



In Devil's Hands  
by Jana Black.

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БРАНЬ

18+

# Jana Black

## In Devil's Hands

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### **Аннотация**

In a desperate bid to escape her crushing depression, she sought help from a highly acclaimed therapist — recommended by a colleague and praised in countless reviews. Nearly forty, married, a mother, and the owner of a thriving network of childrens educational centres, she should have it all figured out. Yet the darkness wont let go. And her therapist, Daniel Skinner, is far more unsettling than she expected. What is he really trying to uncover with those peculiar questions?

Intense

Unflinching

A hint of romance?

Hell take your soul

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# **Jana Black**

## **In Devil's Hands**

### **Part 1**

The steady ticking of the clock and the rhythmic tapping of a pencil against the desk were slowly becoming maddening. Being a therapist wasn't exactly fulfilling, but it paid well. Daniel glanced at the clock and exhaled loudly.

"She's late," he muttered. His last patient of the day was already fifteen minutes behind schedule. "Irresponsible."

A knock came at the door, followed by it cracking open slightly.

"Hello? May I come in?"

Daniel looked up from his desk and studied the woman who had just entered. He gave her a measured once-over and gestured to the chair across from him.

"Please, have a seat."

"Thank you."

The woman stepped into the room hesitantly. As she made her way to the chair, she took in her surroundings. A floor lamp stood on the desk, casting a pool of light over the surface and faintly illuminating the space around it. The corners of the office were swallowed by darkness. An antique grandfather clock in the

corner ticked away with mechanical insistence. The air carried the scent of sandalwood from a diffuser, mingled with the smell of old paper and leather.

Daniel settled behind his dark oak desk — massive, with intricately carved legs — and folded his hands. He looked at his patient.

"So, may I have your name?"

Jeanette. The woman had barely taken her seat — a soft chair without armrests, positioned across from Daniels desk.

"French?" he raised an eyebrow.

"Half. My mothers French, my fathers American."

She cast an inquisitive glance at the bookshelves lining the walls. It was clear the books werent arranged by subject, but by aesthetics — spines matching the decor. Most were in foreign languages. Among them were works on psychoanalysis, but also poetry collections and Kafkas novels.

Jeanettes fingertips tingled. She longed to pick up one of those books, just to hold it.

Daniel made a note in his notebook and nodded.

"Jeanette, then." He gave her another critical look. "And how old are you?"

"Thirty seven."

She looked at the therapist. A colleague had recommended him — hed helped her once. Tall, probably six foot three, broadshouldered, dark hair, blue eyes — they contrasted sharply with his hair, giving his gaze a particular intensity.

Slightly surprised *she looked younger than her age*, Daniel made another note.

"Thirtyseven, then." He tilted his head. "Do you have children?"

"Yes, a daughter. She's ten."

Daniel jotted it down again.

"A daughter, I see." He fixed his gaze on her. "Is there a husband in your life?"

"Its complicated. Kind of there, kind of not."

Daniel leaned forward slightly, his eyes glinting — he'd sensed a weak spot.

"Kind of there Interesting phrasing. Like Schrödingers cat — both alive and dead at the same time. But your husband, I'd guess, is more dead to you or does he just ignore you?"

He smiled faintly, almost with pleasure.

"Tell me: when was the last time you felt like yourself? Not a mother. Not a ghost wife. Just Jeanette."

"Um... that was a long time ago. Right after I started working, just after university."

Daniel made another note, raising his eyebrows slightly, as if he'd just uncovered something intriguing. His expression held nothing, but cold, sceptical interest.

"How many years ago was that?"

"Thirteen or fourteen, the woman sighed."

*A beautiful woman*, Daniel thought, and licked his lips.

He leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. His voice dropped

— like raindrops sliding down glass.

"So... you felt like yourself before your daughter?"

He didnt let her answer, adding gently:

"Doesnt it feel like your life has become a TV series with someone elses script? Youre cast as the mother — a supporting role. And the heroines been taken off the air and no one even noticed she was gone."

*Why do his words cut so deep? Like he sees what I hide even from myself.* Jeanette gripped her bag tighter, holding it on her lap like a shield, the leather handle biting into her palm.

"I suppose. But without that role, I wouldn't even know how I'd want to live. I'm happy with my daughter." She finally spoke aloud.

Daniel tilted his head, as if hearing sincerity — a rare delicacy — for the first time. A pause. Then, softly, almost in a whisper:

"All right But isn't all that *I'm happy* just a habit?"

He ran a finger along the edge of his notebook.

"You're not against your daughter. On the contrary — she's a part of you. But when you say you live for someone else, Jeanette all that's left is ashes of yourself. Then you look in the mirror and ask: Who lived here before me?"

A brief silence fell, broken only by the ticking of the old clock.

"Who would you want to be if no one was watching you as a mother or a wife?" The man's voice sliced smoothly through the vacuum of silence.

"I don't know. I don't even, you know, Daniel, I don't even

know how to dream. Or desire. It's just not there. Sometimes I think it'd be wonderful to travel the world. But then, how could I go alone? What if something happened to me? Especially back then, when I was young and trusting."

Daniel tilted his head sharply and studied her. All his scepticism had suddenly vanished, replaced by genuine interest. He slowly placed his hand on the desk.

"That's quite an unusual answer, Jeanette. Not dreams — but worries. Doubts. Fears. You're afraid not of getting into trouble, are you? You're afraid of making a mistake."

"Yes."

Daniel nodded slowly, his voice dropping to an almost intimate tone, as if revealing something forbidden.

"Then you're not living out of fear of death but out of fear of life."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"Many do. But at least you're honest. That's rare. You're afraid to be alone in a foreign city — but you know what? That fear isn't about planes or hotels. It's about what if something goes wrong and there's no one to save you. Because the person who should have been there has long been kind of not."

A pause. He held her gaze; she didn't dare even breathe.

"Now imagine this: you're travelling alone. Nothing bad happens. And then, suddenly — oh my God! — you realise: I did it on my own. What then?"

