

The Mind's Abyss-Astra

Dr. Jonas Baletto had spent his life studying the human mind, but nothing prepared him for Patient 132.

The young woman sat in the asylum's observation room, staring at the wall, humming a tune that made Jonas's skin crawl. When the police found her, she was covered in blood—none of it hers—and smiling. She hadn't spoken a word since her arrest.

Jonas leaned forward. "Can you tell me why you were there that night?"

She turned her head, eyes gleaming. Then, she grinned.

"Do you ever think about how fragile people are?" she asked.

Jonas frowned. "What do you mean?"

She examined her fingers. "Seven pounds of pressure can crush a windpipe. A second too long in a chokehold and the brain dies. People don't realize how easy it is to break."

Jonas had interviewed killers before, but something about her was off. There was no malice in her voice—just curiosity.

"You didn't run when the police arrived."

She shrugged. "Why would I? I wanted them to see. People fear what they don't understand. And what they fear most..." She leaned in, lowering her voice. "Is their own mind."

Jonas's hands clenched beneath the table. "Explain."

She giggled. "Monsters? Ghosts? Nonsense. The real horror is thought. What happens when you let go of guilt, of rules? People don't like to admit it, Doctor, but the scariest place in the world is their own head."

Jonas swallowed. "You're saying anyone could do... what you did?"

She nodded. "With the right push. Ever had a dark thought, Doctor? Standing by train tracks, wondering what would happen if you stepped forward? Holding a knife and imagining—just for a second—what it would feel like to use it?"

Jonas's breath hitched.

She smirked. "You have, haven't you?"

His mouth was dry. "But I don't act on them."

"Because you tell yourself you shouldn't." She traced a slow circle on the table. "But if you did... if you let go just once, you'd realize how thin the line really is. The mind is an abyss, Doctor. If you stare too long, it stares back."

Jonas felt something cold slither down his spine.

She leaned in, voice barely above a whisper. "Would you like to know the real horror?"

He forced himself to meet her gaze.

She smiled.

"You already let go."

The room suddenly felt off. The table. The walls. The mirror behind her.

There was no mirror in this room.

Jonas's breath came in short gasps as he looked at his hands. His fingers were red, the faint scent of iron lingering.

A distant memory surfaced—flashes of light, screaming, his own laughter.

The door opened, and a man in a white coat stepped inside. "Dr. Baletto, we're finished for today."

Jonas turned toward the voice, but the man wasn't looking at him.

He was looking at her.

The young woman stood, adjusting her coat. "Of course, Doctor."

Jonas shot to his feet. "Wait! No! I—I'm Dr. Baletto!"

She turned, her grin widening.

"I know," she whispered.

Then she walked out the door.

A firm hand gripped Jonas's shoulder.

"Come on, 132," the man said gently. "Time for your meds."

Jonas screamed.