

WATCHED

CHAPTER 1: THE SCREEN

The soft glow of the ring light caught the curve of her collarbone as Raven adjusted the camera angle for the third time. She was a perfectionist about these things, though nobody watching would notice the difference. They'd be too focused on other things. That was precisely the point.

Her stage name was Raven, sleek, dark, a little dangerous. Her real name was something else entirely, something she kept locked away like a secret even from herself these days. The less she existed outside this room, the easier it was to control what happened inside it.

The apartment was small, a one-bedroom in a building that asked no questions and kept no records worth keeping. The bedroom had become her studio: blackout curtains, soft lighting, a carefully curated collection of things designed to project an image. Dark silk sheets. A vintage mirror with an ornate frame. Candles that never actually burned, fire codes and paranoia, both reasonable. Everything was theater, and Raven had learned early that the best performances came from understanding every inch of your stage.

She wore a black bralette and matching briefs, her pale skin luminous against the darkness behind her. Her dark hair fell in waves past her shoulders, and her makeup was heavy, smoky eyes, deep red lips. The look was calculated: vulnerable and powerful at once, submissive in pose but commanding in presence. That paradox was her brand. That's what kept people coming back.

The chat window on her secondary monitor was already filling up as she went live. Usernames she recognized, regulars who'd been following her for months. DarkWatcher, SilentObserver, MidnightKing. They had their favorite personas, their favorite requests. She knew how to work them, knew exactly which words would make them stay, which poses would keep them engaged, which moments of artificial intimacy would make them feel like she was performing just for them.

That was the secret, really. Making each person feel like they were the only one watching.

"Hey, boys," she said, her voice lower than her normal speaking voice, rougher around the edges. Another performance choice. "Missed me?"

The chat exploded. Tips started rolling in immediately, five dollars here, ten there, twenty from someone with the username CrimsonKing. She made a mental note. Reliable tippers got attention, a wink, a private message thanking them. It was all part of the machinery.

She'd been doing this for eight years now. Eight years of performances, of calculated vulnerability, of selling intimacy to strangers. It paid better than any legitimate job she'd ever had, and it gave her something else too, control. In her regular life, she was invisible. A ghost moving through the world. But here, on camera, she was a goddess. Men worshipped her. Men paid her. Men begged for her attention.

In exchange, she gave them exactly what they wanted: the fantasy of a girl who wanted to be dominated, who craved control, who would do anything they asked. It was a lie, but it was a beautiful lie, and she'd gotten very good at telling it.

The chat was full of requests tonight. Dominate me. Make me your slave. Show us what you're really capable of. The usual mix of desperation and fantasy.

Then she saw a username she didn't recognize: ShadowX.

He didn't have a profile picture. No bio. No history that she could see. Just a blank account with a simple name and an air of mystery. He'd tipped fifty dollars without saying anything, and now he was watching.

She felt it immediately, that shift in energy, the sensation of being truly seen rather than simply observed. Most of her viewers were predictable. They wanted what they wanted, and they wanted it now. But this one was different. He was patient. Calculating. He was watching her the way a hunter watches prey.

It should have made her uncomfortable. Instead, it made her pulse quicken.

"Thank you for the tip, ShadowX," she said, addressing him directly even though she had no idea what he looked like or who he was. "New around here?"

For a long moment, there was no response. Just the soft tick of the keyboard as other viewers typed their messages. Then:

New to you. I've been watching for a while.

The words appeared in the chat, and Raven felt a chill run down her spine. She kept smiling, kept performing, but something had shifted inside her. There was something about the way he'd phrased it. Not "I just found your channel" or "I've been a fan." But I've been watching.

Like he'd been hunting her specifically.

Over the next hour, ShadowX's tips continued to arrive at strategic moments. When she shifted position, exposing more of her body. When her performance slipped for just a second and something genuine flickered across her face. When she laughed at a joke in the chat and forgot to be calculating for just an instant. He seemed to know exactly which moments were the real ones, and he rewarded those moments with money.

By the end of the stream, he'd tipped four hundred dollars total. More than any other single viewer had ever given her in a single night.

And he'd barely said a word.

When she ended the broadcast two hours later, there was a private message waiting for her from ShadowX:

You're remarkable. The way you perform, the way you let people think they're seeing the real you while keeping the actual you completely hidden. It's perfect. I want to see more. I want a private session. I want to see how far you'll go.

Raven sat in the darkness of her apartment, still half-naked, the glow of the monitor casting shadows across her face. Her hands were shaking slightly. She should delete the message. Should block him. Should report his account as threatening.

Instead, she read it again.

I want to see how far you'll go.

The words echoed in her mind. How far would she go? It was a question she'd asked herself a thousand times. How much of herself would she sell? How much of her dignity could she trade for money and the intoxicating feeling of being desired? And how much longer could she keep pretending that the performance was separate from the person?

She typed a response before she could second-guess herself:

Private session. Three hundred dollars. Tomorrow night at nine.

