unsure what to say. The weight of her words hung in the air, heavy and unspoken.

And then… we started playing.

It was *stupid*, honestly. Ridiculous. Tori ran the game like she was the queen of the house, dropping cards and laughing her ass off at everything inappropriate.

But somehow, with Ava sitting across from me, the game wasn’t the focus. The focus was her—her laugh when something absurd came up on the card, the way she looked at me when she caught me staring, the way her fingers trembled when she picked up the next card like she was afraid to hold too much of the truth at once.

I couldn’t help myself. I *watched* her. Watched the way her lips curled into a smile every time she looked at me. The way she paused before answering every question, like she was deciding whether to stay or run again.

Tori wasn’t the one who ruined the night.

I was.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. The way she kept looking at me, the tension between us like a live wire. So, I broke.

I pushed my cards aside and leaned in, trying to make it feel like a *moment*. I let the words come out before I could stop them.

“Ava,” I said, voice unsteady. “I’ve thought about you every day. Every damn day since we last spoke. Since you disappeared. And it fucked me up. I don’t even know if you—if you still—”

I stopped, breathing hard. Fuck. What the hell was I doing?

She didn’t say anything at first. She just stared at me.

And then, slowly, she reached for my hand. It felt like fire.

“Atlas,” she whispered, “I never meant to hurt you. I just didn’t know how to fix what I broke.”

“I don’t need you to fix it,” I muttered. “I just need you to stay.”

The night ended without resolution, but for the first time in five years, I felt *seen* again. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t romantic in the way I expected. But it was raw. It was real.

And I wasn’t running from myself anymore.

Neither was she.

**CHAPTER TEN: The Fire We Can't Ignore**

After that night, everything changed.

We spent the next few weeks texting nonstop, talking about everything and nothing. It felt like we were picking up right where we left off, except this time, there was no pretending. No pretending I wasn’t still in love with her. No pretending she wasn’t still in love with me.

Our texts turned from small talk to real talk. At first, it was like dipping our toes into something that had been buried for years.

I told her I was sorry for disappearing.

She told me she never wanted to leave, but she had to. That her past was a damn hurricane, and she never learned how to survive it without drowning.

I told her about the men I’d fucked on Grindr, about how empty it all felt, about how I was just trying to feel something real.

She told me about the two kids she had with an abusive ex. About how she’d been walking on eggshells for so long, she didn’t know what it felt like to *breathe*.

And then, we moved to FaceTime.

At first, it was innocent enough. Casual. Friendly.

We would talk, face-to-face, for hours. Laughing at stupid shit. Talking about our favorite movies. Talking about the dumbest things we could remember from high school.

But then… it wasn’t so innocent.

She would bite her lip. Smirk at me from across the screen. Touch her hair like she was teasing me. And I would catch myself staring at her, wondering if it was okay to want her this much.

We’d laugh.

And then there was silence.

The kind of silence that stretched between us like a taut rope, waiting to snap.

And then, one night… it almost did.

I was sitting in my apartment, the only light coming from the glow of my phone. I could see Ava’s face, that beautiful face that haunted me for years, and we were talking—just talking, right? But her eyes, her lips, they were telling a different story.

There was a moment where I caught her looking at me like I was the only thing in the world. She said something funny, but neither of us laughed. Instead, I felt my chest tighten.

I stared at her for a long time, watching the way her eyes seemed to soften when they met mine.

And then, she spoke.

“I think about you all the time, Atlas,” she said, her voice low. “You don’t even know.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. My throat felt tight. My hands were clammy. I thought for a second maybe I’d never be able to breathe again.

“I think about you too,” I finally said, voice shaking.

She nodded, but there was something else in her eyes. Something too real, too raw. The kind of look that made my heart race.

She was quiet for a moment, staring at me. And then, she almost whispered, “I don’t know if I can… I don’t know if I can let myself love you, Atlas. I don’t know if I know how anymore.”

