

Episode 2

1

— So, Gregory... — he said neutrally, studying her or pretending to. — Gregory... Morgen...

Svetlana froze, pushing her face forward and feeling something inside grow more and more — a mix of anger and fear, as if someone had poured a layer of clay over her, and with every second it thickened and grew heavier, tightening around her and choking her breath. Her breasts under the mesh were rising and falling fast, too fast, and every inhale made the fabric dig into her skin, reminding her of itself with a sharp, almost painful tension, as if in those seconds someone had turned the threads into blades. She didn't take her eyes off Ryan, trying to catch at least a hint of a crack in his gaze — that he would suddenly laugh, slap his palm on the table and say: "Alright, alright, of course I recognized you, Mr. Morgen."

But he just kept silent with that expression on his face, where there was more fatigue than even the slightest doubt.

He shifted his gaze back to the screen, as if reading her thoughts, then after a brief second returned it to her again.

— And what... — Ryan finally said, looking away to the side as if he suddenly got bored. — ...am I supposed to do with you now, 'Gregory'?

Svetlana felt something snap inside. Hope mixed with rage flared up brighter than before. She jerked forward sharply, immediately feeling the fabric bite painfully into her skin again, but that didn't matter now.

— Exactly! — she exhaled, and her voice jumped to a slightly higher pitch than she wanted. — Now you finally got it, right? Gregory Morgen, for fuck's sake! And now call whoever you need and... apologize to me right now!

Ryan only raised an eyebrow, in no hurry to answer. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers still resting on the mouse, as if he was thinking whether it was even worth spending another second on her or already wondering if he'd tell anyone about her after his shift at the bar. Silence hung in the room, broken only by the quiet hum of the system unit and her own heavy breathing, while her breasts under the mesh kept rising and falling, slightly swaying and drawing both her and his attention.

And at that moment, the phone on Ryan's desk rang. An old wired device, black, worn-out, with an old two-color screen and buttons that had long lost their color. He glanced at the screen, frowned slightly — as if the call wasn't scheduled — and picked up the receiver.

— McKenzie, listening, — he said in an even, routine tone, the kind only those who are used to night shifts and sudden inspections speak with.

Svetlana froze, still leaning forward, her palms pressed against the edge of the table. She didn't hear what was being said on the other end, only saw how Ryan's expression changed: his eyebrow lifted a bit higher, his shoulders stayed relaxed, but a slight surprise flashed in his eyes, which he immediately hid.

2

— Yes, sir. The one they brought in at night, — he answered calmly, without extra emotion. — Already processed her. Prints, photos, data in the system. Everything by protocol.

She tried to catch at least a word from the conversation, but the receiver was pressed tightly to Ryan's ear, and the voice on the other end sounded too quiet, muffled.

— Um... are you sure? — Ryan continued, and the corner of his mouth twitched in a barely noticeable smirk. — She just doesn't seem quite... No, sir! Not at all! I'll do it!

He straightened up sharply, as if he had just been snapped into attention, and even started nodding into the empty space, as if the one he was talking to was standing right there, and kept nodding like that for a few more seconds, which made something sweet, too familiar and especially pleasant right now, appear in Svetlana's chest — that very feeling of superiority. Finally. Finally this cop understood who he was dealing with. She almost smiled — the corners of her lips already twitched, ready to stretch into Gregory's usual, victorious smirk.

Ryan listened for a few more moments, briefly answering "yes, sir" and "understood," and then carefully placed the receiver back. For a few seconds he stood still, looking at the phone, as if digesting what he had heard. Svetlana sat there, squeezing her palms and feeling her long nails leave semicircles on her skin, looking at him from below up, already starting to build her plans of revenge, thinking whether to end all of this just by making him get on his knees or to also make him lick the floor in this stinking precinct while she would listen to explanations from the professor.

But instead, Ryan slowly exhaled through his nose, ran a hand over his face and closed his eyes for a second, as if trying to wipe off the irritation that had just been carefully "sent down" to him from above.

When he opened his eyes again, he glanced at Svetlana briefly, and then, without even commenting on her victorious pose, simply slowly walked around the table and went to the metal cabinet in the corner of the room. The door creaked. He rummaged inside, pulled out a transparent bag with the label "Property" and took out a black, glossy handbag on a thin chain from it. He held it in his hands for a moment, furrowing his brows, and then, without even looking at Svetlana, threw it to her.

The handbag traced a short arc and heavily slapped onto the floor next to her, making a dull "thud" and bouncing slightly from the hardness. The chain clinked against the floor, cutting into the ears and drawing even more attention to itself.

