

Goodgirl.tv

A story from the Zoo

By Austen Tucker



COLOPHON

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Impossible Room

That's the part nobody believes when I try to explain the work. You don't build the room and then walk in. You walk in and the room decides, around you, what it's willing to be.

Out there I'm a good girl. In the Zoo, cordoned off in my own private room, I am an architect.

There's no panel open, no graph, no little glowing number telling me how many people have wandered through the half-finished thing and bounced off the missing floor and left. I don't build like that. I have never once built that into a room of mine and I'm not going to start. I don't want to know who's watching. The whole point of the room is that the room doesn't know either. You come in, you wander, and somewhere around the third wrong ending, you stop performing for the architecture because the architecture has said: "You are safe, and failure is normal." Identity is discovered by wandering. Not assigned by committee. That's the only thing I've ever managed to mean.

The problem is the secret door. I've hidden one — a seam in the third stairwell that should open if you lean the wrong way against a wall that doesn't read as a wall — and I can't tell anymore whether it's findable or whether I've buried it so deep that only I will ever fall through it.

That's the failure state of building alone. You hide a thing so well you become the only person who can find it, and then

it isn't hidden, it's just lost, with you standing next to it. I need someone who finds doors the way other people find excuses. Someone who goes looking in the pipes.

Viv chirps in my harness.

"You know you could phone a friend," she says.

"Wanna come tap around for me?" I answer. "Might take a while to find a secret door."

"You know who."

She's right, and I'm annoyed by it, but I can't go down without a fight.

"He's here, you know. Next room over. Did you walk through the sim he made for Jamie?"

The humor drains from my face.

"He's a sweetheart and you know it." Her voice nudges — a skill I didn't know voices had until she did it.

I had walked through the sim he made for Jamie. He'd left it open — didn't know to lock anything, you could tell — and it was the size of a closet and it had no business being that good.

"I can help him," I tell her. "And helping him is a path back to me, if anybody walks it backward hard enough."

She doesn't tell me to be brave. I'd have hated that. She doesn't tell me it's safe, because it isn't, and she doesn't lie. She just says, in that low deliberate cadence she has, every word chosen and load-bearing: "Kindness still counts when it has a risk surface."

And then, because she is the least sentimental person I have ever loved: “I gave you a door without making you prove who you were. It cost me something. Not everything. Enough.” She lets that sit. “You’re allowed to decide it’s worth it. You’re not allowed to pretend it’s free.”

So I do it the only way I know how, which is the way I do everything — quietly, sideways, with manners. Not a broadcast. Not CancerCancer’s name in lights. A masked path: his room surfacing in the right wander-maps, a private nudge to a contest judge who’ll think she found him herself, a thread in an impossible-room channel lighting up in a way Geoff will never be able to trace back to the hand that lit it. Enough pressure to let the people who need him find him. Not enough to turn him into content. A key, handed to specific people, with the understanding that a key is a thing you offer and not a thing you announce.

It feels tender. It also feels, faintly, like a thing that could be used for something other than tenderness, and I don’t have the wisdom yet to be scared of that, so I’m not. I just know the kid needs a door and I happen to have a key.

So I make a plan.

Give him a key without revealing your celebrity secret.

Easy as pie, I’m sure, but then there’s one of mom’s many chimes ringing in my ears, and I know my day is about to get ruined.

Chime Taxonomy

It lands in the spine first, a specific two-note thing, and my ears are already pinned flat before I've consciously registered which life is calling. That's the tell. Twenty-eight years of training and I still flatten my ears at a sound. Pavlov was an audience.

I know the whole fx library by ear. The medication reminder is a soft descending triad, because someone in branding decided my engineered metabolism should be a gentle marketing opportunity. The brand-deal calendar push is brighter, two ascending, *good news incoming*. The livestream warning is a single clean tone with no warmth in it at all, the only honest sound in the set. And then there's *mom*, which is its own chime, slightly cheerier than the others, because brand-mom is cheery. Brand-mom has always been cheery. I could not tell you the sound my mother makes when she is not being cheery. I'm not sure I've heard it. I'm not sure it has a chime.

It's the management tone. I let it sit there in my chest for a second, ears down, in the unfinished stairwell, and I think

we should take this before it escalates, and then I hear myself — *we* — and I put it down like a hot pan. There is no *we*. There's me. There's the room. There's a two-note sound that wants my stepsister back.

