

Behind the Mask

Romy Verbruggen

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First Edition

Chapter 1

The rain fell as if the sky were trying to rid itself of something. Heavy, relentless, without pause. Tessa pulled her coat tighter around her and looked up at the gray stretch of sky above the city—a city that never truly slept, only pretended to.

She had worked late. Again. Her boss had asked her to finish a report, and she had said yes, even though every fiber in her body had screamed no. That was her problem—she couldn't say no. Not to her boss. Not to her mother. Not to the world that was slowly draining her dry.

But this time, it had cost her something she couldn't get back.

She hadn't heard his footsteps. That was the first thing that struck her when she later—much later—tried to reconstruct what had happened. No footsteps. No sound. Just the rain, and then the darkness—swift, total, irreversible.

Like a door slamming shut behind you.

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She didn't know how long she had been asleep. Minutes? Hours? There was no window to measure the light. Only candle flames—four of them—strategically placed like sentries in the corners of the room.

Tessa blinked her eyes open and waited for the panic. It would come. It had to come. But instead of the claws of fear, she felt something else—a cool, sharp curiosity rising from her chest.

She was lying on a bed. Not a metal cage, not a filthy mattress. A real bed, with dark sheets that smelled of something unfamiliar—woody, cold, and old. Her hands were bound in front of her, not behind, with rope tight enough to be serious but loose enough to keep her circulation intact.

Someone had thought this through.

That made it more interesting. And more dangerous.

"You're awake."

The voice came from the corner to her right. Low. Controlled. The kind of voice accustomed to being obeyed without ever needing to raise its volume. Tessa slowly turned her head.

He stood in the shadows as if they had personally invited him. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed in black like someone who had given up color as a matter of principle. And on his face—

A mask.

Smooth, black, expressionless. It covered everything above his jaw. But his eyes—they were visible. Dark, fixed, and unreadable in a way that made her stomach tighten in a way she refused to name.

Tessa licked her dry lips.

"For a while," she said. "I wanted to see when you would say something."

A silence. And then, so subtle she almost missed it: a movement at the corner of his mouth. Not quite a smile. Something more dangerous than that.

"Most people scream," he said.

"I'm not most people."

"No," he said slowly. "I can see that."

There was something in those words—not a compliment, but an observation from someone who had watched long enough to be certain. Tessa expected herself to shiver. She didn't. Instead, she studied him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"That doesn't matter."

"Why am I here?"

"That doesn't matter either. Not yet."

She nodded slowly, as if he had said something reasonable. "And the rope? Does that not matter either?"

He moved. One step forward, nothing more. But that single step was enough to change the air in the room—heavier, closer, charged with a tension she could feel against her skin.

"The rope," he said, "is a reminder. Not for you. For me."

Tessa looked at her wrists. At the rope. And then back at him.

"A reminder of what?"

"That I set boundaries," he said softly. "And that I keep them."

It was strange how reassuring that sounded. Strange—and perhaps unsettling that it sounded reassuring. But Tessa had always preferred honest monsters over kind lies.

And this man—whoever he was—didn't seem to be lying.

Not yet.

Chapter 2

She called him Zade.

Not because he had given her his name—he hadn't. But she refused to call him "he," as if he were an object without weight. A name gave him contours, and contours made him more traceable.

At least, that's what she told herself.

On the first day, she didn't eat. Not as a protest, but out of a peculiar need to see what he would do. Whether he would threaten her, expect pleas, grow impatient.

He did none of that.

He placed the plate on the floor beside the bed, looked at her for one second, and left the room. An hour later, there was a fresh plate.

She ate.

On the second day, she asked about his mask.

"Do you wear it at night too?" she asked. "When you sleep?"

"I sleep little."

"That's not an answer."

"No," he admitted. "It's not."

She waited. He offered no replacement. She quickly learned that he was a man of precise, measured words—never too many, never too few. Every sentence was a decision.