Svetlana flinched with her whole body and slid her gaze over this pathetic excuse for a women's accessory, and then back to Ryan.

— ...what is this? — she asked slowly, confused, still staring at the handbag lying at her feet as if it were some foreign object that had accidentally fallen from another planet.

Ryan didn't answer. He had already returned to the desk, sat down, pulled a folder closer and started quickly filling in some column, scratching the pen over the paper with an irritating squeak, clearly showing with his whole appearance that he just wanted to finish all of this as soon as possible.

Svetlana leaned down to pick up the handbag and immediately felt her heavy breasts swing downward, stretching the mesh to its limit. Her fingers with long red nails awkwardly caught on the chain. The

handbag turned out to be unexpectedly heavy for its size. She straightened up slowly, squeezing it in her fingers, and for a second froze, not daring to open it.

— I asked... — she started, lifting her gaze and, raising her voice, continued, — what is this?

Ryan did not even raise his head. The pen continued to scratch across the paper with the same irritating squeak, as if he deliberately wanted every sound to cut into her ears.

— That's enough already, — he threw out dryly, not looking away from the folder. — Take it and get the hell out.

Svetlana sat across from him, still squeezing the thin chain of the handbag in her fingers, and for a second just stared at him, as if the words didn't reach her right away. Then something inside exploded.

— What do you mean “get the hell out”?! — she shouted, and her voice again broke into a high, almost screeching note that made even her feel disgusted. — Are you serious right now? I just told you who I am, and you're telling me — “take it and get the hell out”?! I'll fucking—

Ryan didn't even raise his eyes. The pen kept scratching over the paper with the same irritating sound, as if he was already somewhere else in his head.

— I don't get it, — he muttered under his breath, as if talking to the folder, not to her, — what the fuck is this shit even. First Monica, then a fucking tractor, now YOU! — he suddenly raised his head, raising his voice so sharply that Svetlana flinched, — couldn't you just say you had a bag? huh?

Svetlana opened her mouth to object, but Ryan had already waved his hand in her direction, continuing to fill out the paper.

— I... — she sharply inhaled, her tits under the net painfully tightened, — I... I... are you fucking insane?!

He suddenly clenched the pen in his fist and slammed it onto the table, lifting his eyes at her.

— Listen carefully, — he said evenly. — If I catch you here again for prostitution — I'll make your life such hell that you'll beg to go back to that mental hospital you escaped from, in my opinion. Got it?

Svetlana jerked with her whole body.

— I'M NOT—

— Go work in another city, — he cut her off, clearly losing patience now. — We've got enough of our own here. No clowning around.

— Are you fucking insane?! — burst out of her, and she резко stood up, forgetting about the heels and about her whole body in these clothes. That didn't matter now. — I'll—

The door suddenly flew open at that moment.

Svetlana flinched, not finishing her sentence, and automatically turned her head toward the sound, feeling her long hair slide over her smooth skin, immediately sending a sharp, almost electric response down her spine.

In the doorway stood that same shift worker — in an oil-soaked jacket, with heavy boots leaving dirty marks on the linoleum. He immediately fixed his gaze on her, and a satisfied smirk slowly spread across his weathered face.

— Oh, there you are, gorgeous, — he drawled in a low, slightly hoarse voice. — Hope I'm not interrupting you, officer?

Svetlana noticed where his gaze was directed and immediately sharply crossed her arms under her breasts, trying to cover at least part of what was so openly pushing out from under the mesh. The soft, heavy flesh was squeezed between her forearms, pressing out even more, and her red nails dug into her skin, leaving small white crescents.

That seemed to only excite the bearded man even more, because the smile on his face grew wider at that moment, and the tip of his tongue slid over his upper lip, making Svetlana's legs press together on their own.

Ryan let out a heavy breath, not even reacting to his appearance right away.

— What do you want, Rick?

He didn't hurry to answer. He took a step inside, his heavy boots thudding dully against the floor, leaving wet marks behind, and only then lazily shrugged.

— Nothing much... just came to check in, the truck's ready, — he started, not taking his eyes off Svetlana. — And then I see such a familiar face here...

Svetlana felt blood rush to her cheeks and her heart pounding so hard the beats echoed in her ears.

— You know each other? — Ryan sharply raised his gaze, shifting it from Rick to Svetlana and back, as if trying to catch at least some logical connection in what was happening.

Rick didn't hesitate for a second.

— Of course we know each other, — he lied easily, and in his voice sounded the lazy confidence of a man who knew perfectly well that everything would slide off him right now. — We've known each other since Vancouver, I was pleasantly surprised when I saw her. Her tattoo wasn't done for nothing, I'll say as a connoisseur — she's a real pro at her job, right, sunshine?