I could feel the wall in her words, the hesitation that had been there since the first moment we’d reconnected. But it was *there*, that *thing* we both felt but couldn’t say.

“I’ll wait for you, Ava,” I said, my voice softer than I intended, the words coming out almost desperate. “I’ll wait for as long as it takes.”

She took a shaky breath, but before she could say anything else, the moment shifted.

Her eyes flicked down to my lips, then back to my eyes, and I caught a glimpse of the vulnerability that had been hiding behind the walls she’d built. Her chest rose and fell with her breath, and for a split second, I thought she was going to say *it*.

And then the moment broke.

She shifted, grabbing her phone again and clearing her throat. “Okay, Atlas, don’t get all mopey on me,” she said with a nervous laugh.

But I could tell. I could feel it in my gut. She was on the edge of something.

From that moment on, we couldn't stop.

We moved from FaceTime to texting every damn second. Sexting, too. Things we both didn’t expect. Things that felt just as real and intense as the emotional connection we were building. Every message was a confession, a challenge, a game we both played, not knowing where it would end.

There were nights when we both went quiet, the silence hanging between us, as if we were waiting for the other to say the words we were both too scared to say. But we didn’t need words. We had our bodies. Our needs. Our desperate, broken love that spilled into late-night texts and calls that lasted until the morning light.

I would send her pictures of myself, slowly becoming more comfortable in my skin. She’d send back pictures of her, teasing me with the curve of her neck or the curve of her lips.

One night, around Christmas, I did something stupid. But it felt right in that moment.

I sent her a Polaroid of my ass.

It was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever done in my life.

I attached the note:

*“I know this is a weird Christmas gift. But I really want to be yours, Ava. Let me be your boyfriend.”*

I wanted to laugh at myself for doing it. But I didn’t. Because deep down, I meant it. I was tired of pretending I didn’t want her. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything.

And then she sent a message back, her words slow but powerful:

*“I can’t believe you did that. I’m not sure if I’m supposed to laugh or cry, but yes. Yes. I want you, too. All of you.”*

Things got even more intense after that.

There were late-night calls where she would whisper her secrets to me, things she had never told anyone before. Things I would never repeat. There were mornings when we talked until the sun came up, laughing and loving each other from miles away.

But we weren’t perfect.

We never were.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Weight of Our Words**

The more we talked, the more I realized that the space between us had shrunk. In the beginning, it had been a safe distance—like I was still a man on the other side of a screen, someone she could talk to without the risk of seeing the mess that lived inside me. But the deeper we got into our calls, into our words, into the things we sent each other, the more I felt like I was getting pulled into a current I couldn’t escape.

At first, it felt like we were just *playing* at being close. Like this was all a game—late-night calls, texts that danced on the edge of something real, something dangerous. I convinced myself I wasn’t really falling for her again. That this was just a fleeting moment, a dangerous indulgence. But as the weeks wore on, I felt the truth settle into my bones like a weight I couldn’t ignore.

I was falling. Hard.

And I was terrified.

I remember one night, after we’d sexted, after she’d sent me a picture that made my hands shake and my heart race. We’d stayed up talking about everything—about our childhoods, our scars, the things we never thought we’d say out loud again.

She went quiet for a moment. A long moment. Her silence stretched across the line like a blanket, heavy with unspoken words.

“I think about you all the time,” she finally whispered, her voice breaking the silence. “More than I should. More than it’s safe.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt my heart stutter in my chest.

I wanted to tell her I felt the same. I wanted to reach through the phone and tell her I couldn’t stop thinking about her. About us. About how all the pieces fit together when we were together—even if it was only digital. But I didn’t. I held back.

“I’m scared, Atlas,” she admitted, her voice so small, so fragile. “I’m scared of letting myself want you. Want anyone. I’ve built these walls, and every time I think about tearing them down, I feel like I’m gonna lose myself again.”

I closed my eyes, trying to find the words. The right words. But all I could think was: **I know.**

I know what it’s like to feel like you’re drowning in your own emotions. To want someone so badly that it feels like you’re losing yourself in the process.