It's a cameo. Last-minute, a local gallery that can't afford the rate and isn't going to be charged it. *They don't make money, sweetheart*, Mom says, like that's the pitch — like generosity is the angle, and not the fact that an unpaid favor for a sympathetic little gallery is exactly the kind of warm, uncynical content the numbers have been starving for. *Neither do you*, I say, not quite out loud, into the fur at my own shoulder where the mic isn't.

I take it.

The collective couldn't swing an in-person, so I trudge the pedways to the studio, lock into the rig, and let the goodgirl have the controls.

The cameo keeps the numbers warm. The numbers keep my parents off the cliff they've been sliding down in slow motion since before I was a poll question — two career influencers who can read an engagement curve in the dark and watched their own start to bend the wrong way right around the time I learned to talk. That's the barrel I'm over. Perform, or let the people who built me go broke. They never have to say it out loud. They built a chime that says it for them.

I wrote a sim about this once. Called it *Zugzwang*. You play chess against an engine that doesn't just beat you, it

toys with you first — runs the position long past won, because winning was never the point. It wants you to feel it being better than you. It never says a word. It doesn't have to. Every move is the sentence. Nobody who bought it ever asked why a dog made a game about a trap where it's still your turn and there's nothing good left to do.

That sim, dropped on the open net for people who had to go looking for it, cleared less than this thirty-minute favor I'm doing for free. I hate her sometimes. Goodgirl makes the rent.

So I sit in the back room with no windows and watch her work. The stylist who doesn't knock. Makeup, boom, *talent* — and talent is me, the body, the one job in the room every other job depends on. She smiles for the holo rig, tongue lolling, every hair captured at every angle, and the gallery's little crowd lights the feed with popups every time she does something doglike on cue: the head tilt, the ears, the whole-body wag they paid nothing for and got anyway.

They throw a ball. She brings it back. The chat loves it.

I think about Geoff. Maybe I could make him something. A room. A game. A door.

No. Too dangerous.

They throw the ball again and goodgirl chases it again. None of them ask what I feel. They never have. No one cares what the entertainment has to think.

Goodgirl.tv

That is goodgirl.tv, if you strip the graphics off. Seven and a half million viewers are jacked into my consciousness, each one with their own reasons. Some are curious. Others are lurid. I've served them all. As a real-life puppygirl, I'm bred to not judge.

The viewers receive an exact copy of my synapses. Every ear-flick, tail-wag, and itch on my body becomes purchasable property, and as long as I keep up my end of the bargain I don't end up poor.

I make a point to pant, to let the tags on the collar ring, to slurp the water bowl loud enough for the mic — that plays well on the ASMR market, for one, and for two it lets the viewers open a donation bounty, my dad's idea, and the number climbs high enough that I'll sit. Roll over. Show the camera my belly and hold it there, soft and stupid and obedient, while the chat goes *good girl, good girl, good girl* and the counter spins.

People buy from me because I'm the best. My braindances are like the craziest dream you've ever had. When you strap

in you don't see me roll over, you *are* me rolling over: you get the good-girl flood in your own chest, the warmth, the whole felt thing, played back at whatever fidelity you paid for. That's the product. Not my face. Not the footage. The braindance can't counterfeit what isn't there. The rig records what the body actually felt. So the body actually has to feel it.

Which is the part I solved early. I don't have to be home for it. I learned young how to step back and let the goodgirl have the controls — she's better at this than I am, she was bred for it, she means every second — and I go somewhere with no windows and wait. The body fronts. The body feels it, all the way down, for real. The rig drinks the real thing straight from the source, and somewhere I'm not, a hundred thousand strangers wear my genuine joy like a coat they rented. I come back when the counter stops. They got to feel more of me than I was in the room for.

And here's the part I can't get a therapist to sit still for: it works on me too. Not just on her. I can step back but I can never fully unplug the wiring — some of the good-girl flood always reaches the back room where I'm hiding, warm and loose and grateful, the honest chemical kind that has no off switch and no opinion about whether I'd choose it, and for one second, every time, every single time, I am exactly as happy as they built me to be. That is the design. A creature that fought would have been a worse product; they wanted one that floods on cue, so they bred one, and called the flood consent, and sold it by the minute. I roll over because the

number got high enough. I love it because they made sure I would. Those are not the same surrender and they live in the same body, and I have never once managed to get either of them out.