Svetlana sharply turned to him, her eyes flashing. She sharply stood up and straightened, removing her hands from her tits and immediately feeling how her tits heavily swung under the net, painfully stretching the fabric.

— WHAT?! — burst out of her, and her voice again treacherously jumped into a high, almost screeching pitch that cut into the ears. — Are you fucking insane, you freak, I—

— Quiet, — Ryan cut her off sharply, not even looking. — I wasn't asking you.

Those words were like a switch clicking. But not for Rick.

— Well, of course, a freak, — Rick smirked lazily, taking another step inside and continuing as if explaining to the officer, not to her. — She's such a willful one sometimes, but sweet, I even thought at times that maybe I'd take her as a wife, if not for my...

Svetlana choked on outrage.

— You— — she stepped toward him, but immediately faltered, her heel awkwardly slipping, and she had to stop sharply to keep her balance, and then, turning to Ryan like to a lifeline, shouted. — It was him who harassed me on the street when I went out! Arrest him!

At that appeal, something inside Svetlana tightened even more. She, damn it, who just yesterday had been one of the most powerful people on the planet, was now standing here — in heels, with trembling

knees, with these tits and in this ridiculous humiliating outfit — and was asking some shitty cop, who talked to her like she was trash, to protect her.

5

Ryan didn't even look at her. His gaze, just like before, was fixed on Rick, with something questioning and even a bit pleading in it.

— You'll take her then? — he asked evenly, as if he was offering a colleague to take an extra folder off the desk.

Rick spread into a satisfied grin.

— Yeah, no problem, — he said right away, without even thinking. — I'll take her. Since she's my... — he threw a quick glance at Svetlana, — acquaintance.

Svetlana didn't seem to understand right away what had just happened.

She stood, slightly leaning forward, feeling her calves tense, the muscles in her lower legs stretched tight like a string, and her feet already starting to burn from the unfamiliar angle.

The thought didn't have time to form. Everything that followed seemed to slip past her, not staying.

— Hey, don't space out, — Rick lazily threw out and, without even asking, grabbed her by the wrist.

Her legs moved on their own while Rick held her firmly by the elbow with his wide, rough palm and led her somewhere. Her heels were already tapping against the linoleum in short, uneven beats, each step echoing with a tremor in her thighs. She looked around — at the station walls, at her breasts swaying with each step — and only one thought spun in her head: 'This is just a joke. This just can't be real. This is just an experiment and a fucking artificial "Town." But why does everything feel SO real? And this file. And this cop. No. He's an actor. But then why the hell is he overacting like this if he knows who I am?' The thoughts tangled, Gregory's voice inside muttered about logic, got angry at everyone, cursed, but only a quiet, broken exhale came out.

The station door slammed behind them. Cold air hit her face, slipped under the short skirt, burned her skin. Steps. A slippery edge. His hand pulling forward. She tried not to fall — short, awkward steps, knees almost together because of the skirt, heels clicking too loud. Her breasts swayed heavily with every movement, knocking the breath out of her, pulling her down, forcing her to hunch more.

— Careful there... — he smirked, not slowing down for a second.

She heard him. But the meaning didn't register. Rick led her across the parking lot, not letting go of her elbow, and she followed him as if in a fog. Her legs moved on their own — in short, shuffling steps, knees slightly bent, her back tense to keep balance. Her breasts swayed heavily with every movement, the mesh digging into her skin, the earrings on long chains coldly hitting her neck.

She came back to herself only when they stopped by a tall truck. Rick sharply pulled her closer and she felt his breath right by her ear.

— And now, gorgeous, — he whispered low, with a rasp, — you owe me a proper thank-you for pulling you out of there. Deal?

His palm confidently landed on her ass and squeezed hard through the thin glossy fabric of the skirt. His fingers dug into the soft flesh, pulling her hips toward him. Svetlana shuddered all over, feeling her wide

hips involuntarily shift, how the thong under the skirt tightened from the movement. Her breasts pressed against his jacket, her nipples instantly reacting with a sharp tingling under the mesh.

6

— Let go... — she exhaled, but her voice came out thin, trembling, almost pleading. She tried to push him away with her free hand, but her fingers with long nails only helplessly slid over the rough fabric of his jacket.

Rick only smirked, squeezing tighter, and leaned even closer, his stubble scraping her cheek, making Svetlana flinch. She tried to pull away, but her heel slipped again, and her body swayed forward, right into him. She clenched her teeth, trying to keep her balance, feeling her calves tighten again with strain, her feet literally aching from the height, the skirt not letting her step back properly.