“I get it,” I said, my voice rough. “I don’t know how to fix myself either. But… I don’t want to run from you. I don’t want to run anymore.”

She sighed heavily on the other end. “But I don’t know how to let you in, Atlas. Not fully. Not after everything.”

And that was the truth of it, wasn’t it? We were both damaged. Both broken in ways we didn’t know how to explain. And even though we wanted each other more than anything, there was a hesitation. A fear. That if we let ourselves fall too hard, too fast, we’d both shatter into pieces we couldn’t put back together.

The emotional weight of it all hung over us. Our calls became more than just *calls* — they became a refuge, a place where we could confess our deepest fears, our desires, our darkest secrets. But the more we shared, the more I felt like I was giving pieces of myself to her that I could never get back.

And sometimes, I wondered if she felt the same. If she was giving pieces of herself to me that she couldn’t afford to lose. Pieces of her that she might never be able to put together again.

A few days before Christmas, I sent her the Polaroid of my ass.

I know it sounds stupid. Hell, it *was* stupid. But in that moment, it felt like the only thing I could do to show her that I was real. That I wanted her. That I wasn’t afraid to be vulnerable with her, even in the weirdest, most ridiculous way. I wasn’t trying to impress her. I wasn’t trying to be funny. I just wanted to be honest.

Her response was immediate:

*“I can’t believe you sent me this. You’re insane. But… yes. I want this. I want you.”*

I laughed. It was the most absurd thing we’d ever shared, but I felt lighter. It was a ridiculous, childish way of saying, *I’m here. I’m not going anywhere*. But it worked. Somehow.

The next day, she sent me a message that made my heart stop:

*“I think I’m falling for you again, Atlas. And I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”*

And that was the moment. The moment I knew everything had changed.

Days passed. And our texting, our calls, our stolen moments together became more intense. Our conversations drifted from playful banter to deep confessions. We talked about our fears, our hopes, our pasts. But even as we shared so much, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were both holding back — afraid of getting too close, of feeling too much.

There were nights I’d lie in bed, my phone next to me, waiting for her message. And when it came, it felt like the world stopped.

But there were also nights when I’d get a message, and it felt like a chasm had opened between us. Like we were two strangers, fumbling our way through something that felt too good to be true.

And then, on one of those nights, I called her.

“Are we doing this right?” I asked, my voice tight with emotion.

She was quiet for a long time before she spoke. “I don’t know. I think I’m still figuring out how to love again.”

“I’m not asking you to love me,” I said quickly. “I just… I just want to be here. With you. Whatever that looks like.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But I’m scared. Scared of everything. Of losing myself. Of losing you. Of loving you and not being able to handle it.”

“I’m here,” I said, my voice steady. “I’m here, Ava. I’ll be here for however long it takes.”

The more we tried to figure it out, the more I realized this was the most *real* I’d ever felt with anyone. The most open I’d ever been. But it was terrifying, too. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t easy. But it was us.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough.

**CHAPTER TWELVE: Stepping Into Her World**

The address Ava gave me was in a part of town I wasn’t used to—nothing like the areas I had been around growing up. The streets were rough, worn down by years of neglect, with crumbling buildings lining the sides, graffiti splashed on every corner. The air smelled of concrete and old oil, the hum of the city around us louder than usual. I wasn’t sure what I expected when she invited me to her home, but it wasn’t this.

I sat in my car for a few moments, the engine still running, my hands gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. I had been here for what felt like forever, and yet, I hadn’t moved. There was a pit in my stomach, the kind of nervousness that hit you when you were about to do something far outside your comfort zone—something that mattered more than anything else.

I hadn’t been in a neighborhood like this in years. Not since my father died. Not since everything started to fall apart. Not since I left.

But now, I was here. I was about to walk into Ava’s world.

