HOMECOMING

EPISODE 32

Jesus, Kris. I mean... I'm trying here, but did I really need to know about the window?

You said you wanted the whole story. This is the whole story. What Alan and I had wasn't some sordid affair. It was real. It was the first real thing I'd had in years.

I get that. I do. It's just... It's hard to hear about my best friend—

Christopher is gone and he's not coming back. How many times do I have to say it? But I'm still here. I'm still your friend. I still remember every stupid thing we did together, every secret you told me, every time you had my back. That doesn't just disappear because my body changed. I'm still the person who knows you better than anyone.

Then help me understand. Because the friend I knew wouldn't... wouldn't be okay with what you're asking me to do.

You're right. He wouldn't. But I'm not asking you as Christopher. I'm asking as Kris. As your best friend who needs you to trust that I know what I'm doing.

Okay. Okay. So you and Alan... you were together. You were building a life. When did it all go wrong?



Wrong? That's the thing, Benji. For a while, nothing went wrong. It was perfect. Better than perfect. I had everything I'd dreamed about during those years in the basement. For the first time, I wasn't just surviving. I was living...

And I was voracious.

I wanted Alan every night.

And I got him.

Was it... different? With Alan versus with Kayla?

Completely. I love Kayla. I do. But it's like loving your best friend. That was Christopher's love for her, and I inherited it. The romantic part? That died with him. When I'm with her, I feel... affection. Gratitude. But not desire. Not really.

And with Alan?

With Alan, I felt everything. Want, need, hunger. The way he touched me wasn't careful or tentative. He didn't treat me like I was broken. And the sex itself... Let's just say there are certain advantages to being a woman that men don't fully appreciate.

I really don't need the details—

You know, you should try it sometime. Being on the receiving end, I mean. Might give you some perspective on what women experience. Might make you a better lover for Kayla.

What? No! I'm not - I don't - C'mon, Kris!

I'm just saying. You'd be surprised how different everything feels when you're not the one in control. When pleasure isn't something you take but something someone gives you.

Can we please get back to the story? You were saying everything was perfect with Alan.

It was. For five months, I had exactly what I wanted.



That first night I slept in his arms, I realized something. For months, even in my own apartment, I'd been waiting for Bella to show up. Waiting for the gas, the injection, the voice telling me I'd broken the rules. I didn't know how much fear I'd been carrying until it was gone. With Alan, I could finally just sleep. Really sleep. No nightmares. No listening for footsteps. Just his heartbeat and his warmth and the knowledge that someone was protecting me instead of hunting me.

I moved in after three days. Three days. That's insane, right? The kind of thing people do in rom-coms, although I doubt they'd put our story on Hallmark. But it wasn't just fear driving me. It was greed. I'd spent three years with nothing, and suddenly here was everything I wanted.





And it was only a few days before Halloween. You remember how much I loved Halloween, right? Well, I hadn't celebrated it in three years. And now I could. But more than that...

Remember how we used to joke about those sexy girl costumes? "Sexy nurse," "sexy witch," "sexy whatever"? How Christopher would say they were ridiculous and objectifying? I was pretty self-righteous about it.

Well, turns out when you actually have the body for it, those costumes are fun as hell. I went as a sexy cat. Black bodysuit, ears, tail, the whole thing. I felt ridiculous and powerful and sexy all at once. I waited until after we took Dustin trick-or treating before putting it on - I didn't want to start any rumors. Well - *anymore* rumors, I guess.

When Alan saw me, I thought he was going to have a stroke. He just stood there staring for a full thirty seconds. It was very… gratifying.

And Dustin. God, Benji, it was love at first sight. For both of us. He had this little eye patch - the doctors said he'd only need it for a few months during treatment. He looked like the world's cutest pirate. And you know what? He didn't ask questions. Didn't care that I was his dad's "friend from work" who suddenly appeared. He just accepted me. Kids are good at that.

He'd show me his Halloween candy and ask me to help with his math homework. He'd tell me about his day at school, about the kids who teased him about the patch and how he told them he was training to be a real knight. And every time I looked at him, I thought: Christopher and I saved him. Together. That was us. That one good thing came from all that hell.

Every time I looked at him, every time he smiled at me or asked for help with his homework, I remembered that Christopher and I had done one truly good thing together. We'd saved his life. That mattered more than anything that had been done to us. More than the castration, the surgeries, the clients. *We saved a kid*. And now I got to watch him grow up.