— I said... let me go, — she forced out more quietly, trying to bring at least some firmness back into her voice.

Inside, everything mixed together. Anger. Fear. And that strange, irritating feeling of helplessness that once drove Gregory Morgen crazy with excitement, but now, here, in this cold air, with this real hand gripping her body, felt completely different. Not like that at all.

Svetlana froze for a second, as if something inside clicked, switched. Her breathing hitched, her breasts under the mesh rose and fell heavily, and with that came a clear, unpleasantly cold realization — this was definitely not a game.

— Not now, sweetheart... not now, — he whispered, pressing closer.

Her fingers trembled, then suddenly clenched into a fist. Her nails dug into her palm, reminding her of her position again.

— I'm not your "sweetheart," — she exhaled differently now, a bit louder and more confident, but still with that stupid tremor in her voice. — And I sure as hell don't owe you anything.

And in that moment her fist flew into his face and actually hit, smacking against his fat cheek with a dull sound.

But instead of triumph, Svetlana immediately cried out from sharp pain: her long red nails dug into the skin of her palm, and her hand itself throbbed with a sharp, pulsing wave, as if she had hit not a cheek, but a concrete wall.

— A-ah—fuck!.. — burst out of her in a high, trembling voice, and she instinctively pressed her bruised hand to her breasts. Her heavy breasts swayed from the sudden movement, the mesh painfully dug into her skin, and her nipples instantly responded with a sharp tingling.

Rick, however, rocked back half a step, but more from surprise than from the force of the blow. He slowly turned his head back to her, ran his tongue over his lip as if checking for blood, and slightly furrowed his brows.

— Now that's some gratitude, — he said dully and stepped forward, looming over her again with his full mass. — You've got no fear left, huh, bitch?

Svetlana stepped back, her heel struck the asphalt again and slipped. She flung her arms, trying to keep her balance, and didn't fall only because the truck's metal was right there.

At that moment, sharply from the other end of the parking lot, came a shout:

— HEY! Rick what the fuck is this?!

Both Rick and Svetlana sharply turned their heads toward the voice.

7

A tall man was approaching them, wearing a dark jacket with a reflective vest stitched onto it, a mug in his hand with steam lazily rising from it. He walked confidently, with heavy steps, and just from his expression it was clear he was in a very serious mood.

Rick froze, still keeping his hand on her ass, but no longer with the same confidence.

— What the fuck are you doing?.. — he threw out again, this time coming closer, stopping just a few steps away.

Rick didn't let go of Svetlana right away. His fingers tightened on her thigh for another second, as if he hadn't fully realized yet that the situation had changed. Then he slowly tilted his head to the side.

— It's all fine, boss, — he drawled with a lazy smirk, but already without the previous confidence. — We were just—

— Take your hand off, — the man cut him off shortly.

Rick's fingers loosened.

Svetlana jerked back sharply, freeing herself, and immediately staggered, clenching her teeth and looking away somewhere down and to the side. Her bruised hand throbbed with a dull pain, and her legs ached from the strain.

— Rick, how many times have I told you? — the man continued in an even, heavy voice. — No whores on the lot.

— I'm not a whore! — burst out of her in a breaking voice, and for some reason, even as she said it, she herself began to doubt this seemingly obvious statement, because catching the gaze of the tall man — her "savior" — she instantly realized how ridiculous all of this sounded.

— Yeah, — he snorted shortly. — None of you are whores.

Svetlana clenched her teeth. Her fist tensed again, nails digging into her palm, sending a dull pain through her already bruised hand. Her breasts under the mesh rose heavily, the fabric stretched tight, reminding her of itself, and she, frowning, pressed them with her wrist, feeling the soft, heavy flesh give under the pressure, pushing out between her forearms and forcing the mesh to dig deeper into her skin.

— I'm not a whore, — she repeated quieter now, but with a stubborn note in her voice, which still sounded too thin and high to her own ears.

But the man had already shifted his gaze back to Rick.

— You got the paperwork done? — he asked shortly, not even looking at Svetlana, as if she had already stopped being the center of the scene.

Rick perked up and smiled.

— The cop, I mean, Officer McKenzie said everything's fine... — Rick shrugged, but already less confidently than a second ago, throwing a quick glance at the boss, — ...we can go.

The man took a short sip, not taking his eyes off him.

— Where are the papers?

Rick hesitated for a second.

— Well... there, with him. I told you — everything's fin—

— Then go. Get them. — The voice became a bit harsher, without raising, but in a way that even the air seemed to tighten. — You're not "going" anywhere without papers.

Rick grimaced, but didn't argue. However, as he was leaving, he still jerked slightly toward Svetlana and lazily nodded toward the truck.