I hadn’t even been sure she’d want me here. Would she see me differently once I crossed the threshold? Would she regret letting me in? I had no idea. She hadn’t said much about her life before I reappeared, but I knew enough to understand that it wasn’t pretty. The kind of stuff people like me don’t talk about. The things that get swept under the rug and never discussed.

But I wasn’t going to turn away. Not now. Not after everything we had shared—after everything we had been through.

I took a deep breath and shut off the engine, my heart pounding in my chest as I climbed out of the car. My legs felt like lead, each step toward the building heavier than the last. I glanced up at the building, a tall, crumbling complex that looked like it had seen better days… decades ago. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but I certainly wasn’t expecting *this*.

I rang the buzzer, and after a few long seconds, the door creaked open. I was greeted by the faint smell of spices and incense, and the sound of kids shouting somewhere in the distance. Ava’s voice floated down from the stairwell.

"Come on up, Atlas," she called, her tone warm but with a hint of nervousness that matched my own.

I climbed the stairs slowly, each step creaking under my weight. The building was old, its walls lined with peeling paint, the fluorescent lights flickering overhead. I had no idea what to expect when I finally reached her door. I hadn’t been in a place like this in a long time—probably not since I was a kid, not since things were much different, when my family was still whole.

When I reached her door, I hesitated for just a second. I could hear movement inside. Ava was probably pacing, or maybe she was just as nervous as I was. I knocked gently, trying to steady my breathing, trying to calm the storm of nerves inside me.

The door swung open, and there she was.

She wore a simple shirt and jeans, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her smile was soft, almost shy, as she stepped aside to let me in. But the moment I crossed the threshold, I could feel the tension in my shoulders start to loosen. This wasn’t like I thought it would be. There were no grand expectations, no judgment. Just Ava.

"Hey," she said quietly, her eyes scanning me up and down, looking for something—maybe reassurance, maybe something more. "I know it's not much, but it’s home."

Her words were casual, but I could tell they meant something to her. Maybe she was worried I’d think less of her. I could see it in the way she fidgeted, the way she bit her lip, the way her eyes flicked to the small apartment around us. It was cozy, small—definitely a far cry from the luxury I’d become used to, but it had an undeniable charm.

The walls were adorned with a few pictures—mostly of her kids, her family—and the furniture, though worn, felt lived-in. It wasn’t a mansion, but it wasn’t supposed to be. This was Ava’s life. This was where she had fought for what she had, where she had survived.

"It’s perfect," I said, and I meant it. There was something real here. Something raw. "It’s more than perfect. It’s you."

Her expression softened, a little smile tugging at her lips. "Yeah, well... it’s not much. But it’s mine."

I could see that Ava had put herself into every inch of this place. It wasn’t just a home—it was a piece of her. A reflection of the struggle she’d been through.

"You look nervous," she observed, her voice soft. She stepped closer, her gaze searching mine. "You okay?"

I could hear the concern in her voice, and it only made my own nerves flare up. How could I not be nervous? I was standing in her world—*her* reality—and I didn’t want to fuck it up. I didn’t want to disappoint her.

"I’m fine," I said, my voice a little too strained. "Just… this is all new to me. I’m just not used to being in places like this, you know?"

Ava nodded. "I get it. But you’re here now. And that means something."

I could tell she was trying to make me feel comfortable, but it was harder than she knew. The memories of my own past, of the family I’d left behind—my sisters, my mother, the wreckage of everything that had been left to rot—were still fresh in my mind. Being here, in her space, in her world… it felt like a step into something new. Something I wasn’t sure I was ready for.

But I wasn’t going to back out. Not now.

"Want a drink?" she asked, a little too casually, but I could see the way her fingers fidgeted. She was just as nervous as I was.

"Sure," I said, nodding. "What do you have?"

"Wine," she said, her smile turning a little more playful. "I think you’re going to need it."

We ended up sitting on the couch, drinking wine, laughing over silly stories from our past, and I realized something in that moment: It wasn’t about the apartment or the neighborhood. It wasn’t about the space we were in.

It was about *her*. And me.