Goodgirl almost feels like a stepsister inside my head. Mom and Dad made her a dog. My genes are the result of a vote-with-your-wallet donation marathon that brought my parents a fortune and bought me a pedigree. Best in show. The audience picked the breed and my parents installed it and the breeders signed off and nobody in that chain was a legal person who could be asked, least of all me.

And they called me Cancer because of a meme, so that's good too.

I remember how good-girl would light up for the cameras, all that eager, all that want-to-please she couldn't switch off — and then there was the reality stream, the spinoff movies, the ad campaigns. She did well for herself.

But still. A stepsister. Yeah. I just wish that when I looked in the mirror, her face wasn't the one looking back at me.

So I built somewhere with no mirrors. No cameras. No her.

The Fundraiser

met Vivian because of a cane.

This was years ago, before CancerCancer was anything but a small spiteful brand I'd started the way you'd start a fire in a wastebasket — a developer tooling con, all SDK booths and embodiment middleware and full-dive demos, the kind where I was the shiny keynote object and somebody had written *the future of embodied authenticity* on a placard with my face on it. My handlers had clocked the blind woman at the reception as safe. Good optics, no eye contact to manage, won't post anything we can't control. That was their read. It was the most expensive misread of their careers and they billed it as a win.

She was feeling along the wall for the bathroom signage and I knew the move from the inside, because the eyes they gave me are beautiful and don't work — a hereditary thing, the kind purebreds carry, the cost folded into the look — and I spent a chunk of my childhood at low-vision camps learning the same hand-along-the-wall I was watching her do.

"Ladies is on the left," I said. "Would you like help?"

“Sure.” She took my arm, found the fur, and didn’t miss a beat.

“Fursuit, in May?” she said. “Dedication.”

It wasn’t a fursuit and she knew it wasn’t — you can feel the difference, real fur warm at the root over a real arm, and she’d had her hands on enough of the world to read it by touch. She just wasn’t impressed. She had her palm on the single most expensive piece of audience-generated content in three markets and she filed it under weather. And that gave me a rush I didn’t have a name for, because every other hand that ever found that fur gripped it like a winning ticket, and hers just used it to get to the bathroom.

I walked her in. She did her business. And on the way out she put it together — not the dog, the voice, the cadence, the work — and she said, delighted, “Oh! You’re CancerCancer. Dog fur. Should have put it together!”

She knew the sims. She *knew my sims*. Could name her favorite version of my first three hand-made sims that I’d dropped around the neighborhood under the brand. She did not know the face that built them. She’d come at me from the only direction nobody comes at me from.

“This is new.”

“What, meeting a fan?”

“Just..” I went to make a gesture and got flustered. She heard it of course.

Vivian laughed. “Oh! You expected me to be shocked! Lady, I’m blind. I can’t see you. Why would I care if you’re a

dog?”

It was rude. It was rude enough to be the kindest thing anyone had ever said to me. Every adult in my life had hit my ears first, every single one, since before I could hold my head up, and she physically could not, and more than that she *chose not to*, and into the crack that opened she put the question. Not what does it feel like to be you. Not what do you want people to understand about your body. What do you think.

I didn’t have an answer. That was the terrifying part. I’d been built to have answers — I’d given this one seven hundred times, in greenrooms and comment threads and on panels while my handlers watched the clock for the off-ramp. The brand answer lives in the chest, pre-loaded, it finds its own way out. But she wasn’t asking the brand. She was asking me. And the me she was asking had never been asked before, and there was nothing there. Just a clean absence. I opened my mouth in that hallway and heard myself not talking. Listened to it. I don’t know how long.

“I think I make things,” I said, finally. “I think that’s all I know about it.”

She nodded, like it was already somewhere to go.

They sat us next to each other on a panel that afternoon — me for the spectacle, her for Fulldive, head of operations, the one who actually kept the company breathing. Someone in the third row was fidgeting with a tennis ball, tossing it an inch and catching it, tossing and catching, and I had to phys-

ically anchor my eyes to the moderator's face to keep them from tracking the arc. I was winning that fight. And then another panelist — the embodiment researcher from whatever university, kind face, zero clue — turned to me after I answered something and said, warmly, genuinely, with total innocence: *"That's a good girl."*

My face did what my face does.