"Huh. If I apply that to my whole life, I manage everything

on my own. I ask myself why I keep living like this. And I think it's right. For my daughter. It's the right thing to do. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one hand."

Daniel smiled slowly — not mockingly, but with a gentle, almost warm cruelty.

"Ah, there it is It's the right thing to do."

He leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. Only now did Jeanette notice the window behind him, tightly curtained with heavy, deep burgundy fabric.

"It's a beautiful mask. You wear it and think: I'm a saint, a martyr. I'm Mother Earth. But inside someones knocking. Quietly: It hurts. And you silence it with my daughter, like it's both a prayer and a sentence."

He looked straight at her.

"But tell me honestly: if someone had told you as a child — You'll grow up and spend your whole life feeling guilty for wanting to be happy — would you have believed it?"

Another silence fell, and the seconds seemed to stretch.

"You can endure a lot for your child but don't forget who you are." Daniel broke the silence again.

"But I *am* happy. Everything's fine. He doesn't drink, he doesn't hit, he's a good father, not a great husband, sure. But I'm not young anymore, and I have my daughter. I've got maybe fifty years left — that's the max. And then life ends. That's it. Basically, everything's fine. I survive. I'm happy when my daughters happy. Her happiness matters more to me."

The smirk slowly faded from his face. Daniel leaned forward, folding his hands into a steeple once more.

"Really?" He tilted his head slightly, as if examining her under a microscope. "Do you truly believe that? Or are you just saying it?"

His eyebrow lifted slightly. He seemed intent on getting to the heart of the matter.

"Are you happy now, Jeanette?"

"Yes. I just I wish there was more romance, more love, more respect."

Daniel nodded slowly, as if he'd finally struck a nerve. His voice grew a touch warmer — yet it remained piercing.

"Ah, there it is. Not *I'm unhappy*, but **I'm missing something**.

He leaned back in his chair.

"Romance. Love. Respect. Such simple words and so dangerous when they fester inside for years beneath a layer of well, at least its okay."

A pause. He held her gaze.

"Can you imagine what it would be like to wake up one day and realise you truly deserve all of that? Not because you're a patient mother but simply because you are you — Jeanette?"

"But who would give me that? Let's say I do realise it — but who would actually give me all that? My husband?" Jeanette spread her hands wide, nearly dropping her bag. She felt like a high school senior facing a final exam.

"That's a good question. Your husband? Doubtful." Daniel tilted his head slowly, offering a faint smile.

"What if I told you I know someone who could give you all of that?"

"And who might that be? Who would bother with a married woman, with a child, whose whole life has been one long depression? Pills would be easier." Jeanette lowered her eyes.

The corners of Daniels mouth slowly lifted, but his eyes remained cold. He leaned in slightly, narrowing his gaze.

"Someone who can give you what you've been missing all your life."

He settled back in his armchair, watching her intently.

"Someone who won't ask for anything in return."

He leaned closer.

"But there's a condition."

"Are you talking about yourself, Mr. Skinner?"

His smile warmed slightly. Daniel nodded slowly, confirming her guess.

"I'm talking about myself." A beam from the floor lamp flickered, casting a shadow across his face.

His sharp eyes studied her face carefully, trying to gauge her reaction to what he was about to propose.

*Has he done this before? Or is this some kind of experiment?* Jeanette pressed her lips together but decided to ask.

"And what's the condition? Can I hear it before I agree?"

"The condition is simple, Jeanette".

Daniel leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. His voice was soft, almost lazy — but with an undercurrent of steel.

"You have to stop pretending. With me. With yourself. And with that hollow space in your chest you call *Im happy*."

A pause.

"You want romance? Love? Respect? Then start seeing yourself as deserving of it. Not someday — now. Even if you're shaking with fear. Even if it shames you. And the second condition you won't be afraid of the consequences of the truth."

He leaned in, almost whispering.

"Because after that you can't go back to everything's fine."

"Will this help me discover my true self?"

Daniel gave a slight nod, tilting his head to the side. His gaze burned right through her, as if measuring her reaction.

"Yes, it will help you discover who you really are. The real Jeanette — not a mother, not a wife, not just another role you play. You'll understand what you truly want."

He held her eyes, then gave a small chuckle.

"If you're not too afraid to face the truth, that is."

"I understand. Can I take some time to think? I don't have to answer right away, do I?"

Daniel nodded, leaning back slowly. His tone softened a little.

"Of course. This is important. Sort things out properly."

"I can come back tomorrow and give you my answer."

"I'll be here. Thank you."

Daniel smiled and nodded.

"Until tomorrow, Jeanette."

He watched her with interest as she left the office.

"Goodbye, Mr. Skinner."

Daniel remained silent, watching her go, motionless for a few seconds. Then he tilted his head to the side and chuckled quietly to himself: "Well see."

Later that day. An hour passed. Jeanette decided to clarify things further and sent Daniel a message on the messaging app. She couldn't stop thinking about his offer.

*Mr. Skinner, good evening. I still cant quite understand: why would you cross the line between therapist and client to offer me love, romance, and respect?*

Daniel was sitting in his office, scrolling through something on his laptop. Suddenly, a notification popped up on screen. He chuckled softly and opened the messenger. A thin smirk spread across his lips as he read Jeanettes words. He stared at the message for a moment, as if mulling over his reply, then slowly began typing:

*Just felt like it.*

*Understood. Until tomorrow, Mr. Skinner.*

Daniel lingered his thumb over her name. *The game has begun*, he thought — but aloud, he simply said:

*Until tomorrow, Jeanette*

He ran a finger along the edge of the desk, where a barely visible scratch lay beneath the varnish. How many times had he stared into his own reflection and asked: *Who are you?*

The laptop beeped — a new email had arrived.

Daniel didn't bother opening it.

Instead, he pulled up the chat window with Jeanette, looked at her profile picture — a smile, but sad eyes — and closed the screen.

The room grew darker.

## Part 2

### Jeanette

I woke up early that morning. I had to get my daughter ready for school — pack her lunch, make her breakfast and breakfast for me — don't forget a cup of coffee.