We were here. Together. In the quiet of her world, trying to find something that had been missing for so long.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Trust in the Silence**

The first morning after, when we woke up together, felt like a quiet victory.

I could feel the shift between us, something unspoken but undeniable. There was no rush anymore—no frantic need to prove something to each other. We had shared our bodies, yes, but it was the trust we’d built with our words, our silences, that held the real weight of what we’d done.

Ava wasn’t just the woman I’d wanted for years; she was the woman I needed in ways I didn’t understand before. She was the person who knew me—not just the man I had become, but the boy I used to be. The boy who had suffered in silence, hiding behind walls that no one had ever bothered to tear down.

And somehow, with her, those walls started to crumble.

We spent the next few weeks falling into a rhythm. Our days were filled with texts, calls, and late-night video chats. But it was the moments in between—the small, intimate gestures—that really shaped what was happening between us.

One evening, after a long day at work, I showed up at her apartment with a bottle of wine, my heart in my throat. I was nervous, unsure of what I was expecting, but needing to be near her.

She opened the door, wearing nothing but a loose T-shirt and leggings. Her hair was messy, her face free of makeup, and she looked so… *real*. So *human*.

“Hey,” she said softly, her smile easy, a quiet invitation. “You’re late.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, holding up the wine as if that somehow explained it. “I was… trying to work out how to be *normal* around you.”

She raised an eyebrow, stepping aside to let me in. “Normal? I don’t think either of us knows what that is anymore.”

We shared a quiet laugh, and I followed her to the couch. She pulled her legs underneath her, and we talked. About everything and nothing. But it was in the pauses between words, in the way our hands brushed as we reached for our glasses, that the unspoken connection between us deepened.

Later that night, after a few glasses of wine and a game of cards against humanity—where we both acted far too competitive for people who were supposed to be *casual*—we ended up on her couch, leaning into each other.

I looked over at her, my heart heavy with things I hadn’t said. Things I wasn’t sure I could say. Things I had never allowed myself to admit, even to myself. But with Ava, the walls felt like they were coming down without me having to try.

She was staring at the TV, but I could tell her mind was somewhere else. I couldn’t stop myself from reaching for her hand, intertwining my fingers with hers. She didn’t pull away. She just looked at me, like she was trying to decide whether she should be scared or not.

“You know, I’ve spent so much of my life running,” I said, my voice low, but steady. “Running from my past, running from myself. Hell, running from people who loved me. And I don’t want to do that anymore.”

Ava’s gaze softened. Her thumb traced the back of my hand, a comforting gesture that made something inside me loosen. “What are you running from now?”

I thought about it for a second. The truth was, I had been running from love. From the idea of *letting someone in*. Of trusting someone enough to be vulnerable.

“I guess… I’m running from the idea that this—*we*—could be too good to be true,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

Ava turned her body toward mine, facing me fully now. Her eyes were dark with emotion, and for a moment, she didn’t say anything. She just looked at me, like she could see everything I hadn’t yet allowed myself to show.

“I get it,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I’ve been running from love my whole life. From letting someone in, from *trusting* that love would stick around long enough to be real.”

There was something in the way she said it that made my chest tighten. I knew exactly what she meant. We both carried wounds that hadn’t healed yet, scars that ran deeper than either of us wanted to admit.

But right then, in that moment, I realized that we were choosing to heal together. Slowly. Gently. Carefully.

Our relationship wasn’t perfect. Nothing about it was. We had our issues. Ava still fought with the remnants of her past—the abuse she’d survived, the years she’d spent trapped in a toxic relationship. And I was no stranger to the darkness that came with my own history.

But what we had was real. It was messy. It was flawed. But it was ours.

The days turned into weeks, and the weight of the past we both carried began to feel lighter. We shared things with each other that we hadn’t shared with anyone else, secrets and dreams and fears that felt safe to voice in each other’s arms. And it wasn’t just about the big moments—those grand declarations of love or the passionate nights we spent tangled in each other’s sheets.