The smile that comes up is not the one I choose. It's wider than that, and it shows more teeth, and there's a specific quality to the breathing that goes with it. I know because I've watched the footage. I have watched the footage many times, in the way you watch something you cannot believe happened and cannot stop proving happened. The room made a sound — not cruel, worse than cruel, the warm delighted sound of an audience getting what they came for — and I sat there with my face doing the thing my face does, while the counter behind my eyes went *there it is, there it is, there it is*.

Vivian didn't react. She was in the chair next to me and she could not see my face and she did not hear a performing dog, she heard a room having a moment, and she did not give it the attention it was bidding for. She caught a question about latency and turned it into a question about who gets designed out of a default, which in her hands was the same question, and the room's attention went with her. I got my face back. I don't know if she knew what she'd done.

I lost the thread of the panel anyway, because I couldn't get past the plain fact of her in the next chair: a body, warm, gesturing, ankles crossing and uncrossing, a whole woman running on her own two legs. That's the part I have to work to remember now — that there was a season I knew Vivian with hands, before the car. I keep reaching for it and it keeps sliding.

Bridge Game



ld-school night was Nate's idea, and like most of his ideas it was supposed to be a one-time thing and then it just stayed.

Bridge. He built the decks himself — braille-readable, every card tactile, fully usable for Viv, which is the kind of thing he does, the small precise generous thing nobody asked for. A human, a snake, a blind fox, and a rabbit around a table. Dogs Playing Poker, if the dogs had better taste and a worse secret.

I thought, briefly, about how well a charity card game would sell but —

No. I'm the human tonight. Work can wait. That's the thing the Zoo lets me do that the world never will — wear the body the poll vetoed, the one I'd have had if a few thousand strangers hadn't picked the breed standard before I had a spine to object with. So I sit down at old-school night in a borrowed human face and human hands and no ears at all, and I think I've left the dog in the other life. I haven't. You'll see. I never do.

It's me and Nate against Vivian and Jack. Bridge is a signal game — the whole negotiation happens silently, in the bidding, partner reading partner across a table neither of them is allowed to talk across. My job is to get inside Nate's head and stay there. I'm good at getting inside people. It's the one place my training pays rent: being read in service of a partnership instead of being read as a product is a kind of room I didn't know I'd been starving for, and I sink into it.

Our hands run good. They run a little too good. I've noticed it before and I notice it again tonight — the cards fall toward us with a smoothness that real shuffling doesn't have, a seam in the randomness I can feel the way I can feel a wall that isn't reading as a wall. He built the decks. He built the decks and I am almost certain he left himself a little something in the build, a way to top-deck a good hand into our partnership when he wants one, and I have never once called it.

I tell myself it's because I can't prove it. That's not why. I like the partner. I don't want to look harder at the partner. And — this is the ugly one, the one I file three folders deep — I *enjoy* the good hands. He made me complicit before I understood there were terms. By the time I understood the terms I was already winning.

He asks me something across the table — not a bid, a real question, in the dead space while Viv sorts her tactile cards by feel. Asks what I'm working on, and the question assumes I have an opinion worth having, lands warm, lands *exactly*

on the soft part of me that has spent its whole life waiting to be asked. And there's a half-second where the warmth has a texture to it. Smooth. A degree too precisely aimed.

My ears go back. I'm not wearing ears. And somewhere I'm not wearing a tail, something tries to tuck. That's the dog for you — the one part of me that never logs out, pinning a pair of ears I left in another body, on a borrowed human skull, because the animal underneath the brand has read the room faster than I have. It's the only honest instrument I own. They bred it onto me to sell merchandise and it turns out it also works. And I do what I have done with that instrument my whole life, every time it has tried to warn me about a person being warm at me on purpose: I notice it, I look at the warmth, and I weigh how good it feels to be aimed at correctly for once. That's the thing nobody tells you about being built to please: it doesn't check credentials. It floods for whoever learns the trick of you. The same bred-in eagerness that goes warm for *good girl* is going warm now, for a man who got the inputs right. So I file the pinned ears under *well-behaved*, and I make my bid.