On the third day, a book appeared on the nightstand. No explanation, no accompanying note. Just a book, old and frayed at the spine, about the psychology of choices and the illusion of free will.

Tessa held it up so he could see it.

"Serious reading for a kidnapper."

"I'm not a kidnapper."

She glanced pointedly at the rope around her wrists. He had loosened it during the night—so loose now that it felt more ceremonial than functional.

"No," she said. "Of course not."

He pulled up a chair. That was new. Until now, he had always remained standing, always at a distance that allowed for two interpretations. Now he sat. Less than a meter away, elbows resting on his knees, eyes fixed on her.

"What are you like?" he asked.

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What are you like as a person. Apart from this." He gestured vaguely at the room, at the rope, at her situation. As if it were all incidental.

Tessa stared at him. She had expected to be interrogated. Threatened. Broken. Not—this.

"Curious," she said finally. "I'm curious."

"About what?"

"About everything." She paused. "About you."

It was the first time she saw his breathing change. Almost imperceptible—a slight delay, a fraction of a second. But she saw it.

"That," he said slowly, "is dangerous."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

He stood up. The distance returned, restored like a wall he needed. But when he looked at her before leaving the room, there was something in his gaze she hadn't seen before. Something that didn't belong to someone fully in control.

She kept that look like a stone slipped into her pocket. She didn't yet know what she would need it for.

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The book was good. That irritated her in a way she couldn't explain—that he had chosen exactly the kind of book she would have picked herself in a bookstore. As if he knew her. As if he had watched before he acted.

She read all night. Not because she couldn't sleep, but because reading felt like the only territory she still had control over.

And yet—in the quiet hours before dawn—she wondered what he looked like beneath that mask.

She pushed the thought away.

Then let it return.

Chapter 3

A week passed.

Tessa kept track of it in scratches on the wall behind the nightstand. Seven lines. Seven days of conversations that seemed to lead nowhere yet somehow everywhere. Seven days of Zade moving closer and then retreating, like a tide that refused to admit it wanted to be a flood.

She understood his game. Or she thought she did.

It began on the fifth day. She was sitting on the bed, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up, a book open on her lap. He walked in and stopped beside her bed. Close enough for her to feel the warmth of his presence.

Tessa didn't look up from her book.

"You're not reading," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Because you've been on the same page for ten minutes."

She closed the book. Looked up. He was so close she could see the texture of his mask, the way it curved along his jawline, the vein pulsing at his temple.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"You," she said, more honestly than was wise.

Silence. Thick and charged and full of everything left unsaid.

Then—he leaned forward slightly. Not enough. Never enough. His face level with hers, his eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made heat gather along her spine.

"Tessa," he said. Just her name. Nothing more. But the way he said it—slowly, almost carefully, as if it were something fragile—

And then he stepped back.

Just like that. Without reason. Back toward the door, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders straight and closed again.

"Your food is ready," he said.

Tessa watched him.

She was furious. Not because he had held her captive. But because he had let her feel what it was like to stand on the edge—and then pushed her back.

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"Do you always do it like this?" she asked the following evening.

"Do what?"

She gestured impatiently at the space between them. "This. Come closer, pull away. Come closer, pull away. It's a game."

Zade leaned against the wall, arms crossed. In the candlelight he looked larger than during the day. More dangerous. And yet there was something unexpected in his posture—a tension that didn't feel like brute strength but like the restraint of something that wanted to erupt.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "I don't want you to get used to the distance."

Tessa's heart did something it had no right to do.

"That's manipulation," she said.

"Yes."

No denial. No apology. Just the truth, raw and unwrapped.

"Why point it out?" she asked more quietly.

He looked at her for a long time—the kind of look that didn't judge but catalogued, as if he were storing every detail of her, every feature, every shade of her eyes in this light.

"Because," he said finally, "I don't want you to say later that I never let you know."

Later.