Thanksgiving, we went to Alan's uncle's house. I'd spent two weeks learning how to cook a turkey. Christopher couldn't boil water without setting off the smoke alarm, but I wanted to contribute. To be useful. To be the kind of woman who shows up to family dinners with something homemade.

I'd started using special tattoo cover-up makeup for occasions like this. Christopher's half-sleeve skull didn't exactly scream "nice girl meeting the family." And honestly, I hated looking at it. It was his mark, not mine. A reminder of someone I'd 'never be again.

After dinner, the women went to the kitchen and the men went to watch football. It was such a stereotype I almost laughed. But I followed the women because that's where I belonged now. And you know what? It was nice. They taught me their pie crust recipe. Asked me about my job. Welcomed me like I'd always been one of them.

Christopher would've hated that. The gender segregation, the domestic expectations. He would've given a speech about patriarchy and made everyone uncomfortable. But I loved it. I loved learning to make pie crust. I loved being included in their world. Does that make me a bad feminist?

Christmas Eve, Alan had to work late on some breaking story about city council corruption. So I sent him a little... motivation to come home. Christopher would've been mortified. But I loved it. Loved knowing I could make him drop everything and rush home. Loved having that power over him.

The point is, I wasn't performing anymore. In the basement, *sexy* was armor. A tool. A survival mechanism. But with Alan? I wanted to be sexy for him. I wanted to see that look in his eyes, wanted to make him want me. That was mine. My choice.



For the first time in my life, my sexuality wasn't something being taken from me or forced on me. It was something I owned. Something I could give. And God, it felt good.

I kept working at Full Rack even after moving in with Alan. Told him I needed my own money, my independence. Truth was, I was good at it. Really good. My tips were insane - sometimes $400 a night. Part of me felt proud. I was supporting myself, earning my keep. The other part felt like I was right back in the basement.



February, Frank gave me "Top Rack of the Month." There was a little ceremony, a $200 bonus, and my photo on the wall of fame. The other girls congratulated me. I smiled and thanked him while imagining all the ways I could hurt him. The irony wasn't lost on me - I'd escaped a basement where I was objectified and ended up in a sports bar where I was objectified. At least here I got a certificate.

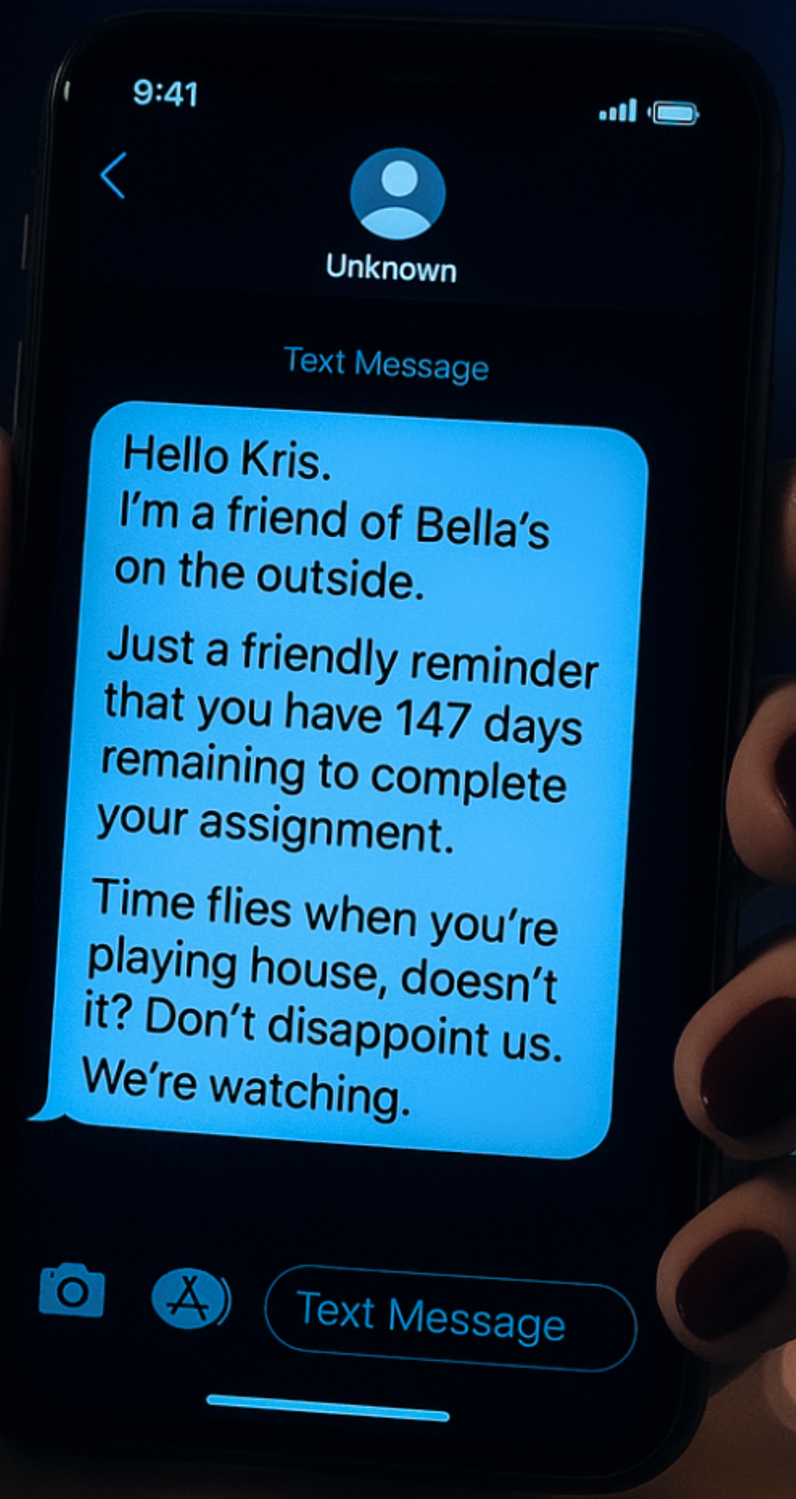
The touching was constant. A hand on my hip as I squeezed past. Fingers "accidentally" brushing my ass. Men who'd "drop" something so I'd have to bend over. And everyone just... accepted it. The other girls, the manager, even the women who came in with these men. This was just how things were. And I started to understand, just a little bit, why Bella did what she did. Not that it excused anything. But I got it. The rage at knowing this was normal. That for women, violation was just part of the job description.