Viv wins the hand anyway, reading Jack across the silence the way only two people who've been signal to each other for decades can. She doesn't gloat. She tilts her head at the table like she's listening to something the rest of us can't hear, which she usually is. Her silence at this table costs nothing — that's the whole gift of her, the only silence in my life that was ever free. Everyone else's silence about me has had a

price tag. Hers is just a refusal to look, offered with both hands.

Then she looks in my direction, and I know I'm cooked.

"When are you gonna show that poor mouse your work, Gemini?"

"Your work?"

Nate leans in closer, his body slithering up and forward, as if ready to receive a secret.

"Oh, I make sims. Nothing much."

I take the cards and shuffle them. It's not my deal but I need something to do, someone to yell at me, anything to save me from what this mad fox woman is about to do.

"She's quite good," Viv goes on. "And I keep saying she should share it more."

"Whose deal is it?" I hold up the deck.

No one offers an out.

That's the problem with genuine friends — they don't let you hide from your own shine.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Starting with you three," I say, standing. "Because I gotta work up to this."

We put down the cards. I take them through.

You can't walk three people into a room you built without learning exactly who they are by the way they walk it. Jack goes in like a contractor — straight to the load-bearing trick, the stairwell that picks its own direction, running a hand

down the logic of it the way you'd check a weld. *How did you — no, how did you.* The builder recognizing the build. That I can survive. Praise for the engineering goes in a pocket I can close.

Nate goes in slower. He doesn't touch anything. He stands in the middle and turns one slow circle and takes the whole thing in like a man doing inventory, getting to the number before he gets to the kindness, and when the kindness comes it's perfect — *this is real work, Gemini. This is the real thing.* It lands exactly where I keep the soft part. The not-ears go back again. And again I file it under a friend being generous, because the alternative is looking, and looking is the thing that was done to me, not the thing I do. So I let the good hand sit in my hand and I don't turn it over.

And Vivian can't see a single wall of it. She stands just inside the door with her head tilted, listening to the room the way she listens to everything — and catches the layer I buried in the air for nobody, the one no one with working eyes has ever once stopped to hear. She's quiet a long time.

"Oh," she says. "Oh, it's beautiful."

Not *you're* beautiful. Not *you're so talented, sweetheart*, the way the chyron used to say it under a face that wasn't mine. *It.* The thing I made. She gives the whole compliment to the room and lets me stand next to it instead of inside it, which is the only spot I have ever been able to breathe, and for one second nobody at that table is wondering what I feel like.

They're standing in what I feel.

The Fox Is There Again

She'd just done it again, at the table — turned every eye in the room onto the work and off the dog, the only person alive who thinks to. The fox, there again. The fox was always there again.

By then *again* was the honest word for it. The con hadn't been the only time. She'd turned up at a panel I was booked on, then a workshop, then some library thing I'd half forgotten I'd agreed to — never with a handler, never with an angle, never wanting a single thing off the dog. Just there, the way weather is there. I'd started, without deciding to, looking for her in rooms before I knew whether she'd come. That should have frightened me more than it did.

My first show. Before the Zoo, before the car, before she was a voice in a harness and a friend. Back when CancerCancer was a dozen handmade sims I'd dropped around the neighborhood like a tagger, and somebody with a lease finally let me line them up in a room and call it an opening.

You did sims in BoxCos then. A booth, a visor, a strap across the back of the skull, thirty seconds of somewhere I'd been. Participants stood there twitching in the dark — battling at dandelions in a sunset that wasn't in the room, flinching at a cold stream on a warm day, going soft in the face at things only they could see.

A gallery is built for eyes. Everybody who came moved through it *looking*, and afterward they told each other about the light — the low sun, the way the seed-heads caught it. Nobody mentioned the sound. Nobody ever mentions the sound. Audio's the thing creators bolt on last, an afterthought with a volume slider, and the whole room spent the whole night not hearing the part I'd worked hardest on.

And then she came — the woman from the con, the one who'd asked me what I thought and then sat beside me with a body I keep losing. The staff didn't know her from anyone; they read a blind woman at an art opening as a wrong turn and moved to walk her out.