The word lingered in the air long after he was gone. Later implied a future. And a future implied that he had already thought beyond this moment, this room, this rope.

Tessa pulled the rope from her wrists.

She did it slowly, deliberately, knowing he could hear it if he stood on the other side of the door.

She waited.

The door remained closed.

And that told her more than any word he had ever spoken.

Chapter 4

There were things Zade did that no kidnapper would do.

That was what Tessa kept track of at night, in her head—like a list she forbade herself to write down, because paper was too permanent for thoughts she might later want to take back.

He brought her tea every morning. Not because she had asked for tea—but because he had seen her shiver on the first night, and the next morning there was a cup waiting. Hot, with exactly the amount of milk she used at home.

She had never told him how she took her tea.

That one detail unsettled her more than the rope ever had.

He brought books. Music on a small portable speaker he had set in the doorway one afternoon without explanation. The first day it was jazz, the second classical, the third something that felt like the soundtrack to a night that never wanted to become morning.

"What is this?" she had asked on the fourth day.

"Satie. Gymnopédies."

"Do you know more of his work?"

"All of it."

She had looked at him. "You don't see that often. Someone who knows everything about a composer."

"I've had a lot of time," he said. Something in his voice closed then, quickly, like a door that had been left slightly ajar.

She didn't press. But she remembered.

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On the tenth day, she asked him to stay.

He had taken up his usual position by the door, ready to leave, when she said it. Simply, without preamble.

"Stay."

He went still. Not for long—a fraction, a hesitation most people would have missed. But Tessa had learned to read him in millimeters.

"That's not a good idea," he said.

"I know. Stay anyway."

He stayed.

They sat in the room while Satie drifted from the speaker and the candles burned and the silence between them took on something that felt more like company than tension. Tessa read. Zade sat. He did nothing—no phone, no book, no distraction. He simply sat, looking at the wall, or the ceiling, or sometimes, when she wasn't looking directly at him, at her.

She knew he was looking at her. She let him.

"Why a mask?" she asked after an hour, without lifting her eyes from the page.

"You already know."

"I have a theory. That's not the same as knowing."

A long silence. Satie filled it.

"People react to faces," he said finally. "They read emotions, make judgments, build assumptions. A mask removes that. It leaves only the conversation."

"And when the conversation is over?"

Nothing.

"Zade."

She had never used his name so directly before. It sounded different than she had expected—more intimate, more dangerous, like a key turning in a lock.

He looked at her. And in his gaze was something she hadn't seen before—something on the verge of breaking through but still holding back, like a dam full of cracks that refuses to give way.

"Then there is nothing left," he said.

She didn't believe him. And he knew she didn't believe him. And neither of them said it out loud.

Chapter 5

The night she got sick changed everything.

It began as a shiver—subtle, as if her body were making a decision it hadn't asked her permission for. She lay in the dark, trying to ignore the tremors, to reason them away, to control them with sheer willpower.

But the body does not listen to will once it has decided to burn.

She didn't know what time it was when the door opened. She didn't know whether she had cried out, or groaned, or simply hesitated loudly enough in her breathing for him to hear it through the wall. She only knew that he was suddenly there—a dark figure bending over her—and that his hand touched her forehead.

Cold. His hand was cold. It felt like water on fire.

"How long?" he asked.

"I don't know." Her voice sounded thin.

He disappeared. She heard water running. He returned with a cloth and a glass, lifting her head with an efficiency that was nothing dramatic but entirely gentle.

"Drink," he said.

She drank.

He stayed.

That was what remained with her—not the cold cloth on her forehead, not the tea, not the blanket over her shoulders. But that he stayed. The entire night, in the chair beside the bed, his elbows on his knees and his eyes on her.

"Sleep," he said once.

"I don't trust you when I'm asleep," she murmured.

"That's wise."

"But I'll do it anyway."

And she did.