After I got back from dropping her off, I made breakfast for my husband and went to wake him up.

As I sat across from him, pretending to listen carefully, I kept replaying Daniels words in my head: "*What if there's someone who can give you love, romance, and respect?.. You must listen only to me. Who are you, Jeanette, if no one sees you as a mother, a wife?..*"

Could Irène have gone through the same thing I'm going through? Did he act ambiguously with her too? Is that why she's so thrilled? What kind of therapy is this?

"What time will you be home today?" Paul mumbled through a mouthful of food, brutally pulling me back to reality.

"Probably late again."

"What's so important at the office that you come home at midnight? And why did you even go to a therapist? Your head's fine. Are you just burning through money?"

"Stop it. And dont you dare count my money. When are you going to get a job though? I'm tired of carrying everything on my shoulders."

The silence was broken by a rude sound — he'd done it again, right there at the table. Like a pig.

I got up from the table, rinsed my second coffee mug, and placed it on the drying rack.

"There's soup in the fridge. And salad. Pick the kid up from school. Don't forget. Classes end at three."

"I won't forget."

He added a loud belch to his reply.

I pressed my lips together and left the kitchen without a word. I went into the bedroom and changed into a classic kneelength pencil dress, deep navy blue. I brushed my shoulderlength wavy chestnut hair with a wide comb.

A couple of sprays of my favourite Arabian perfume — a gift from a friend on my birthday — and I headed to the hallway to grab my coat and put on my lowheeled ankle boots. I couldn't remember the last time I'd worn high heels

On my way to work, I thought about Daniel and Paul, comparing them. Paul chewed without looking at me — he always did that. Daniel, on the other hand, looked at me as if he were undressing me with his eyes — right from our very first meeting.

Paul used to be tall, slim, smart. They say a man makes his woman — that is, his attitude affects her appearance. But what if it's because of me he's become like this? Did I turn a prince into a pig?

At the office, Irène greeted me.

"So, tell me — what's Daniel like? I can tell you've already seen him."

She was smiling broadly, showing off her veneers. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks flushed. Her light auburn hair was beautifully styled — clearly done by a professional. Yes, she'd started going to a stylist right after she started seeing Daniel Skinner.

She hooked her arm in mine and whispered conspiratorially: "Hes amazing, not just a man."

I was taken aback at first, unsure what to say. I just needed a regular therapist.

"Irène, tell me — were your sessions with him normal?"

I stopped in the hallway of my centre. The students hadn't arrived yet — this was the morning, reserved for meetings with teachers and business matters. All the students would come after three.

"Well yeah," she drawled. "Why? Did he hit on you?"

She narrowed her cunning green eyes, the corners of her mouth lifting.

"No. Maybe I'm just not getting something. Or maybe that's just his approach."

I shrugged, trying to convince myself I was overthinking it.

Fine. I'll go see him again today. Maybe then I'll understand his approach to patients.

I called Skinner's admin and confirmed the appointment.

**That evening**

The sun was setting, casting dim shadows across the ceiling of the office. Daniel sat at his desk, flipping through some papers, when there was a quiet knock on the door. He slowly set the folder aside.

Come in.

Jeanette stepped cautiously into the familiar office. She was late again — held up at work. She felt deeply ashamed.

"Hello, Mr. Skinner. May I come in?"

Daniel sat back in his chair, arms crossed. He glanced at the clock — five minutes to the hour. A faint smirk played on his lips.

"Come in, Jeanette. You're not too late not like last time."

He gestured to the chair.

"Have a seat. And don't make that face — I'm not the university rector or your conscience.

His voice was soft almost gentle.

"So, what did you want to talk about? Romance? Or why you're still thinking instead of living?"

"I've been thinking about your offer, and I still can't figure it out: why would you do this? I mean, I'm depressed. Can't you just prescribe me some medication?"

She looked hopefully into his blue eyes — so cold, it seemed.

Daniel tilted his head slowly, his smile turning predatory.

"Depression isn't a stamp in your passport, Jeanette. It's not you're sick — here's a pill — you're cured. It's depth and if you just toss a pill into it, the result won't come quickly. For a fast

result, you need a person."

He leaned forward, and the light from the floor lamp caressed his handsome face — a strong, masculine face.

"And I'm offering to pull you out by the hand. First to the edge of freedom, then to stand on your own feet and after that? After that, you can start running on your own."

A pause. They sank into silence again, broken only by the ticking of the old clock.

"And yes why would I do this? Because I'm interested in watching dead souls come back to life. Especially when they're so beautiful, yet fading because no one sees their beauty."

"You want a pill? Take something else: an opportunity." This handsome therapist smiled attractively.

"But how will all this work?"

Jeannette shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It felt like she might fall off any second.

Daniel pushed a few papers aside on the desk with a chuckle.

"In the simplest terms: you do what I say."

He tilted his head slightly. His eyes were cold, fixed on her. Jeanette swallowed involuntarily, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest.

More complexly: "I'll help you break free from the shackles you've put on yourself over the years. I'll remove what you think are your principles and replace them with freedom."

A pause. He smiled — slyly.

"Are you ready?"

"If this means cheating on my husband, then no."

Jeanette blurted it out in one breath. A knot of fear tightened in her stomach.

Daniel's eyes narrowed slowly, a glint of mockery and coldness in them.

"No, Jeanette, it won't."

He leaned back.

"I won't ask you to cheat on your husband or ignore your child. I'm asking you to change yourself."

A pause. He studied her face carefully, as if searching for an answer in her expression.

Jeanette tried to process it. So he wasn't going to ask her to do anything improper — she could relax? But why did a wave of hurt and disappointment suddenly wash over her?

"So — are you ready or not?"

Jeanette pressed her lips together, afraid to give a rash answer.

Daniel watched her every move, gauging her reactions. When her lips pressed together, he chuckled slightly, as if confirming his own guess.

"You're afraid, aren't you?"

His voice was soft, almost soothing — with a hint of cunning.

"Afraid you won't be able to?"

Jeanette nodded involuntarily.