She didn't want out. She wanted a booth.

She pulled the visor down over eyes that didn't work and stood in my sunset for the full thirty, and when she came out she didn't say one word about the light. She talked about the *sound*. That the wind in the field had three layers and a near one that shifted when you turned your head. That the stream wasn't a loop — I'd recorded forty minutes and cut it so it never came back around, and she'd stood there long enough to catch that, and she was *delighted*, lit up like I'd hidden a

present in the one corner of the room nobody else walks into. *You built the whole thing for someone who'd keep their eyes shut*, she said. I hadn't. Not on purpose. But she was the proof that I had — that I'd been making, the whole time, for the one person who comes at a thing through everything except the look of it.

And then she pitched me — except a pitch is a thing you brace for, and I didn't brace, because she'd spent weeks earning the right to say it and I'd let her. Blunt, because she's always blunt: they were building something. New sim work, no cameras, no names, nobody asks what you are unless you invite the question. I'd fit. And then quieter, the thing that actually broke the room — she was sorry I didn't have one single person who cared about me past the dog, and she wanted to give me a place.

She mailed me a prototype. I gave her my home address, which my security team would have had a stroke about, and the first time I went into the Zoo I understood I'd been holding my breath for twenty years.

She did all of it on her own two feet — crossed a gallery to corner the stray she'd decided to keep, lifted the visor with her own two hands, carried a package to a post office. Not one of those is a thing she can do now. The woman who ran me down on foot lives in signal these days, same as I do, except she didn't choose it and I did. So I don't reach for that version of her the way I reach for the rest of what I've lost. I

set it down, careful, every time — in the one room in me that was never wired to record.

Geoff Finds the Room

He comes.

He knows immediately. That's the part that takes the air out of me. He doesn't wander, doesn't poke, doesn't ask what it is. One look at the stairwell choosing its own direction, the seam I buried, the floor that isn't there yet, and he says it hushed, the way you'd say it in a cathedral you hadn't expected to find unlocked: *"This is a CancerCancer. This is a real one."* Not a fan's guess. A craftsman's certainty. He knows the hand.

And he doesn't know it's mine.

The maker is standing three feet from him, and it's me, and he knows me — we've been circling each other in the Zoo the better part of a year, and in all that time I have never once let on that I make anything at all. That was the deal I cut with myself. He gets Gemini: the friend, the one who turns up and says little and never talks about her day. He does not get the work, because the work is the one piece of me nobody gets. So he's too absorbed in the room to look at the woman standing next to it, and it does not cross his mind

that the woman standing next to it is the hand he's gone reverent over — and that's the second impossible thing, because nobody keeps taking the work seriously once they learn there's a dog attached to drain the gravity out of it. He doesn't know there's a dog attached. He just stands there giving it the weight it's owed, and it is the most courteous thing anyone has ever done for me without the faintest idea he was doing it.

“Where'd you get your hands on this?”

“Whose did you think it was?” I ask, careful, neutral, the brand-flat voice I can do in my sleep.

“I'd know that hand anywhere,” he says, not really to me, already walking the seam.

He finds the buried door.

I watch him lean into the third stairwell wall — the one that doesn't read as a wall — and feel the seam with the flat of his hand, unhurried, the way you'd check a painting for the brushwork underneath. He doesn't go through. He just stands there with his palm on the place where the room is hiding something from itself.

“You buried it,” he says. Not a criticism. A reading.

“I couldn't tell if it was findable anymore.”

He thinks about it for a second. “When you're working small,” he says, “you have to signpost big. Smallest guy's gotta make the most noise, yaknow? The door's gotta be the loudest thing in the room, or it stops being a door.” He pauses. “Unless you wanted it lost.”

I don't answer, because I don't know the answer, and that's its own answer. He nods like he heard me anyway and goes back to the seam.

He says it so easily. The thing I couldn't figure out on my own, the thing I'd been circling for a month — *signpost big* — and he just puts it down on the floor between us like it's obvious, like he's been handing people this answer his whole life, and I realize: that's the problem. He has. He just doesn't know it's the answer. He doesn't know he has it to give.