His response came back instantly:

Done. And Raven? I'm going to see all of you. Not just the performance. The real you. And you're going to let me.

Raven closed the chat window and sat in the darkness. Her heart was pounding. Her skin felt electric. Every instinct told her this was dangerous, that she should block him and move on.

But another part of her, a part she'd been ignoring for a long time, was already anticipating tomorrow night.

She wanted to know what he would ask her to do. She wanted to know if he could actually see through her performance to the person underneath. She wanted to know if there was anyone in the world who could make her feel as vulnerable and exposed as she made her viewers feel every single night.

She was terrified.

And she couldn't wait.

CHAPTER 2: NORMAL

The alarm didn't wake her. Raven had been lying in the dark for twenty minutes already, listening to the rain against the window, running through the previous night the way she always did after a session, cataloguing what worked, what didn't, what she'd do

differently.

ShadowX's message was still open on her phone.

Part of you wants to be found.

She put the phone face-down on the nightstand and got up.

Her morning routine was precise. Coffee first, black, no exceptions, while standing at the kitchen window watching the street below wake up. Seattle in November moved slowly, the city wrapped in grey, pedestrians hunched under umbrellas, buses hissing through shallow puddles. She'd lived here for four years and still wasn't sure if she loved it or merely found it appropriate. It matched her interior weather most of the time. That felt like enough.

Shower. Clean clothes, jeans, a dark green sweater, her battered leather jacket. She put on makeup lighter than her stage face but heavier than most women wore to run errands. Old habit. Armor she couldn't quite put down.

By 8:30 she was out the door.

The city was good for walking, which was the main reason she'd stayed. She walked to the coffee shop three blocks east where the barista knew her order and didn't try to make conversation about it. She walked to the small grocery on the corner, the bookstore on Pike, the waterfront when the weather permitted, which it almost never did, but she went anyway.

Today she had actual errands. She needed a new SD card for her secondary camera, which had started struggling. She needed to pick up a package at the mail service she used for professional correspondence, a PO Box situation, technically, a private mailbox service that added another layer of separation between her online life and her real one.

The package contained merchandise samples from a vendor she was considering. She'd been thinking about launching a physical product line, branded content, nothing explicit, just aesthetic items with her logo. It was the kind of diversification that made financial sense at her level. She was building something here, even if it didn't look like it from the outside.

She thought about this as she walked, the business side of what she did, which most people never considered. They saw the camera and the dark sheets and the performed vulnerability and thought it was simple. They thought it required no intelligence, no planning, no architecture. They were wrong. She had spreadsheets. She had a content calendar. She had a tax accountant who knew the nature of her work and didn't flinch, because she'd specifically interviewed three of them before choosing one.

She had a therapist too, though she hadn't gone in three months. She'd been meaning to make an appointment. She kept meaning to.

The mailbox service was on Second Avenue, a narrow shopfront squeezed between a dry cleaner and a vape shop. The woman behind the counter, middle-aged, efficient, glasses

on a beaded chain, handed over the package with a pleasant nod and no commentary. Raven appreciated her professionally.

She was tucking the package under her arm when her phone buzzed.

A platform notification. ShadowX had sent a follow-up message.

She stood on the sidewalk in the November drizzle and read it.

Good morning. I hope you slept well. I thought about you.

Four sentences. Simple. But the way he'd written it, no question mark after the sleep comment, just a statement, as if he knew the answer, made something shift under her ribs.

She typed back before she could decide not to: Why are you messaging me off-session?

The response came in less than thirty seconds.

Because I wanted to. Because there's no rule that says I can't. And because I think you wanted me to.

She stared at the screen. Around her, Seattle went about its business, a woman arguing on her phone, two men loading boxes from a delivery truck, a pigeon doing pigeon things near a trash bin. Normal city morning. She was standing in it feeling thoroughly abnormal.

You don't know what I want, she typed.

Not yet. But I'm patient.

She put the phone in her pocket and walked home faster than she'd left.

Back at the apartment, she put the package on the counter and made another coffee she didn't particularly need and sat at the kitchen table and thought about ShadowX with the same analytical precision she applied to everything.

He was a problem. That was the frame she needed to hold, he was a potential problem, and she was someone who managed problems effectively. He hadn't done anything technically wrong yet. He'd tipped generously, requested a private session through proper channels, sent messages that were unsettling but not explicitly threatening. The platform had messaging functions precisely because clients communicated with creators. He was using them.

And yet.

Part of you wants to be found.

She pulled up his account on her creator dashboard. The platform gave creators limited information about their subscribers, username, subscription tier, tip history, when they'd first subscribed. ShadowX had subscribed forty-three days ago, though there was no way of knowing how long he'd watched before creating the account. He'd tipped a total of two thousand, three hundred and forty dollars across fourteen sessions. He'd purchased

three premium content packages.

No profile information. No photo. The email address associated with his account was a string of numbers at a domain she didn't recognize.

She opened her laptop and searched the domain name. Nothing. A dead end, or a private server. Someone who understood privacy architecture well enough to build their own.