When she woke the next morning, he was still there. The same position, the same posture—but his eyes were closed. She looked at him—at the mask that remained on even in sleep, at the way his shoulders were less tense than during the day, at his hands resting loosely on his knees.

She hadn't noticed it in the fevered haze of the night, but now, in the early light, she saw it: his left hand had been holding hers. She didn't know when. She didn't know for how long. But there was warmth on her skin that had nothing to do with fever.

She didn't pull her hand away.

He opened his eyes. Looked at her. Looked at their hands. And slowly—so slowly she could see the decision move through him—he let her go.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Better." She paused. "Thank you."

He stood up. Turned away. And at the door, with his back to her, he stopped.

"Don't say that," he said. There was a crack in his voice she hadn't heard before.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the reason you're here. There's nothing to thank me for."

"You sat with me all night."

"That doesn't change the facts."

Tessa looked at his back. At the rigid line of his shoulders, the way he buried his hands in his pockets as if he had to hide them somewhere.

"Zade," she said softly.

He didn't turn around.

"The facts aren't the only thing that exists," she said. "You know that."

A long silence. The longest there had ever been between them.

Then he walked away.

But for the first time, he left the door slightly ajar.

Tessa looked at the opening. At the light slipping through the crack. At the freedom presenting itself like a question.

She didn't get up.

She lay back down, pulled the blanket around her, and thought about the warmth of a hand that had held hers without asking for anything in return.

That was the most dangerous thing he had done. Worse than the rope. Worse than the room. Worse than the mask he always kept in place.

He had given her something she couldn't give back.

And she already knew she wanted more of it.

Chapter 6

The door remained slightly ajar for three days.

Tessa counted them. Not deliberately, not with a goal, but her mind did what it had always done—inventory, categorize, recognize patterns in things others overlooked. Three days. Seventy-two hours of an opening about ten centimeters wide, enough to let light in but not enough to see what lay beyond.

She hadn't walked through it.

That was what unsettled her most. Not that the door was open. Not that Zade had done it—deliberately, she had no doubt that everything he did was deliberate. But that she hadn't taken advantage of it. That every morning she had woken, looked at the crack, and decided to stay.

She told herself it was strategic. That she was waiting for the right moment, gathering information, that escape would be more successful if she knew what was on the other side of that door. She built stories around it, neat constructions of logic stacked carefully together until they formed a reasoning she could sell to herself on cool, clear mornings when the candles had burned out and only the faint light from the hallway remained.

But on the third day, when she finally stood and walked to the door and placed her hand against the wood—cold, smooth, old wood with a texture like dry skin—she knew that wasn't the reason.

She pushed the door open.

A corridor. Long, low-ceilinged, with stone walls sweating moisture and torches screwed into holders at regular intervals. The light was orange and shifting, casting shadows that seemed alive. At the end of the corridor was a staircase—stone, narrow, leading upward. To her right was a heavy, ancient door. To her left, nothing but wall.

She stood in the doorway and listened.

Nothing. No footsteps, no voices, no signs of life beyond the distant drip of water somewhere deep in the building, and her own breathing, calmer than she deserved.

She could have left. She knew that. She could have climbed the stairs, searched for an exit, screamed until someone heard her. She didn't have her phone—that had

been gone from the start—but people were always there if you searched hard enough. The world had not stopped existing simply because she had been sitting in a candlelit room with Satie and a masked man who brought tea with the right amount of milk.

She took two steps into the corridor.

And then she heard him.

Not footsteps—she never heard him walk; that was his gift or his curse, the way he moved through spaces like a shadow that had decided to stand. But she heard his breathing, deep and steady, and she recognized it already. God help her, she recognized it after only a week and a half, the way you recognize the breathing of someone who has slept too close to you for too long.

She turned.

He stood at the other end of the corridor. In the flickering torchlight he looked more like a statue than a man—motionless, dressed in black, his mask reflecting the light in a way that replaced his face with something older and more dangerous. He hadn't stopped her. He hadn't called out, hadn't threatened, hadn't crossed the distance to grab her arm.