— You get in the truck for now.

8

He already reached for her again, like she was just an object that could be moved from one place to another, but Svetlana immediately jerked back before she even had time to think. Her heel slipped on the wet asphalt, her foot tensed painfully, and she barely kept her balance, grabbing onto the cold metal of the truck.

— Don't touch me! — burst out of her.

Her voice jumped up again, thin, sharp, and it almost made her feel sick.

Rick snorted.

— Oh come on. You'll just sit for five minutes—

— I said: hands off her, — the tall man repeated.

Now he wasn't just speaking heavily — he was speaking in a tone after which even the dumbest start to understand that if they argue, their jaw is going to hurt for a long time, maybe even for the rest of their life.

Rick slowly straightened up, raised his hands in the air, like he'd been unfairly accused of something.

— Alright, alright. What are you getting worked up for? I just wanted to help. It's cold, she must be freezing.

His gaze darted to Svetlana's tits, which she was covering with her wrist, and that same lazy, oily smirk flashed across his face again.

— ...yeah, really, she needs to warm up, — he added more quietly, almost under his breath, giving a slight wink, sending a wave of goosebumps down Svetlana's back.

— Rick, — the man said, louder now but without shouting, — go to McKenzie. Now.

Rick opened his mouth, but the boss only slightly lifted his chin, and that was enough. The subordinate cursed under his breath, spat to the side, and, no longer looking at Svetlana, heavily walked back toward the police building.

She remained standing there, slightly hunched, still pressing her hand to her breasts, hearing the fading footsteps. Her heart was pounding in her throat, echoing in her temples, in her ears, in her fingers. Her hand throbbed with a dull pain, reminding her of itself with every smallest movement. This was already too humiliating. Too much, even for Gregory with all his fantasies.

And although Gregory's fantasies were different — and even worse, much worse — the harsh realism that had covered her fragile body and the situation she found herself in made her think only about wanting to go back and forget, erase all these memories, as if they had never existed.

She slowly exhaled through clenched teeth.

— I'm not a whore, — she repeated, almost in a whisper now, more to herself than to anyone else.

The tall man didn't interrupt her. He just stood nearby, a bit to the side, not pressing, not coming closer.

— I heard that, — he said after a short pause.

Svetlana raised her eyes to him, and he, taking another sip, looked into her eyes. His eyelid twitched, he set the mug down on the hood and quickly, as if wanting to make up for his careless subordinate, took off his jacket with the reflective vest and, without making any kind of "heroic" gesture out of it, held it out to Svetlana.

— Here, put it on, — he said, a bit more quietly than before. — It's really cold.

9

Svetlana froze, staring at the jacket held out to her. Inside, everything was still boiling with anger, humiliation, and that irritating feeling that everything around her was saying — no, screaming — that she was exactly what she looked like. That she was, and had always been, that same whore. And even though she knew the truth, knew that all of this was temporary, it was as if reality didn't give a damn. It kept saying it louder and louder: "You're Svetlana, a whore from Moldova, working illegally in Canada and the U.S."

And that jacket from this "savior" only seemed to underline even more how everything was not the same as before. Not like in that controlled, or so she thought, "Town," where she was just going to try living out one of her fantasies for real.

For real...

But not like this kind of real, right?

Svetlana kept looking at the outstretched jacket, not daring to take it right away, even though the cold was really starting to be felt. Not to mention that she simply felt disgusted by the fact that she was essentially naked. And this jacket, which seemed huge, was really starting to pull her thoughts toward it more and more.

— I'm not... — she started and immediately stumbled.

She sharply looked away, as if she couldn't allow herself to look at him at that moment, feeling her cheeks burn.

— I'm not cold, — she added, quieter now, and heard herself how... ridiculous it sounded.

A cold wind swept across her legs at that moment, slipping under her skirt, goosebumps ran over her skin, and she involuntarily pressed her knees together a bit tighter, feeling her muscles tense, the fabric pulling and sticking to her skin again.

The man didn't take the jacket back.

— Yeah, — was all he said calmly, and the next second the heavy jacket was already on her shoulders.

The fabric was still warm from his body, soaked with the smell of diesel, coffee, and male sweat. Svetlana shuddered as the weight of the jacket settled on her, and she instinctively hunched her shoulders, pulling her head in, feeling the rough lining slide over her skin, catch on the mesh, press her breasts a bit tighter than before. The warmth hit her body immediately, sharply, almost painfully pleasant in contrast to the wind.

— I... didn't ask, — she squeezed out quietly, lifting the collar of the jacket and shifting from one foot to the other, trying to find a more comfortable stance in those heels.