It was the quiet moments. The times when we sat on the couch together, just *being*. When I held her hand and she rested her head on my shoulder, the world outside faded away, and all that mattered was the quiet intimacy between us.

And then there were nights when I couldn’t help myself, when my hand would slip under her shirt, my lips would brush against her neck, and the desire would grow between us like a fire. But this time, it wasn’t about rushing. It wasn’t about proving anything. It was about *being together* in a way that felt real, grounded. When we kissed, it wasn’t frantic. It wasn’t desperate. It was slow. Deep. And when we made love, it wasn’t just about *pleasure*. It was about *connection*. About becoming one in a way that went beyond just bodies.

It was healing.

It was love.

That was the beauty of it. In all the mess, the past, the insecurities—we were *together*. And it was enough.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I wasn’t running anymore. I was finally standing still, letting someone see me for who I truly was.

And maybe, just maybe, Ava had found the same thing in me.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Firsts and Laughter**

The night had started like any other—quiet, simple. Ava and I had spent the evening talking, laughing about our shared memories, and trying to ignore the tension in the air. But tonight, there was something different. The way we looked at each other, the way our words had slowed to murmurs and touches, hinted at the fact that something was about to change.

We had crossed a threshold months ago, one I hadn’t been sure I was ready for. But now, here, in the soft dim glow of her bedroom, I felt my nerves settle into something new: anticipation.

Ava’s gaze lingered on me as I stood at the edge of the bed, heart thumping in my chest. I wasn’t just scared of being close to her—I was scared of *myself*. I’d never been good with this kind of vulnerability. Sex had always felt like a performance, something I had to get right or else. But with her… it was different. I wasn’t trying to prove anything.

She looked at me and smiled, the corners of her lips lifting just slightly. “You sure you’re okay with this?” she asked, her voice low but with an unmistakable sweetness.

I nodded, my throat tight. "Yeah, I’m fine. Just... nervous."

“Don’t be,” she said softly, her hand reaching for mine, guiding me onto the bed. She was still so calm, so grounded in her own skin. It was something I admired, something I didn’t quite know how to imitate.

But then I noticed something on her nightstand—a little bottle, a small, shiny object next to it. My eyes widened for a second as I realized what it was.

“You didn’t—” I trailed off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

She chuckled, the laugh light but full of mischief. “I did,” she said, holding up a sleek, unfamiliar toy. “You said you were nervous. Maybe this will help.”

My cheeks flushed deep red. I wasn’t exactly experienced in this area, and the idea of using a sex toy felt both funny and incredibly awkward. I was used to *avoiding* things that made me feel vulnerable, things that made me feel like I didn’t know what I was doing. But with Ava, something felt safe. She didn’t make me feel like I was failing at anything. If anything, she made it okay to be inexperienced.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my voice steady as I joked, “Well, this is a first.”

Ava’s grin widened. “It’s okay to laugh. It’s supposed to be fun.”

Fun. Yeah. That was the word I needed to hear. Fun. I nodded, swallowing the nerves that still buzzed in my chest.

We took our time—slow, cautious, yet impossibly gentle with each other. Her fingers were soft on my skin, and I found myself melting under her touch, forgetting the outside world. She guided me through it, as if she could sense my uncertainty, her movements confident but never rushed.

I watched her, amazed by how easy it felt to be with her—how easy it felt to be *myself* around her. She leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to my neck, and then whispered, “Just relax. I’m here.”

And then, with a little bit of hesitation—and a whole lot of curiosity—I let her introduce the toy. It wasn’t anything huge, nothing that would intimidate me. But I still felt that nervous buzz run through me as she positioned it between us. Her fingers danced over it like she knew exactly what to do, and for the first time, I felt completely out of my element.

But the laughter. Oh god, the laughter was unexpected.

I couldn’t help it. The sound of the toy buzzing, the odd sensations it gave me… I couldn’t keep a straight face. The first time she used it on me, I burst out laughing, unable to control myself. My whole body shook with the ridiculousness of it.