"I am. Afraid I won't be able — and afraid something might happen that could ruin everything."

"Ah, life..."

Daniel leaned forward slowly.

His voice dropped to a nearwhisper — and somehow, that made it even more dangerous.

"You're already living there, Jeanette. In that kind of life — the one that's gone completely off the rails. You just don't notice it."

He traced a finger along the edge of his notebook.

"Every morning, you get up and play a role: mother, wife, good girl. But the real Jeanette?"

His words seemed to echo off the walls of the office.

"The real Jeanette is sitting in the dark, afraid to step into the light. Because she knows: once she steps out everything could really change."

A pause.

Jeanette's ears were ringing. It was getting hard to breathe.

"But tell me honestly — isn't your life already going off the rails?"

Jeanette let out a heavy sigh and looked up at Daniel.

*Handsome, damn it*

"Maybe you tell me, how long will this experiment last? It is an experiment, right?"

Daniel leaned back slowly with a smirk and gave a short nod.

"Yes, it's an experiment. But not for long — just two weeks."

He made a light gesture with his hand, then laced his fingers together, watching her intently.

"Two weeks — to see how far you can go."

His long, elegant fingers sank into his dark hair, pushing it back.

*Why can't my husband wear his hair like that?*

"What do you say?"

She wanted to object — to remind him of her daughter, her duty, that this was madness.

But the words dissolved in his gaze.

"All right. I agree. When do we start?"

Daniels smirk widened, almost predatory. He nodded slowly, as if he'd expected her to agree.

"We start right now."

Daniel rose from his seat and moved slowly toward her, stopping very close.

"Close your eyes."

Jeanette took a deep breath and did as Daniel said.

He stood directly in front of her, watching carefully. A faint chill and the scent of expensive cologne emanated from him.

"Don't think about anything, Jeanette. Just breathe — and listen to my voice."

He leaned a little closer, his lips almost brushing her ear. His voice was low, quiet.

"Good. You're breathing deeply and listening to my voice. Your breath is syncing with the ticking of the clock in this room. You'll let go of all thoughts and worries in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

Jeanette felt as if she was falling into a bright tunnel, drifting into nothingness.

Daniel held that position for a few more seconds, then stepped back and spoke in a brief, commanding tone:

"Open your mouth."

His voice had grown slightly harsher.

Jeanette snapped out of her trance, as if she'd just hit her head on a rock.

"Why?" she asked, frightened, her eyes still closed.

Daniel tilted his head slightly, and the cold glint in his eyes sharpened.

"Because I said so."

He paused, his voice like a whisper across raw nerves:

"And you already agreed to obey — from the very first second. Haven't you forgotten?"

Somewhere deep inside, a voice screamed, *Stop!* — but Daniel's voice was louder:

"Open your mouth, Jeanette. That's an order."

She opened her mouth hesitantly.

Daniel's eyes watched her reaction closely. He was standing so close she could feel his breath.

"Wider."

His voice was slightly hoarse.

Jeanette did as he asked, gripping the handles of her bag tightly.

He chuckled, studying her face, tilting his head slightly.

"Now, relax your tongue."

A pause. His voice grew softer, honeyed, almost hypnotic:

"Pull your belly in and tilt your head back slightly."

He watched her closely, as if tracking every breath she took.

Jeanette followed his instructions, not understanding why — or why her body was responding the way it was. Every cell in her body was waiting, begging. Waves of desire, long suppressed by work, rose in the pit of her belly.

Daniel leaned in even closer. The shadow of his body enveloped Jeanette's silhouette. His hand rose slowly and gently touched her cheek, fingertips trailing along her skin. Jeanette flinched in surprise. He savoured the moment, never taking his eyes off her lips — holding himself back from kissing them right then.

"Now, Jeanette, exhale slowly. I want to hear your sigh."

One hand slid down, lightly pressing her chin. The other stroked her neck, moving down toward her collarbones.

Jeanette exhaled raggedly and couldn't stifle an unruly moan.

"Excellent..."

Daniel slowly traced his finger along her lower lip, then stepped back. His voice turned a touch drier, with an edge of command:

"Close your mouth, Jeanette. On the count of ten, you may open your eyes. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten."

He stood in front of her, staring intently into her eyes — very

close. Jeanette was bewildered, unsure what had just happened or what was happening now. What should she do?

Her chest was rising and falling rapidly. Her breath came in short gasps. Her hands, which had been gripping her bag all this time, were stiff — her fingers refused to unclench.

*What am I doing?*

"You completed your first task. You learned to obey me even when you don't understand why. It's an important skill — one that will serve you well in our relationship."

A smirk flickered at the corners of Daniels lips.

"And tomorrow will be harder."

Jeanette blinked foolishly.

"Are you mocking me, Mr. Skinner?"

Daniel slowly crossed his arms and tilted his head, taking a step back.

"Oh, no, Jeanette This isn't mockery. This is just the beginning."

He walked over to the desk, picked up a stack of papers, and handed her a single sheet with care.

"Here's your first homework assignment — for the day after tomorrow. Don't be late."

Jeanette stepped up to Daniel's desk and took the paper.

His eyes were cold yet somehow too alive.

"If you think this is mockery, close your eyes and feel: do you like how you feel right now? Did your body feel good?"

Jeanette ignored his question and didn't bother reading what

was on the sheet. She asked at once:

"What is this? What's the assignment?"

A nearly imperceptible smirk flickered across Daniels face, as if he'd been waiting for that question. He tilted his head as if debating whether to answer. Finally, he did:

"It's a list. An example."

He paused briefly, watching her carefully.

"Make a list of your fantasies. Use the questions on that sheet as a guide."

Daniel walked around the desk and resumed his seat.

"What kind of fantasies?"

The corners of Daniels mouth twitched upward slightly.

"Any kind."

He leaned forward over the desk, never breaking his intense gaze.

"Your secret desires. The ones you can't tell your husband — or anyone. The ones youre uncomfortable even thinking about. Shameful. Scary."

A pause.

"But starting today, you'll think about them constantly."