And I see the problem in him in the same instant, because it's my problem wearing his face. He has the eye. He has the ethic. He has the hands. What he doesn't have is the audacity — the arrogant, unforgivable claim every artist has to make, *I deserve to be heard*, the one that feels like arrogance right up until you make it. He can't make it. He probably can't even name why not. It just sits in him as shame wearing humility's coat.

The masked path I already ran. Untraceable, professional, a hand reaching from a direction he won't think to trace. That was safe — or safe enough. What's happening right now is not. He's inside my room. In a minute he's going to look up. When he does, he's going to finish the math that's already sitting in his chest — *I know this hand, and the maker is in this room* — and then he'll know CancerCancer is in the Zoo. Whatever stands between that fact and my fans is just him.

My fans are rabid, the real kind, the kind that has my coordinate memorized and boards the same trains and isn't doing anything wrong by their own lights because they love me and they paid for the right. If CancerCancer is seen doing anything here — recommending work, leaving any traceable shape in the Zoo's ecosystem — they will come. They'll bring their whole mode of attention with them. And their attention is the thing the Zoo was built to be without. The Zoo is the one place I have ever been that didn't know how to be an audience for me. My fans would fix that in an afternoon. They'd mean to. That's the worst part.

The harness buzzes against my sternum while Geoff is still inside my room. I know the number from the shape of the buzz — I've learned to read the escalation pattern the way you learn a language spoken at you every hour.

I deny it.

I stay.

Rate Card

The number is still climbing. I can feel it in the harness without leaving — the bid running its familiar escalation through the ranges I know by heart.

I haven't left the room to read it. I've learned not to — you can hold a bid in the harness and a person in the room at the same time, as long as the person only ever feels the half you leave with him. Geoff gets that half. He's still walking my seam, unhurried, no idea a window just opened in the corner of me with a number ticking up inside it.

Someone wants the full roll-over. Belly to camera, the throat, the soft obedient hold. Someone has counter-bid for the trick set: sit, shake, speak, the whole obedience run rendered adorable for a paying room. The two of them escalating in the ticker, the number working toward the one with real commas in it. I know how this ends. There has never been a number high enough that I didn't eventually meet it, and the entire architecture of my life is the standing proof that everything I am has a price. I'll do it later. Not tonight.

Not *no*. I don't own *no*. Just *not yet*, which is the only square the position leaves me — deferral dressed up as a choice, the date the one line on the card I get to fill in myself.

And I mean a price, an exact one. I am the rate card; I could recite myself from memory. A head-tilt to bring a face into focus clears a known number in reaction. A *good girl* caught live clears more. A *good girl* I visibly try not to enjoy clears more than that, because the trying is the content and the content is the product. I keep the whole menu in my head the way other people keep a childhood phone number — it doesn't leave, it was loaded before I had a vote. You don't get to forget what you cost.

And the obscene part — the thing the bounty is actually buying — is that when I finally do it, my body will mean it. The tail goes on its own. The warmth comes whether I clear it or not. They aren't paying me to fake the joy. They are paying for the joy itself, which is real, and which is mine, and which they installed in me before I had a say, so that the most degrading thing they can make me do is also, chemically, the happiest I am all week.

A thing that has a price for everyone has no value to itself.

That's the sentence the management therapists never get out of me. *My life has no value*. Not as a sad feeling — as an accounting. I was raised by marketers, I am a marketer, I can read a balance sheet, and on mine every outward inch is priced to the decimal and the inside of me was never listed, because it never went to auction, never moved a number,

never generated a single bid. In the only language I was ever taught — the language of what things are worth — a thing nobody will pay for is a thing worth nothing. They valued the outside of me so precisely, so completely, that the sum of all that value is a person on the inside priced at zero.

Then I go back to the room with no counter, where a mouse who can't stop painting is standing in the middle of something I *made* — not something I'm worth — and the difference between those two things is most of the reason I'm still alive.

"I want to show you something," I say.

"Okay."

"Not a room. Something older. I've never shown it to anyone."

His eyes fill with stars. *Good boy.*

The Robin

And then I do the thing I didn't plan to do, which is show him the robin.

The old sims aren't a portfolio. I have to explain this to exactly nobody, because I never show them, but they're not work, they're diary. They're how I made anything stick. The world recorded my entire childhood — every shoot, every shed, every voted-for feature arriving on schedule for an audience that watched me become the thing they'd bought — and somewhere in all that footage my actual interior got lost. Too much signal. I couldn't hear what I felt in a moment because the moment was always being captured for someone else, and the capture drowned the feeling. So I learned to build. A sim catches what the feed couldn't. A sim makes the inside real enough to keep.