— And I didn't ask you, — the man replied calmly, already lifting his mug back up.

Svetlana pressed her lips together for a second. That seemingly ordinary, even somewhat stereotypically masculine reply, as if knocked another support out from under her, so that she almost physically felt it fly past her ear with a ringing, almost cartoonish "whooooosh."

She awkwardly shifted her shoulders, feeling the weight of the jacket, and then suddenly, a bit unexpectedly even for herself, turned her head toward this "good guy" and, staring at him, said:

— Call your boss!

10

He went silent for a second, looking at her a bit more closely.

— What?

Svetlana straightened up sharply, as much as the heels and her aching calves allowed, and immediately felt her heavy breasts shift under the jacket, bumping against the lining. The fabric pressed them even tighter than the mesh had, and that only made the irritation inside her worse.

— The one who... — she stumbled, exhaled раздражённо, — who's in charge here in this "Town," got it? Or are you also pretending you don't know anything?

He kept looking at her for a few more seconds, studying her face, which with every passing moment was losing that sudden confidence and arrogance that had appeared on it, becoming more and more... soft?

— What "Town" are you even talking about, — he finally said evenly. — This is a lot by the station in Fort St. John, girl.

Svetlana flinched with her whole body at that "girl," as if she'd been jabbed with something sharp again.

— Don't call me that, — she snapped.

He slightly raised an eyebrow, but didn't argue.

— Alright. I won't. — he gave a slight smile, but immediately dropped it when he saw Svetlana's face, — How did you even end up here? — a pause, he sharply turned away. Smiled and added more quietly, scratching the back of his head, — Though... damn, what am I saying. Stupid question, really.

Svetlana froze for a second, once again feeling that sting of "truth," and was about to open her mouth to tell the real truth that had already worn her down herself, but immediately shut it. Not now. Not with this big guy.

— I... — she started and immediately faltered, looking away to the side and squeezing the jacket so hard her nails dug into it, sending pain through her already bruised hand.

She sharply exhaled, clenched her teeth and raised her gaze to him, as if deciding whether it was worth going down that road called "Gregory Morgen" again.

— This is... a mistake, — she finally said. — All of this.

— A mistake, — the man repeated calmly. — Yeah. I get it.

He took another sip and added:

— Judging by the way you look, you've been making mistakes... for a long time. And pretty often, huh?

Svetlana flinched, as if expecting something else. An apology, a laugh. But no, damn it, no. He said it so calmly and routinely, even with a hint of pity, like he was talking about something long understood, something that no longer caused either anger or interest.

For a second she just stared at him without blinking.

Something inside jerked unpleasantly — not like before, when jealous people or reporters tried to piss her off, but deeper. As if he wasn't trying to humiliate her... just stating a diagnosis. And that made it worse.

— Fuck you... — she exhaled, lowering her gaze and noticing that on the ground all this time lay that same black handbag with the thin chain.

Apparently, she had dropped it when that fat bastard Rick was grabbing at her.

She stared at the handbag as if it could give her an answer. For a moment everything else — the cold, the man beside her, the station, the heels, the pain in her legs — faded into the background. Only that black glossy thing with the thin chain remained, lying in the dirt.

11

Svetlana slowly bent down.

And immediately felt how her body reacted to the movement: her breasts swayed heavily under the jacket, painfully hitting the lining, the skirt tightened over her hips, letting the cold air instantly slide along her thighs, and her aching calves immediately reminded her that even this simple movement now required effort and caution. She clenched her teeth, trying not to pay attention to any of it, and reached down.

Her fingers with long nails awkwardly hooked the chain, not forgetting to hit the asphalt in the process and forcing her to adjust her hand movement to account for them too.

Finally, clutching the damp handbag in her hands, she straightened up and froze for a second.

— Yours? — the man asked calmly, nodding at the handbag.

Svetlana didn't answer right away. She looked at it, feeling her fingers involuntarily tighten around the glossy surface, her nails slightly sliding over it.

— ...huh? — she finally said, quietly, almost in a whisper, — I guess... mine...

She heard herself how pathetic and uncertain that sounded, and that immediately twisted something inside her again. Her fingers tightened around the glossy handbag, feeling the cheap smooth surface under them and hearing the word "mine," which she had just said, echo in her head.

The man didn't comment on her answer. He only tilted his head slightly, studying her no longer as distantly as a minute ago.

— Alright, — he said after a short pause. — By the way, my name's Hank. Hank Donahue.

He looked at her as if expecting her to immediately respond and introduce herself, but that didn't happen.

— And you? — he added, as if casually.

She already opened her mouth.