"But I don't have any."

Daniel chuckled, holding her gaze, tilting his head slightly. His voice dropped, almost to a command:

"Don't lie."

He rose from the desk again and stepped closer — so close she could smell him. Jeanette felt as if she'd stopped breathing

entirely.

"Everyone has secret desires."

He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to an almost inaudible whisper:

"And that means you have them, too."

He slowly ran his hand along her cheek, burning her skin with his warmth, then stopped beneath her chin.

He tilted his head a little further, staring intently into her eyes, as if trying to find the answer in her expression.

"You're simply afraid to see them."

His voice grew colder. His hand brushed lightly along her neck, barely grazing her collarbones.

Jeanettes palms were sweating. Her shoulders tensed. She held his gaze unflinchingly, afraid to miss something important.

"You're afraid to look inside yourself."

He leaned even closer to her face. Now his lips were so near she could feel his warm breath. His hand moved more firmly along her neck and gave it a gentle squeeze. In a low, quiet voice — almost a whisper — he continued:

"But tomorrow you'll learn to see them. Your desires. They're only for you. You must learn to want and to desire."

He pulled back slightly, but his hand remained on her neck. A smirk flickered at the corners of his lips.

"We had an excellent session, didn't we? You enjoyed it, didn't you, Jeanette?"

She was lost and desperate. She didn't have desires like that

except, perhaps, a kiss. She'd been waiting for him to kiss her — when she'd sat with her eyes closed, when she'd opened her mouth, when he'd been so close just now she'd been ready to kiss him.

Daniel drawled, as if reading her thoughts. His fingers slowly left her neck and slid along her chin, coming to rest on her lower lip.

"So you thought I was going to kiss you?"

His voice dropped even lower, tinged with a lazy mockery. The woman's eyes widened in fear — he'd figured it out.

"Or maybe you wanted me to do it with you?"

A pause. He watched her every breath.

"Then write it down on your list. Your first desire: I want Daniel Skinner to kiss me."

A smirk flickered across his face.

"That's not a fantasy That's a drop of truth — a glimpse of the flood you've been holding back all this time."

Jeanette flushed red in an instant, like a girl caught spying. She took a step back toward the door.

"Goodbye, Mr. Skinner."

She turned abruptly and left the office quickly.

Daniel made no attempt to stop her. He just watched her go, then gripped the edge of the desk to steady the tremor in his fingers.

*Too fast*, he thought, but then he smiled. *Its working.*

Almost in a whisper, he spoke aloud:

"See you tomorrow, Jeanette."

The corners of his lips lifted.

"Tonight, you'll write down that very first item on your list of desires."

As she left the office, Jeanette caught sight of her reflection in the mirror across from Daniels door. Her cheeks were burning.

"What am I doing?" she whispered to the stranger in the mirror.

## Part 3

*Jeanette*

I woke up surprisingly easily this morning. Everyone was still asleep, and the alarm wasn't set to go off for another twenty minutes. I slipped into the bathroom, took a shower, and looked in the mirror. There was a glimmer in my eyes — longforgotten, but it flickered and died just as quickly as it had appeared.

I stood by the sink for a moment, tapping my index finger thoughtfully against the rim. Then my gaze fell on the threestep skincare set that Irène had given me for the New Year. I chuckled and picked up the case. *Well Lets give it a try. The Koreans don't invent just anything.*

Ten minutes later, my face was glowing. *Yes gold. Gold. Not a woman — gold.*

I stepped out of the bathroom, went into the kitchen, and switched on the kettle. I toasted some bread for Lily, generously spread it with jam and sour cream — she loves it that way. The neat triangles sat on her favourite pandapatterned plate with a yellow rim. Cocoa and a few marshmallows. Her morning had to be perfect today.

"Sweetheart wake up," I said, stroking my daughters head and brushing the hair from her face. I've made a wonderful breakfast for you.

She sat up sleepily, rubbing her eyes. *She's growing up so fast,*

*my beautiful girl.*

Without a word, she got out of bed, slipped on her slippers, and padded over to the table.

"Wow" she perked up at once. "Mom, is it some kind of holiday? Maybe I don't have to go to school today?" Her brows arched, her lips stretched into a smile.

"No, you're going to school," I said, tousling her hair on top of her head. "But yes, it's a holiday — a new day has dawned, and we've woken up. Isn't that a holiday?"

I winked at her.

We sat down at the table. She devoured her toast, sipping cocoa and squinting with pleasure. Today, I drank coffee from a beautiful mug and, for the first time in years, I ate a cheese sandwich.

I never used to have breakfast. I skipped that meal every morning. I'd wake up exhausted, unrested, and with the onset of depression, everything had felt so grey, wornout, and meaningless.

My daughter and I left the house in high spirits, ready to conquer the day.

"Mom, will you pick me up today?"

"Mmm, I think so," I smiled.

Lily had nearly grown as tall as I was, and now we walked arm-in-arm, smiling and joking. At the school gates, I said goodbye and headed to the office.

Yes, to the office — not back home to wake Paul. His

breakfast was on the table: scrambled eggs and his favourite ham, tea with four spoons of sugar. He could eat it without me. And I wouldn't have to listen to him grumbling, farting, and belching loudly every few minutes. *Ugh.*

At the office, the receptionist greeted me. Mary had joined us a month ago — beautiful, smart, and quick to catch on. But it seemed she'd had her share of bad luck too, though only with a boyfriend. *If things work out with Daniel, I'll recommend him to her.* I remembered his gaze and his whisper, the way he'd commanded me — a pleasant shiver ran through me.

"Jeanette, two letters from partners have arrived for you. The courier delivered them; they asked for a reply as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Mary." Ill look into it. "Anything else?"

*Daniel*

That morning, he'd sent her a bouquet of white lilies, wrapped in matte paper with minimal decoration, along with a note.

*Is she at the office yet?*

He glanced at the clock.

Work wasn't going well. Patients spoke; he listened, but his thoughts were elsewhere — with her silence.