Ava looked at me, wide-eyed, and then her laughter joined mine, the room suddenly feeling lighter. There was no tension anymore, just pure, unexpected humor between us.

“What the hell?” I giggled, still a little breathless. “This feels—”

“Like what?” she teased, still trying to suppress her own giggles. “Like an electric toothbrush?”

“Exactly,” I grinned. “I feel like I’m getting a cleaning… but in the best possible way.”

Ava snorted, and we both collapsed into laughter, the intimacy of the moment taking a backseat to the absurdity of it all. It wasn’t awkward anymore. It was just us—laughing, exploring, and getting comfortable with the weirdness of it all. She had a way of making me feel like I wasn’t failing, like it was okay to be uncertain and messy and still have fun.

Eventually, the laughter died down, and we took a more serious turn, our bodies moving closer. The toy wasn’t something to focus on anymore; it was just a tool. The real intimacy came from the way we touched, the way we gazed at each other as if there was nowhere else to be but *here*.

Ava’s hand slid down my chest, and I knew she was guiding me, leading me through this with the confidence that I hadn’t yet fully learned. “You okay?” she asked, her voice breathless.

I nodded, my heart pounding. “Yeah. Just… it feels good.”

She smirked. “You’re not just saying that?”

“No,” I replied honestly. “I really mean it. This... this feels right.”

Her fingers found mine, and we shared another kiss, slow and lingering, as I felt her adjust the toy again. There was a hum between us, electric and steady, and it wasn’t long before I felt the intensity of what was happening—what we were doing together.

And then, as things picked up, I heard her whisper, almost under her breath, “I think you’re about to make me—”

I didn’t need to hear more. I had known it was coming, but feeling it—the way she reacted, the way her body tensed and relaxed—was something that completely overwhelmed me.

“Wait—did you just—?” I asked, incredulous, as the sensation hit me, a rush of warmth filling my chest.

Ava’s eyes met mine, wide and pleased. “Double,” she whispered with a smile. “Screenshot that moment.”

My heart pounded in my chest, and I couldn’t stop the smile that spread across my face. For the first time in my life, sex wasn’t about performance—it was about feeling, exploring, and laughing in the middle of it all. I had made her feel something real, something intense. And for once, it wasn’t just about me. It was about *us*.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The Weight of the Past**

The day Ava left me alone in my apartment, the walls felt like they were closing in. My breath grew shallow, my mind racing in a thousand directions. I had spent the night with her, laughing, feeling, maybe even—*for once*—daring to believe that I was enough for someone. But the moment she walked out, the comfort I had wrapped myself in unraveled like cheap fabric.

I sat on the edge of my bed, my hands shaking, but I couldn’t stop them. I was drowning. I couldn’t breathe. I felt my chest tighten, the walls around me pressing in with the weight of things I hadn’t yet said, hadn’t yet faced.

The past. My family. The scars I kept hidden—both physical and emotional.

It felt like they were all coming back in waves, crashing over me, dragging me under. It felt like being a kid again, small and powerless, desperate for someone to see me, to believe me, but no one ever did.

I gripped the edge of the mattress, trying to ground myself. *You’re fine*, I told myself. *You have Ava. You’re better now.*

But my mind wouldn’t let me go. I couldn’t shake the feeling of being trapped. I thought I had come so far, thought that maybe, just maybe, I could rebuild myself from the wreckage of my past. But every time I closed my eyes, I saw their faces—the ones who didn’t believe me, the ones who had left me behind. My mother, my sisters, my brother.

I could still feel the weight of my brother’s hands on me, the cruel jokes he whispered when no one was around, the way no one ever noticed the bruises, the way I kept them hidden—*because it was my fault*.

“Get over it,” I muttered to myself, my voice hoarse. *You’re a man now. You don’t need them anymore.*

But that wasn’t true, was it? I had spent so long convincing myself that I didn’t need anyone, that the hurt was just a thing of the past. I buried my pain in the form of endless hookups, meaningless flings, anything to escape. But no matter how many bodies I shared space with, no matter how many people I fooled myself into thinking I could connect with, the emptiness was always there, just waiting to remind me of my loneliness.