That was interesting. That was the detail that sharpened her attention from vague unease into something more specific. He wasn't just a wealthy voyeur. He was a technically sophisticated person who had deliberately chosen to remain invisible.

She added a note to his file in the spreadsheet she kept for significant accounts:

High spend. Technically proficient. Deliberately anonymous. Unusual engagement style. Escalating contact. Monitor.

She stared at the last word for a moment, then added one more:

Fascinating.

She deleted Fascinating. immediately.

But she'd typed it.

She met Cass for lunch at the Vietnamese place on Capitol Hill that they'd been going to since they'd both lived in the neighborhood. Cass was already at their usual table, phone out, frowning at something with the intense focus she brought to everything, including frowning.

Cassidy Nguyen had been Raven's closest friend for six years, which was longer than most things in Raven's life had lasted. She was a UX designer with strong opinions about fonts and an uncanny ability to read Raven's emotional state even when Raven was actively trying to prevent it. It was occasionally annoying and frequently invaluable.

"You look like you're thinking too hard," Cass said without looking up.

"I'm always thinking too hard."

"You look like you're thinking too hard about something specific." Now she looked up. Dark eyes, sharp and warm at once. "Session thing?"

Raven sat down and picked up the menu she already had memorized. "Maybe."

"The quiet one?"

Raven paused. She'd mentioned ShadowX twice in passing over the past few weeks, obliquely, without details, in the way she mentioned things she was still categorizing. Cass had, of course, catalogued the mentions precisely.

"He messaged me this morning. Off-session."

Cass set down her phone. "What did he say?"

"That he'd thought about me. That he was patient."

"Patient," Cass repeated, in the tone she used when a word bothered her.

"I know."

"Patient toward what?"

"That's the question."

The food arrived, pho for Cass, a bánh mì for Raven that she ate methodically while talking, because she was good at compartmentalizing her bodily functions and her anxious thoughts into separate tracks.

"What do you know about him?" Cass asked.

"Almost nothing. He's technically sophisticated, I searched his email domain, it's a private server. High spend. Forty-three days of consistent engagement."

"Does he know anything about you?"

"He knows what's on camera."

"That's a lot."

"It's a controlled amount. I'm careful."

Cass wrapped both hands around her tea and gave Raven the look that meant she was choosing her words. "The fact that you're telling me about him means you're not totally comfortable."

"I'm always comfortable. I'm just, "

"You're not uncomfortable about most clients. You've had obsessive clients before. You handled them fine."

"He's different."

"Different how?"

Raven considered this for a moment. "He's not performing at me," she said finally. "Most clients are performing. They have a fantasy version of me in their heads and they're performing at that version. He's, he's looking at me. The actual me. Or trying to."

Cass was quiet for a moment. "And that's a problem?"

"It should be."

"But?"

Raven ate the last of her bánh mì and looked out the window at the rain. "I haven't blocked him."

"No," Cass said. "You haven't."

They didn't say anything else about it for the rest of lunch. But when they hugged goodbye on the sidewalk, Cass held on a beat longer than usual.

"Be careful," she said.

"I'm always careful."

"I know. Be extra careful."

That night, Raven didn't have a scheduled session. She spent the evening editing content, answering subscriber messages, updating her content calendar for the following week. Normal work. The business of being who she was online.

At 11:14 PM, she was in bed reading when a new message came through from ShadowX.

Are you awake?

She should have left it unread. Instead she picked up her phone and typed: What do you want?

His response came immediately, as if he'd been waiting.

I want to know what you look like right now. Not on camera. Not performing. Just you, right now, in your space.

She looked around her bedroom, the real one, not the studio version of it. Smaller than it appeared on screen. Messier. A stack of books on the floor beside the bed because she'd run out of shelf space. A half-empty glass of water. The acoustic foam on one wall. The ring light folded and pushed into the corner, dormant.

Why does that matter to you? she typed.

Because I'm interested in you. Not the performance. You.

You don't know the difference.

I do, he wrote. You showed me the difference last night. When I asked you to go slower and you forgot to perform and just existed for a moment. I want more of that. I want all of that.

Her heart rate did something she noted clinically and chose not to act on.

That's not something I offer, she typed.

I know. That's why I'm asking instead of buying it.

She put the phone face-down.

Then she picked it up again.

Good night, ShadowX.

His response came as she was reaching to turn off the lamp.

Good night, Raven. I'll be here when you wake up.

She turned off the light. Lay in the dark. Thought about a man who had no face, no name, no profile, just a presence, precise and patient, on the other side of a screen.

I'll be here when you wake up.

She should have found that threatening. She knew she should have.

She fell asleep thinking about it anyway, and in the morning, before she'd even made coffee, she checked to see if he'd sent anything else.

He had.

Good morning. It's raining again. I thought of you.

She stood in her kitchen in the grey November light, phone in hand, heart doing the thing she wasn't going to name.

She typed: How do you know it's raining where I am?

A long pause. Then:

I just do.