*What is she feeling now?*

*Shame? (I've let him down. He'll think I'm weak.)*

*Anger? (Why is he pressuring me so much? I'm not obliged)*

*Relief? (I'm safe. It's too dangerous.)*

He closed his eyes, picturing her face: her unrestrained

moan, her frightened eyes, her indignation, the way her lips had trembled when he'd said, "Open your mouth." How her fingers had clenched around her bag. How she'd obeyed.

*She trembled, but she didn't pull away. She waited  
She'll come back. She'll definitely come back. She'll be here  
again tomorrow.*

But somehow, it didn't sound like confidence — it sounded like a spell.

*Jeanette*

The bouquet. A bouquet of white lilies The scent somehow reminded me of him — his shirt, his collar, his neck. *I wanted... I wanted so many things then. But it's silly and frightening.*

Flowers from him. *Very interesting.* I walked over to my desk, where the understated bundle of flowers sat. I traced the petals with my fingertips, feeling their softness. My gaze fell on a note hidden among the blooms. I pulled it out.

*You forgot to ask what happens if you don't come. Can you guess? D.*

My cheeks flushed with heat. *Right. The list. I have to make that list today, without fail.*

There was a knock at the office door.

"Come in."

Irène burst into my quiet workspace, radiant and cheerful as ever.

"Hi, Jeanette!"

The scent of her perfume instantly filled every inch of the

room.

"Hi!" I smiled, setting aside my papers.

"Mmm, you have flowers? Who are they from?" Without waiting for an answer, her hand dipped into the bouquet and fished out the note I'd shoved back in, embarrassed.

"Hmm, very interesting..." She raised one eyebrow. "Could it be Daniel?"

*Oh Lord, why is she so nosy?*

"I think so. No one else would send them. Did he send you bouquets too?"

"What? No," she waved it off. "But with you I can see he's acting completely different."

Irène sat on the chair by my desk, one leg crossed over the other, swinging it playfully up and down.

"So... he?.." she drawled, fanning herself with the note.

*Please don't let her ask...*

"Decided to treat you differently?" my friend finished.

I exhaled almost imperceptibly with relief. I didn't really want to tell her what Daniel had done during our sessions.

"Are you sure this is just therapy?" she asked with a meaningful smile.

"What do you mean?" I chuckled. "What else could it be?"

Unconsciously, I traced the edge of my notebook — and only then did I remember that gesture from Daniels office. *He does that. What? Am I starting to copy him?*

"Hmm. Alright," but Irène narrowed her eyes slyly. "You do

realise he's overstepping boundaries, right?"

A pause.

"He gives you assignments?"

"He does. And yes, the bouquet is unsettling. But I don't even know how to react to it." I bit my lip unconsciously, remembering how he'd stood beside me, giving his orders.

"And I have to make a list of desires."

"Ah! Yes, that's fun. You know, when I..." my friend began chirping, recalling how she'd completed a similar task for Daniel, instantly forgetting her thoughts about the bouquet.

But it seemed her assignment had been different from mine.

When I was alone, I picked up my phone to message Daniel:

*Mr. Skinner, thank you for the bouquet. But you really didn't have to. I remember about the session. I'll be there at the appointed time.*

A moment later, his reply came:

*Gratitude is sweet. But you know what happens for overdue assignments. The list will either fix the situation — or worsen it.*

*I was taken aback. Worsen it?» What does he mean? Will he cancel the session? Come to my house? Or make me say out loud what I've written on the list? What on earth should I reply?*

I pushed my worries aside, throwing myself headfirst into work. Meetings, signing documents, appointments with teachers — it all spun past like a carousel throughout the day. I forgot about lunch again. As always. It's a good thing Mary brings me coffee — she knows I need it.

By three o'clock, I left the office to pick up Lily from school. An hour later, we were back home.

"Why did you pick her up? I could have done it," Paul said, holding Lily, who'd just taken off her shoes and jumped into his arms for a hug.

"I'm perfectly capable of picking up my own daughter from school," I replied. "We can take turns doing it."

"Uhhuh. Still don't see the point. You're usually stuck at work till late anyway," he said, hanging Lily's coat on a hanger and closing the wardrobe.

"But I love it when Mom picks me up!" Lily chimed in, joining the parents' conversation. "Let Mom pick me up!"

"What about me? Have you stopped loving me, Lily?" Paul leaned toward the child and pouted his lower lip, pretending to be sad.

"Daddy," Lily placed her little palms on his cheeks, "I love you very much — and I love Mom too."

"But you love me more than Mom, right?"

Lily stayed silent, just smiling and hugging her dad.

"Why ask the child that?" I snapped, walking deeper into the apartment.

"You definitely love me more than Mom," Paul insisted loudly, kissing the child on the cheek.

"Jeanette, will you make something to eat? I'm hungry," he added — and then another loud belch followed.

*Oh God What's wrong with his stomach?*

"I'll make something," I tossed over my shoulder as I washed my hands.

"Make it now. I want cutlets," Paul called after me as I headed into the kitchen. A mountain of unwashed dishes had piled up in the sink.

"What were you doing? Why so many dishes?"

I felt like crying. I was exhausted from work — yes, not a full day today, but still... *Isn't it possible to?*

"I was making pumpkin juice! I looked it up online. Look — there was a whole carafe!" He pointed to a plump, nearly empty glass jug.

"Mmm... Was it tasty?"

"Yes. By the way, were out of cookies. We need to buy some. Could you run to the store?"

I clenched the sponge in my hand, silently.

"I'll buy them," I sighed, letting go of my frustration.

As I washed the dishes, I felt his eyes on me. He sat at the table, finishing his pumpkin juice, boring a hole into me with his stare.

"You've put on some weight, Jeanette. You've gotten so plump," he laughed. "Look at that belly."

He came up behind me and squeezed my waist with his hands.

"I'm fine"

Paul kept squeezing, and I thought of how Daniel had touched my wrist — lightly, yet with authority. One touch made me burn; another extinguished the light.

"No, look. See how you've let yourself go," he pressed on. "Come on, lets step on the scales."

"No. Do you want me to cook?" I tried to pull away from his grip.