I closed my eyes, but the darkness didn’t bring the peace I was hoping for. Instead, I was drowning in memories. My father's sudden death. The way my sisters distanced themselves from me, the way my mother disappeared, chasing after men and leaving me with the wreckage of our broken family. No one cared. No one saw me.

And then, the unbearable truth: **I had let myself become just as broken as the people who hurt me.**

I thought of Ava. Of everything we had shared. How she made me feel *seen*. How she *knew me* in ways no one had ever bothered to. She made me feel something close to *normal*. But as much as I wanted to hold on to her, to hold on to the love we were building, the fear kept rising in me—**the fear that I wasn’t good enough for her.** That I wasn’t even *worthy* of the love she gave me.

I ran my hands through my hair, dragging my fingers down my face, trying to push away the tears that threatened to spill. *This is crazy,* I thought. *I shouldn’t feel like this. I’m better now. I can do this. I’ve been through worse.*

But deep down, I knew I hadn’t confronted the worst of it. The trauma. The fear. The anger I had kept hidden. It was all still there, festering in the shadows of my mind.

My skin crawled. I felt sick. The weight of the past had caught up with me, and it felt like it was suffocating me. I had spent so much time pretending to be *okay*, pretending to be someone else—someone I wasn’t. I thought that if I could just pretend long enough, I could forget. I could escape. But it wasn’t working anymore.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to break something, to destroy everything in my path, to feel something—anything—that would make it stop. The pain. The uncertainty. The constant, gnawing *lack* of peace.

But I couldn’t.

Ava’s face appeared in my mind. The way she looked at me, the way she *saw* me, not as the broken man I was trying to escape, but as someone worthy of love. My heart swelled with both longing and guilt.

I wanted to be the man she thought I could be. But I didn’t know how.

Days passed, and things with Ava became strained. I kept thinking I could push through it, that if I just *tried harder*, if I just *acted better*, I could make it work. I spent hours convincing myself that I was just tired, that I just needed more time, more space. But every time we talked, I could feel the distance between us growing.

Her patience was running thin.

One evening, after another argument, Ava came to my apartment. She was quiet when she walked in, the tension thick in the air. I sat on the couch, trying to keep it together, but she didn’t give me the space I thought I needed. Instead, she sat across from me, her eyes hard with something that looked like both concern and frustration.

“Ava…” I began, but she cut me off with a soft shake of her head.

“No, Atlas. I can’t do this anymore.”

My heart dropped. “What do you mean?”

She looked at me, her voice trembling but firm. “You’re not *okay*. You’re not even trying. You’re just burying everything, pushing it all down, pretending you don’t have a problem. You’re afraid of what’s inside, and I get it—I really do. But I can’t watch you destroy yourself, and I can’t keep pretending that everything’s fine between us when it’s not.”

I stood up, feeling my chest tighten. “I’m trying, Ava. I really am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re lying to me. To yourself.” She stood up, pacing. “You keep saying it’s the past. You keep blaming your family, your trauma, but you’re not facing it. You’re not confronting it.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. She was right. I had been running. I had been blaming everyone else for what I couldn’t fix within myself.

She turned to face me, her voice breaking but resolute. “I love you, Atlas, but I can’t keep doing this if you won’t go get help. If you won’t go to therapy, I can’t be here anymore. I can’t keep waiting for you to get it together. I need you to show up—for yourself—and for us.”

The silence between us felt suffocating. I stood there, frozen, as her words echoed in my head. **Go to therapy**. It felt like a sharp knife lodged in my throat.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I couldn’t even find the words to beg her to stay. To apologize. The shame was too heavy. Instead, I watched her grab her coat and walk to the door.

“I can’t fix you, Atlas,” she said softly, her back turned to me. “But I need you to fix yourself.”