

A man with a beard and multiple tattoos is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a white button-down shirt that is open at the collar. His tattoos include a large chest piece with roses and a central emblem, and a neck tattoo featuring a portrait and the name 'Jersey'. He has a contemplative expression, with his right hand resting on his forehead. The background is a dark, starry night sky. The entire scene is reflected in a body of water at the bottom of the frame.

bait

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BAIT

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*To Scandinavian pine kitchens, 42-inch plasma screen TVs, grey Ford Fusions, and the idiot who placed them above the life growing inside me.
This one's for you, asshole.*

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ONE

I want to keep my dreams, even the bad ones, because without them, I might have nothing all night long.

Joseph Heller

ABIGAIL

I can't tell you the exact moment the night terrors started. There was no traumatic childhood experience that set them off. No defining moment that marked the beginning of the screams at night. No significant event that led a happy five-year-old girl to wake up sweating and wailing in the darkness.

My parents put it down to TV I shouldn't have been watching. Scary stories from older kids in the playground. An overactive imagination.

It doesn't matter where they came from. Not really.

They arrived without invitation and took up residence. Permanently. *That's* what really matters.

Every night without fail the monster would chase me through the undergrowth. Every night I'd feel his hot breath on my neck as I ran for my life.

Every night the beast got a little bit closer. A little bit bigger. A little bit more terrifying.

I may not be able to tell you when and why the monster started hunting me in the first place, but I can tell you when I stopped screaming.

I can tell you when the nightmares stopped being terrors and the monster became a man.

I can even tell you when I started wanting them. Wanting the chase. Wanting *him*.

And I can tell you when, finally, one day the nightmares came to life.

My name is Abigail Rachel Summers, and tonight I am bait.

* * *

Two weeks earlier.

Jack Dobson is a guy you could call conventionally attractive. He has a symmetrical face, high cheekbones, and just the right amount of gel in his salon-messy hair.

He's a member of the pink shirt brigade at the office, and he's wearing one now, looking thoroughly out of place in the spit and sawdust joint I picked

out for dinner this evening.

Jack's a guy my parents would approve of. The kind they could make small talk with over a Sunday roast. Maybe even engage in a friendly debate on the current political landscape.

I have no interest whatsoever in this going further. I don't want to see what he's packing under his pink shirt, and I have no inclination to let him see what's under mine, either.

By all rights that means I shouldn't be here, but the steak is good and I was coerced by the admin girls at the copy machine this morning.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that Jack Dobson is a nice guy. Too nice for me.

He laughs as he recounts another story about a colleague I haven't met. I smile politely as I finish up my mushrooms.

"You haven't met the Worcester guys yet, right?" he asks, again. I nod, again. "Don't worry," he says. "Once you hit the six-month mark you'll be like part of the furniture. Summer barbeque coming up. After that you'll know *everyone*."

I don't want to hit the six-month mark and I don't want to know everyone. I don't care about my job at Office Express, and I don't care that maybe someone like Jack could be good for someone like me.

Maybe in another place and time, but not here and definitely not now.

I'm rootless here. Three months into a life I never wanted to be living. Three months into the paper-thin existence I figured was my best chance at a fresh

start.

I'm here with Jack because I'm death-gripping the hope that one day I'll wake up without the soul-destroying pang of loss in my gut. That I won't be clutching my belly and crying into my pillow as I realise all over again that this is my world now.

I'm a pragmatist. Or I am these days.

If I'm ever going to wake up and realise this new life isn't all that bad, it needs to actually be a semblance of one.

So, I force another smile. Fake another laugh. Order another drink. I try to be interested in Jack and his kind eyes and his pink shirt. I try to pretend I'm a normal girl living a normal life without a shit ton of baggage trailing from the noose around my neck.

I think he believes me. After three glasses of white I'm even beginning to believe myself.

Until I see *him*. The guy at the bar.

He's wearing too much denim. Dirty denim tucked into big muddy boots. He has a moustache and greasy hair to his shoulders, and eyes that aren't kind at all, not even close.

And he's looking at me.

I suddenly know for certain that I'll never find out what's under Jack's pink shirt. My breath hitches and my nerves coil in my belly, my heart already thumping at the thought that this may really be it.

Maybe denim guy will be the one to chase me.

Maybe he'll be my monster.

"Earth to Abigail." Jack's laugh is so blissfully unaware. I smile as I jolt back to him.

"Sorry," I say. "I must be tired. Long day."

"Thursdays will do that to you. Delivery day, right?"

I nod. "Still learning the ropes. Product codes coming out of my ears."

"You'll get there," he says kindly. "It's a lot to take in."

It's not, but I smile anyway.

I haven't even registered I've put my cutlery across my plate until he suggests we get the bill. The panic is instant and intense, my heart in my throat as I grab the dessert menu from the stand between us.

"Maybe some chocolate will wake me up," I suggest, and he rests a hand on his stomach.

"Not for me. I couldn't eat another thing." He pauses. "You have one, though. Maybe it'll pep you up enough to hit a club. It's disco night down at Divas. Thursday night special, some of the sales guys are already out."

I watch denim guy down a whisky at the bar then order another. He smooths his moustache with his mouth wide open, staring right at me as Jack calls the waitress to take my order.

Denim guy wants me. I can see it in his eyes.

The sly smile on his lips tells me he knows I want him too.

My dirty soul must be a beacon to other dirty souls out for a good time. It's always like this.

They must smell it on me. Taste it on the air. Hone into the fucked-up frequencies of freaks like me.

Luckily regular people, like sweet Jack here, have it roll over their heads without a clue.