Once upon a time, I'd loved his touch. But that was long ago. Very long ago.

"Come on."

Paul took the sponge from my hand and, wiping his hands on my house dress, led me to the scales.

"Step on."

Jeanette obediently stepped on.

"There, look."

He tapped with his index finger. Once, his fingers had been extraordinary — not anymore.

"Someone's been eating too much. Lily, don't be like your mom. She's put on a lot of weight."

Sixtyfour kilograms.

"Leave the child out of this," I hissed.

I stepped off the scales and silently walked into the kitchen. Paul went into the room, turned on his show on the laptop, lay on the bed, and laughed — and laughed.

*Just a few more decades, and it'll all be over... It'll all end...*

After dinner, we went to our separate rooms. Lily played her games. Paul kept watching his show. And I I sat down to write my list.

*What do I want?*

*"Then write that down on your list too. Your first desire: I want Daniel Skinner to kiss me."*

She remembered Daniels words from the day before. A fluttering knot twisted in the pit of her stomach. Her heart pounded so loudly she feared Paul might hear it.

She smoothed the sheet of paper with her hand and finally decided to write her list.

*I want...*

She crossed it out. Rewrote it:

*I want to feel alive.*

But it felt too vague. Too safe.

*I want Daniel Skinner to kiss me.*

Her hand trembled. She glanced at the door, as if he might walk in.

## Part 4

*A day later, at the appointed time*

Daniel is waiting for Jeanette in the same office, flipping through some papers, a faint smirk playing on his lips. He doesn't look up right away when she walks in — only when she stops in front of his desk, does he finally meet her gaze, his eyes raking over every inch of her.

"Good evening, Jeanette."

He sets the papers down on the desk and gestures to a chair.

"Take a seat."

Jeanette obeys without a word.

He stares at her intently, hands folded on the desk. His voice is cold, but slightly softer now.

"Did you complete the task?"

He leans forward slightly and holds out his hand.

"Give me the list."

Jeanette hesitantly hands him the piece of paper. It's not long — just five items:

1. A gentle kiss from him.
2. A warm embrace.
3. His time — just for me.
4. He wants only me.
5. He values me.

Daniel studies the list carefully. His lips twitch in a faint smirk,

as if hed expected something different — something bolder. But no, just these five points.

After a moment, he lifts his eyes from the paper and looks at her.

"Are you serious?"

Her cheeks flush with shame.

"I told you I don't know how to desire."

He chuckles softly, placing the list on the desk in front of him. His hand slowly glides across the surface towards her, fingers brushing the edge of the paper.

"Can't desire, or won't allow yourself?.."

He leans forward, holding her gaze.

"Those are two different things, Jeanette."

"I don't know..."

Daniel nods slowly, as if accepting her answer.

"All right Then let's start with something simple."

He picks up a pen and draws a line under the last item.

"Tonight, you'll write another list. But not about what you want from me," he grins with a satisfied smile.

A pause. The silence of the office envelops them like a vacuum for a few seconds.

"But about what you're afraid of in me."

His eyes bore into hers.

"Because fear is also a form of intimacy. And you're already feeling it, aren't you?"

Jeanette stays silent, her gaze darting nervously between his

eyes and the sheet of paper.

He watches her in silence, hands clasped on the desk. His eyes follow her every reaction. After a brief pause, he adds slowly:

"You have nothing to fear, Jeanette."

He leans back in his chair, tilting his head slightly, a hint of a smirk lingering at the corners of his lips.

"Don't we trust each other?.. " he almost purrs.

"We do," Jeanette's voice betrays her, cracking slightly.

The corners of his mouth twitch, as if he's been waiting for this answer. With his eyes half -closed, he watches her closely.

"Then get started."

There's a sheet of paper and a pen on the desk. He gestures towards them.

"Don't be afraid, Jeanette."

His voice is quiet, almost gentle — the only thing that could calm her at this moment.

"Just write down whatever comes to your mind."

"All right," Jeanette picks up the pen and, with a trembling hand, begins to write:

1. Harsh.
2. Arrogant.
3. Bold.
4. Overconfident.
5. Dominant.

He reads the list carefully after Jeanette hands it to him five minutes later. A slow, satisfied smile spreads across his face.

"You're observant."

He leans back, eyes halfclosed. His voice drops, becoming almost lazy.

"But you know... You listed my traits. I asked about your fear."

A pause.

He leans forward, staring intently at her.

"What are you afraid of? That I'll take advantage of all this?.. Or that I wont?"

"That you'll take advantage" Jeanette swallows nervously. "And that I'll give in. And everything will go just as I expected," she whispers the last words.

Daniel nods slowly, as if she's just confirmed something fascinating. He makes no attempt to reassure her. On the contrary, his eyes flash with a cold gleam.

"And you're right."

Daniel flips the sheet with her fears and places it next to the list of desires. Their words seem to flow into each other: dominant — his time — just for me, bold — he wants only me.

Jeannette feels a familiar shiver run down her spine — the same one that appears when he's too close.

Warmth. Fear. Desire. Three sensations merge into one.

*"I'm not afraid of him"* she realizes. *"Im afraid of myself."*

*"Of what will happen if I let it happen."*

He stands up and slowly walks around the desk, stopping beside Jeanette.

"I will take advantage," he pauses. "And you'll give in because

you're tired of being alone."

Not because you're foolish or weak.

He places his hands on her shoulders, leaning slightly from the side.

"And it won't go the way you expected because I'm not just any man. I'm the one who knows how to touch what's inside of you — what you didn't even know was there: your soul, it's desires"

A pause. An old clock coldly ticks away the seconds, cutting through the silence of the office with its steady rhythm. Jeanette involuntarily glances at the pendulum — it swings back and forth, as if counting down the last moments of her resistance.

"You're afraid of losing control?.. Good. Then tomorrow we'll start losing it," he seems to growl the last words.

Jeanette's eyes widen with surprise and fear.

Daniel leans closer, his lips almost brushing her ear.

"But don't be too scared, Jeanette."