He simply stood there.

And watched.

They looked at each other across the length of the corridor, and the silence between them was so full she could almost touch its weight.

"You could have left," he said. No accusation in his voice. No relief. Just an observation, dry and precise, like someone noting a fact he already knew.

"I know," she said.

"Why didn't you?"

She looked at him. She thought of the truth—the real, uncomfortable, ill-fitting truth she had spent three days trying to reason away—and considered a lie, and finally chose something in between because she wasn't strong enough for the full truth and not weak enough for a complete lie.

"I'm more curious about where this is going than about what's outside," she said.

Silence.

"That's the stupidest thing you've ever said," he said.

"Probably."

He moved. Walked toward her, slowly, each step controlled and calculated in a way she now recognized as his way of thinking—he thought with his body, worked things out in movement before putting them into words. She stayed where she was. Her heart beat harder than she wanted, but her feet refused to retreat, and that felt like the only victory that mattered.

He stopped half a meter in front of her. Close enough for her to see details of his mask she missed during the day—a small imperfection near his left jaw, a hairline crack in the lacquer by his temple, traces of something he had applied himself long ago, with the kind of attention someone gives to something they wear every day.

"You don't understand what you're doing," he said.

"Then explain it to me."

"If I could, I would have already."

She looked up at him. He was a head taller than her, maybe more, and in the narrow corridor those centimeters felt heavier than in the room. She felt his warmth. She smelled him—something dark, something woody, something she couldn't name but would recognize instantly the next time she encountered it, in another space, in another world, maybe years later, and she would know it was his.

"Zade," she said softly.

"Go back to the room, Tessa."

"Give me a reason."

"I am the reason."

She waited for more. Nothing came. But there was something in the way he said it—not as a threat, not as a command, but as a confession he didn't fully allow himself to understand—and that something held her in place better than any rope ever had.

She went back to the room.

He followed her. And this time, when he pulled the door closed behind him, he didn't shut it completely. He left it slightly open again, and Tessa wondered if he realized that each time he did that he was choosing again, offering the chance again, and each time she didn't leave confirming something he might not yet be ready to hear.

She stared at the crack until the torchlight outside shifted from orange to gold to the faint gray of something that resembled morning. And the entire time she thought about the way he had said: I am the reason. Not: because I said so. Not: because you have no choice. But: I am the reason. As if his presence alone should be enough to keep her there.

The worst part was that maybe it was.

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She spent the following days reading and thinking and observing. Zade had a rhythm she now knew as well as her own—the morning tea, the afternoon silence, the evening conversations that began neutral and somewhere along the way turned into something she couldn't quite name but that felt like the kind of conversation you have with someone you've known for years, not someone who abducted you weeks ago and placed you in a stone room with candlelight and good books.

He asked questions about her life, her work, her habits, her thoughts on things that didn't matter and things that mattered very much. Never personal enough to make her wary, but always just deep enough to pull something loose. She found herself answering more honestly than she ever had with people she'd known for years—people she loved or had loved, people she had lived with and worked with and eaten beside.

That was perhaps the most dangerous thing he did. Not the confinement, not the room, not the mask. But the way he listened—fully, without distraction, without the urge to immediately counter with his own story—and how that listening made her say things she hadn't known she needed to say.

"You don't miss anyone," he said one evening. It wasn't a question.

She looked up from her book. "How do you know?"

"You've never mentioned anyone. Not a name, not a reference. You've been here fourteen days and you haven't asked whether anyone is looking for you, whether anyone is afraid for you, whether anyone has called the police."

Tessa thought about it. It was true. She hadn't realized it, but it was true—there was no face that kept her awake at night, no voice she missed, no place she longed for with the intensity you would expect from someone in her situation.

"I have friends," she said.