I don't want to feel the tingle between my legs as I think of denim guy's dirty hands on me. I don't want to clench my thighs under the table as I think about his filthy cock inside me.

I don't want to want him, but I do.

This place is on the outskirts of the city centre. I already know that the river path runs along the back of the car park.

I know it'll be dark and quiet on a Thursday evening with barely a soul around.

I'm trying not to look at him when my gateaux arrives. I ask Jack questions about his ten-year history at the office, shamelessly deflecting him from asking any questions about me.

Denim guy's had two more shots by the time my plate is clear. He licks his lips and smirks as he flashes me the shocker. My pussy throbs at the sight of his extended fingers.

Two in the pink, one in the stink.

He really is disgusting.

I really don't want to want this.

I feel as disgusting as he is as I meet his eyes and give him the gentlest nod. Jack doesn't even notice, he's too busy raising his hand for the bill.

Denim guy finishes up his drink and heads for the rear entrance. He brushes close enough on his way past that I smell the diesel on him. I wonder if his cock smells like that too.

Jack pays the bill before I can protest, all smiles as he grabs his suit jacket and shrugs it on.

"Let's go hit the dance floor," he says, and I feel like a bitch when he registers my copout expression.

"I'm still really tired," I lie. "I should get back home, long day tomorrow."

He nods. Shrugs. And then he shows he really is a decent guy, unlike the piece of shit waiting for me outside. "Sure, of course. Some other time. I'll walk you home."

"No need," I say. "I'll call a cab." I hold up my phone.

"Then I'll wait for it to arrive," he offers, but I shake my head.

"Seriously, there's no need. Head on down to Divas with the guys. You'll get a decent dance in if you're quick."

He looks uncertain until I gather my things. I don't look at him, pretending I'm keying in the cab number as he dawdles awkwardly. I press the fake call to my ear and tell him I'll see him in the morning.

I'm still holding the handset when he says his goodbyes and heads reluctantly for the front exit.

I wait twenty seconds before I head for the back.

It's dark out here, just like I knew it would be. The spotlights cast the kind of ominous orange glow that gives me shivers. The car park is empty enough that it's easy to see denim guy propped up against a battered old truck. He's smoking as he waits, barely straightening up as my heels clack across the tarmac in his direction.

I hold up a hand when he tries to speak, flattening my body to his as I land my lips straight onto his filthy mouth. He tastes of smoke and whisky. His moustache tickles my top lip and it makes me shudder.

He flicks his cigarette away and slips his dirty fingers inside my jacket.

My clit tingles at the memory of his hand gesture. *Two in the pink*. I part my legs as his filthy hand slides up under my skirt.

I'm already wet through my knickers. I whimper into his open mouth as he rubs me through the lace.

He's rough. Unskilled. His fingers press so hard it aches.

"Dirty bitch for such a pretty little thing," he grunts.

"Fuck me," I hiss. "I like it rough."

He yanks my head back by my hair. “Is that right?”

The darkness is inside me already, adrenaline pumping at the thought of taking his filthy cock.

He’s lean but muscular. Tall and wiry. And fast.

I’m sure he’ll be fast.

I palm his dick through his jeans and loosen his belt, sucking his tongue into my mouth for one more kiss before I push myself well clear of him.

He stares at me with dark eyes as I back away a few paces.

“What’s the fucking deal?” he grunts, but I keep on walking.

My skin prickles as he follows. His footsteps are heavy. Hard.

Fast.

“Hey, bitch. What’s the fucking deal here?”

I shoot him a look over my shoulder but keep on going.

I quicken up as he closes the distance, breaking into a jog as I reach the entrance to the river path.

And then he grabs me. His hand closes around my arm and hauls me back to him, his breath hot in my face as we stare at each other.

I moan as he squeezes my tit through my blouse. It feels good enough that I hitch myself against his thigh and grind my pussy through my knickers.

“Gonna fuck all your holes, you filthy bitch,” he rasps.

For a second I contemplate if I should let him.

I wonder if the adrenaline in my veins really is worth all this.

If feeling *alive* is worth all this.

But feeling alive is all I have left. Passing moments are the only things that keep me going.

He grunts in anger as I push myself off him for the second time. I barely make it ten paces before he’s back on me and my heart is thumping in my temples.

Monster.

His breath on my neck.

His hands on me.

But no.

It isn’t him.

It never is.

“Do you want to fuck or not, you crazy bitch, huh?!” I’m glad I can’t see his eyes in the darkness. “Make up your fucking mind!”

And I have.

“No,” I tell him. “I don’t.”

I stare into the darkness of the river path, adrenaline subsiding as he curses under his breath and heads back the way he came.

“You’re fucking tapped!” he yells before he reaches his truck and bleeps the alarm.

I hear the truck pull away and I’m glad I didn’t end up trussed up in his trunk. He’s too drunk to be driving anywhere.

I might be fucked up, but even I have sensibilities.

I stare at the glow of the city across the meadows, listening to the hiss of the river as I picture my tiny little apartment in the distance. The lights will be off. The room sparse and cold, decorated with only the handful of trinkets I brought along from my old life.

My tears of shame are quiet. The numb ones are always the most pitiful.

But it’s not the grubby finger marks on my knickers, or the taste of whisky on my lips that make me cry tonight.

These aren’t the tears of someone who is ashamed of wanting a monster in the darkness. Of wanting to be taken without mercy. Of wanting the promise of relief that comes through being on the edge of something truly petrifying.

They’re the tears of someone who’s grieving her lost life.

Her old friends. Her old job. Her old apartment with the green hallway and the dreamcatcher in the living room window.