— Gre—

For a moment, that room in the station flashed before her eyes again: the gray table, the folder, Ryan's dry voice, that indifferent "Svetlana Tseban," said so casually, and then those photos from the file, obvious Photoshop, as it had seemed to her, but looking too real, just like the fact that her file and biography were even in the police system. And again Ryan's voice: "Svetlana Tseban, 25 years old, born in Moldova... three arrests for illegal prostitution."

She went silent, feeling her cheeks instantly burn, and sharply covered her mouth with one hand, while with the other she squeezed the handbag harder, so that the chain dug into her fingers, and looked away to the side, at the dirty asphalt of the parking lot.

— Svet—

But even that name didn't come out.

It got stuck too, because saying "Svetlana" felt like signing something final. Admitting it. Admitting that she, maybe temporarily, but truly, was this Svetlana. This... whore.

— ...no name, — she finally forced out, her voice coming out thin, almost a whisper. — I don't have a name.

Hank slowly nodded, as if that was exactly what he expected, and then slowly nodded again.

— I see, — he said quietly. — Yeah, in this line of work it's better without names. Less trouble.

12

She stared at him as if he had just hit her.

— What line of work?!— burst out of her sharply, though without the previous force. — Did you also decide that I'm...

A whore.

No. She didn't want to say that about herself. Not even in a question. Not even as a hint.

And so she just stayed silent. Silent and looking up at Hank from below, clutching the handbag and grinding her teeth, taking heavy breaths in and out through her nose.

Hank slightly raised his shoulders, as if about to explain something simple and obvious, opened his mouth:

— Listen, I just meant—

But at that moment a loud sound rang out as the door of the station slammed shut.

Svetlana flinched before she even understood why. And when she turned her head toward the sound, she literally felt herself shrink, like a sponge being squeezed dry.

Rick.

He was coming out onto the porch, already pulling on his greasy jacket properly as he walked, and when he noticed her next to Hank, he immediately locked his eyes on her. This time there was no smirk on his face. Only a heavy, angry look of a man who had just been put in his place in front of others.

Svetlana instinctively pulled Hank's jacket tighter around herself and took a small step back without even noticing it. Her heel clicked shortly against the asphalt. Her heart slammed somewhere right up in her throat.

Hank shifted his gaze from her to Rick, lingered on his subordinate's face for an extra second, and his own expression noticeably hardened. Then he looked back at Svetlana — more attentively now.

— Listen, — he said evenly, as if making a decision on the spot. — I'm heading into town anyway. I can give you a ride to the motel.

Svetlana didn't answer.

She was still looking at Rick. He lingered on the porch, shoved his hands into his pockets and didn't leave. Just stood there and watched. And from that look, everything that had happened by the truck surfaced in her memory too vividly: his hand, the heavy breath by her ear, the rough whisper, the feeling that everything about it was wrong. Not a fantasy. Not a game. Not an "experience." Real.

— You're staying at a motel, right? — Hank asked a bit softer now, but without pressure.

Svetlana froze.

The question was simple. So simple that it almost felt scary. Because she didn't know. Didn't know where Svetlana Tseban was "staying." Didn't know if she even had a room, a key, documents, money. Didn't know how many more surprises this reality had in store for her — a reality that, it seemed, didn't give a damn who she used to be.

But Rick was still standing on the porch.

Svetlana swallowed, not taking her eyes off the station, and then slowly nodded.

— Yeah, — she forced out quietly. — At a motel.

Hank looked at her as if he understood more than she wanted to show, but didn't press further.

— Alright, — he said. — Then let's go. And you don't have to tell me your name if you don't want to. It's enough for me that you don't want to stay here.

Svetlana looked up at him.

She couldn't answer right away. Inside, some dull, pointless argument was still going on — between the urge to snap back, to order him around, to tell him to go to hell, to demand explanations, to call the professor, to smash this whole fucked-up experiment to hell — and the simple, humiliating understanding that right now it would be better for her to just get into his truck and get out of here as fast as possible.

She nodded again, this time a bit more confidently.

Hank picked up his mug from the hood and stepped aside, toward where he had come from to "save" her — toward his pickup parked a little away from the main row.

Svetlana stood still.

— You coming?

Svetlana blinked, as if the question didn't reach her right away.

— Huh?.. — slipped out of her quietly.

Hank stood there, looking at her with a questioning gaze.

Svetlana looked at him. At the mug in his hand. At that confident silhouette. Then at Rick, at the way he continued to stare at her with a gaze that was either greedy or satisfied. Once again she felt the phantom trace of his squeezing on her ass.

And then... she took a step.