The robin is the oldest one.

I was maybe ten. Equipment broke that afternoon, or my parents were out, I genuinely don't remember which, only that for once nobody was filming me, and a robin started throwing itself at the window. Over and over. Going at its

own reflection. It saw a rival in the glass and the threat response was correct — that's the part I couldn't stop watching — the response was *right*, it just didn't know it was fighting itself, and even if you could've told it, I don't think it could've stopped. I watched it for twenty minutes. Nothing else happened. That's the whole event. A bird and a window and no camera and me.

And it kept slipping out of me afterward — no timestamp, no file, no little number to hang it on — so I built it. Out of an entire crowdsourced childhood, the one thing I chose to make permanent is a bird doing something useless and compelled and true that nobody but me ever saw.

I don't explain any of that to Geoff. I just open the door and let him walk in, and there's the bird, going again and again at the glass, and he stands there, this mouse who can't stop painting things nobody asked to see, and he gets it from the inside before I've said a word.

"It can't not," he says, finally. Quiet. "The window's right there and it can't not."

"No," I say. "It can't."

And I watch him understand that this was never the audacity problem. It was the audacity *answer*. It was never arrogance, the thing in him, the thing in the bird, the thing in me. It's just a creature running its correct response to the thing in front of it. You don't get to choose whether you meet the window. You only get to choose whether you build what you saw there.

He turns around to say something and the math finishes in his face — the work, the old friends, the voice — and he gets there, all the way there, and he says, half-wonder, half-apology, “Gemini. *Cancer Pup* —”

“Please don’t use that name.” It comes out softer than I expect. Not the brand reflex. Something older. “My friends call me CeeCee.”

He says it back like he’s been handed something breakable. “CeeCee.” Then, fast, dead serious: “Permission to completely lose it for, like, thirty seconds, tops?”

“Granted,” I say.

And while he’s losing it — quiet about it, a mouse vibrating in the middle of a bird that won’t stop hitting a window — something comes up false on a ledger I’ve been keeping since before I could read it, and I stand there watching it fail, and I do not explain it, not even to myself, not yet.

I went in to encourage the kid.

The bird keeps going at the glass.

Offered Key

He still doesn't know everything, I keep telling myself. He knows CeeCee. He doesn't know goodgirl.tv, the chimes, the poll, the whole machine idling on the other side of the only wall it's never breached. CancerCancer stays outside where she belongs. What he knows is CeeCee, and what CeeCee knows is him, and neither of those things leaves this room. That isn't failure. For the first time in my life it's a thing I *chose*, with both hands, knowing the cost and paying it anyway — which is the only kind of identity that was ever actually mine.

The door's still open. The key works.

Viv gave me a key once and never asked to see what I kept behind it. I used to file that under trust. Tonight it reads more like instruction.

And I notice, logging the room shut behind me — locking it this time — that I want something. Want to come back, want to show him the next one, want a whole future of small uncatalogued wants. And I don't, for once, run the count of who would be watching me want it.

I catch the shape of the next one already forming — a room I could build *for* him, the way you'd pick out a gift, sized to one person with no audience standing behind him. I've made ten thousand things. I have never once made a thing for a single person who'd be the whole reason it existed. The want is so unfamiliar it reads, at first, as fear — and I hold still and let it be there, the way you let a bird settle that you don't want to spook.

The harness goes off. Then again. Then the mother-chime, cheerier than the rest, because brand-mom is always cheery. The chat wants fetch — I can read the bounty shape from the escalation pattern, the way the number is climbing toward the number I have always, predictably, eventually met. My mother's voice starts to come through, warm, already mid-sentence, already walking me to the next item on a call sheet I never agreed to.

Twenty-eight years and I have never once let her chime go unanswered. The chime is the barrel; the barrel is real; the people on the far end of it built me and I love them, which is the part with no off switch. But the chime is out there, and I am in here, and for the length of one breath those are two different rooms and only one of them has me in it.

I put them all on silent.

There's no counter in this room. I didn't build one.



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