Reluctantly, he pulls away, his hands sliding lightly down her shoulders. Unnoticed, his warm palms move to her waist. Daniel looms over her, still seated on the chair, trapped in the cage of his arms, his breath, his presence.

"I can promise you'll like it even if it hurts a little."

Jeanette jumps up from her seat and steps away from him. Her heart pounds wildly in her chest, beating out an alarm. Loudly. Her eyes are wide with fear and confusion.

"What are you doing?!" she bursts out. "This is... this is..."

Jeannette chokes on her indignation and anger at how her body reacted to his touch.

Daniel chuckles and shoves his hands into his trouser pockets.

"This?.. What this?"

He walks slowly towards her, tilting his head slightly and looking at her from under his brows.

"What am I doing?.. I'm touching you because I can."

He steps closer, leans in even more, his lips almost touching her forehead.

"And because I want to," he takes a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume.

Daniel takes another step, standing almost flush against Jeanette. He presses her against the edge of the desk, both hands resting on either side of her hips — a trap. He leans over her, voice rough and low:

"You're afraid because you feel," his breath scorches the skin on her neck.

Jeannette freezes. Her fingers clench into fists, but her body treacherously leans towards him.

"And your body already knows the truth," he pulls back slightly, making her feel the loss of warmth. "It wants what you're afraid to give yourself. To allow."

A pause. He looks into her eyes — without pity, without doubt.

"But not today Jeanette. Not until you say, I want."

She flinches, as if struck. Her throat goes dry.

He takes a slow step back.

"And when you do it, I'll be faster than thought. Are you ready?"

*This is madness...*

Jeanette shakes her head, squeezing her eyes shut tightly.

"I'd better go. And I'm sorry for bothering you all these days."

Daniel doesn't try to stop her. He just stands there, arms crossed, watching her grip her bag tightly — as if trying to hold herself together and protect herself.

"Bothered?.."

He chuckles — quietly, almost cruelly.

"You didn't bother me. You came. And that's a start."

He takes a step towards the window, where the light is fading behind the cold glass.

"Go if you think you can forget this day. Forget the touch. Forget my voice forget the warmth that ran through your body."

He presses his lips together and takes a deep breath before shooting Jeanette a quick glance. He could see her perfectly in the reflection. But he wanted to savour the fear and rejection in her eyes.

"Just stop lying to yourself. I'm sure you'll be back tomorrow. Because you want more."

Jeanette glances at the heavy office door, seizes the freedom offered to her and flees.

*Yes, I'm running away — and and I'm not coming back. Enough. Enough. I'll just leave everything as it is. To hell with it.*

*To hell!*

The door closes softly. The click of Jeanettes heels shatters the lingering silence. Daniel doesn't turn around right away. He stands with his back to the exit, hands behind his back, as if counting the losers moves in a game.

"Eight steps" he says quietly to himself. "She stopped. Hmm... Doubts? Interesting."

Then he slowly turns to face the door, tucks his hands into his trouser pockets and smirks slightly.

"But tomorrow she'll give me another step, then another one"

He walks over to the desk, picks up the sheet with her list, and runs his finger over the first item: "A gentle kiss from him."

"I never promised to be gentle"

A whisper:

"But I'll give you a kiss. When you ask for it yourself."

*Jeanette*

I hurried down the evening street, wrapping myself tighter in my coat. The block twinkled with the yellow lights of streetlamps, but they offered no warmth.

His voice echoed in my head over and over again: *I'll take advantage and you'll give in* I shook my head, as if trying to shake off a spell. I needed to get a grip. Heres home. My daughter and Paul are waiting for me there. I believe that. I can't be alive only with Daniel... I can't

"Where have you been?!" Paul stepped out of the kitchen, hands on his hips. "Do you even know what time it is? Half past

ten at night! Did you forget about the kid? Who's going to feed her? The fridge is completely empty." He waved his hand vaguely in some direction.

"I... I just had a session with a psychiatrist" I took off my halfboots and hung my coat in the hallway closet. "I'll cook something now."

Without changing my clothes, I head into the kitchen and wash my hands in hot water. They're shaking. I'm afraid Paul will find out what kind of sessions I've really been having. I'm really afraid. I clench my hands into fists for a moment to steady the trembling.

"Mum! Look, we've got to colour in a map — will you help me later? It's for tomorrow. I have to hand it in tomorrow." Lily grabs my wrist with her warm little hand and shows me the outline map in the atlas.

"All right," I try to respond in the moment, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Daniel's office.

"First, Mum needs to make us something to eat. By the way, I even washed the dishes." Paul gives me a cold look.

"Huh?" Only now do I notice the sink is sparkling clean.

He really did wash the dishes.

"Thanks. I'll be quick."

I decide to whip up an omelette with vegetables. As I'm dishing out the omelette onto plates, Daniel's words echo in my head again: *You'll give in because you're tired of being alone.*

I look at Paul — his lips are moving, but the words don't

register in my mind.

*Yes, I'm tired. But could he ever understand that?*

The family gathers for a very late dinner. Paul grumbles that it's not what he was hoping for, but it'll do. Lily happily tucks into the omelette.

"Mum, let's go and look at the map — I'm getting sleepy."

"Let's go, Lily."

"I'm off to bed," Paul says and heads to the bedroom.

To his bedroom. He's been sleeping separately for about ten years now. Yes. I don't sleep with him. I make excuses that he snores at night and that Lily's still scared to sleep alone. In reality, I just don't know where I belong in this house.

I check Lily's map, we wash up and go to bed. My daughter falls asleep almost immediately, hugging me tightly and nuzzling her nose into my shoulder.

Her breathing becomes steady and warm. I stroke her hair, inhaling the scent of her child's skin. For a moment, the world feels simpler. But the silence of the bedroom is instantly filled with Daniel's voice: *Just stop lying to yourself...*

I lie there, staring into the darkness. Somewhere behind the wall, a clock ticks — is it the same as in Daniel's office?

Or is it my heart beating?

*I'm sure you'll be back tomorrow. Because you want more.*

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