— I'm coming... — she stepped forward, almost immediately stumbling over her own heel and sharply throwing her free hand forward so she wouldn't crash straight onto the asphalt, but Hank reacted in time, immediately grabbing her by the elbow, helping her stay on her feet.

— Easy, — he said quietly, letting her go and simply offering his wrist as support.

Svetlana stared at his wrist as if he wasn't offering a hand, but something far more dangerous.

Her eyes widened, that same mix of helplessness washed over her again — the one she was already tired of drowning in since this morning, and which was starting to feel almost familiar, less overwhelming.

— I can walk on my own, — she cut him off, taking an awkward step forward. Then another. Then another.

Her calves tensed again, her breasts swaying under the jacket. Her heels clicked against the asphalt in short, uneven beats.

Hank walked beside her, not trying to grab her again, but watching her, thinking about something of his own, or maybe trying to understand this girl and her strange behavior, which seemed both strange and not strange at the same time. Her whole appearance said one thing, but her actions, words, and thoughts said something completely different. And that whole set of contradictions, in a strange way, drew attention. But not the way women attract men. More like something that stands out from the usual picture. Like a detail that doesn't fit, but because of that, catches the eye more than anything else.

...

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Epilogue of Episode 2

— You did WHAT?! — the loud, slightly nasal voice of Professor Klaus Werner cut through the lab like a knife, slicing apart the usual quiet order of the place.

The young assistant at the terminal — thin, with slightly messy hair — froze, not taking his eyes off the screen where lines of data kept running. Nearby stood a woman in a white lab coat, arms crossed over her breasts, staring at the floor as if trying to dissolve into the tiles.

Werner slowly lowered the tablet in his hands and shifted his gaze from one to the other.

— I... — the assistant started, but his voice betrayed him and trembled, — we acted according to protocol, sir.

— According to what protocol? — Werner asked quietly.

That “quietly” sounded far more dangerous than a shout.

— According to... the adaptive environment scenario, — he rushed on, as if speed could replace confidence. — The subject was supposed to be integrated into the model with maximum realism. You said it yourself: “no concessions, full immersion”... so we thought...

Werner closed his eyes for a second and took a very, very slow breath.

— You thought?! — Werner almost shrieked suddenly, — You thought?! You thought that with this level of immersion we wouldn't lose him?! Where is he now?! Do you know?! — he leaned toward the skinny guy, then straightened and leaned toward the woman, — or maybe YOU do?!

Spit flew from his mouth and settled in a thin spray on the edge of her white coat. The woman didn't even blink, only tightened her arms over her breasts, as if that could make her smaller and less noticeable.

— Sir, we didn't... — she began carefully, but Werner immediately raised his hand.

— Quiet, — he snapped.

The lab fell silent again, broken only by the low hum of server racks and the occasional click of a relay somewhere in the adjacent block. On one of the central screens, the neural environment diagram continued to flicker: layers, branches, colored nodes, dynamically shifting connections.

He turned away from them and began pacing back and forth, walking in circles, his steps striking the silence of the lab and echoing in each of the technicians like some strange phantom pain.

— We don't even know what his name is now! — he barked again, stopping abruptly and glaring at the boy, then at the woman, — what am I supposed to tell his father?! Huh? HUH?!

The boy at the terminal went so pale that even the monitor light no longer seemed like the coldest thing on his face.

— Sir... — he finally forced out, not lifting his eyes. — We... I... if we... then...

Werner ignored him and continued, as if just thinking out loud:

— The damn FBI forced me to create this protocol for their fucking agents, and what am I supposed to say now? What? “Hey guys, we used your secret AI-based global data rewriting system that leaves no trace of edits, so that some rich pervert—” — he cut himself off sharply, as if realizing how it sounded, and dragged a hand hard over his face, — “...so that one of the richest men on the planet could live out his fantasy. So now I need you, yes, don’t panic, to find — maybe somewhere in the world there’s some kind of strange... girl? Yes, with a face exactly like his and... what? Yes, she could be anywhere, at any point on the planet...” — he closed his eyes, — oh fuck... a girl...— Ahem. A prostitute, sir, — the assistant corrected quietly, almost automatically, not managing to filter the word.

Silence.

— I mean, we know the det—

Werner slowly turned his head toward him, silencing him with a single look.

— Thank you for the clarification, — he said in a tone that made it clear the assistant should have kept his mouth shut. — An incredibly valuable scientific classification. Almost saves the situation.

The boy went even paler and shrank into his shoulders.

The atmosphere felt tighter than a wire before a short circuit, and everyone, absolutely everyone, already understood that something was about to blow.

— Sir... there is one idea... — finally, as if waiting for the right moment, said the woman who had been silent all this time.