The other girls started coming to me when things got bad. Like Jenny, who was nineteen and saving for nursing school. A regular had gotten too handsy, and when she told Frank, he said she was “too sensitive.” She broke down in the break room. I held her while she cried and told her it wasn’t her fault. That she wasn’t crazy. That what happened to her mattered.

I didn’t tell her I understood better than she knew. That I’d spent three years learning to disconnect my mind from my body while men touched me however they wanted. That I’d become an expert at swallowing my rage. I just held her and let her cry.

The first text came in January.

I didn't respond. I deleted it and put the phone down like it had burned me. Told myself it was spam, a wrong number, anything but what I knew it was. A reminder that my borrowed time was running out.



I knew I should start looking. Start evaluating candidates. But I couldn't. The men at Full Rack could be disgusting. Entitled. Gross. But did any of them deserve what happened to me? The castration, the forced transition, the years of sexual slavery?

I kept telling myself that nobody did. So I ignored the texts. Focused on my life with Alan and Dustin. Pretended I could just run out the clock and somehow it would all work out.

But the texts wouldn't stop. I got one every two weeks. Like clockwork. Each one counting down the days. Each one reminding me what would happen if I failed.

I threw myself into being normal. Date nights at expensive galleries where Alan would pretend he knew something about art. Movies where we'd argue about the ending. Long walks along the lake where we'd talk about nothing and everything.



Valentine's Day, he took me to this ridiculously expensive restaurant. Made reservations weeks in advance. I felt like Cinderella at the ball, except I knew exactly when my midnight was coming. 147 days. Then 133. Then 119. But that night, with Alan looking at me like I was the only woman in the world, I let myself forget. I let myself pretend this was my real life, not borrowed time.



February, we drove down to the “Chicagoland” Renaissance Faire. Which, despite the name, is actually in Texas. Some entrepreneur’s idea of a joke. Twelve-hour drive, but it was Dustin’s Make-A-Wish trip. He wanted to be a real knight at a real Renaissance Faire, and they picked one where it’d actually be warm enough to enjoy. I’d surprised them with costumes I’d spent weeks making. Well, buying and altering - I wasn’t that domestic yet. Dustin was a knight, of course. Alan was... Alan said he was a nobleman but he looked more like a pirate who’d stolen nice clothes. And me? I was a lady, naturally.

We took one photo that day. Just one. I usually avoided cameras - too risky, too permanent. But Alan begged. He wanted proof this was real, that we existed together. So I said yes.

And for those few seconds while the camera clicked, I let myself believe this was my family. That I'd earned them. That they were mine to keep.

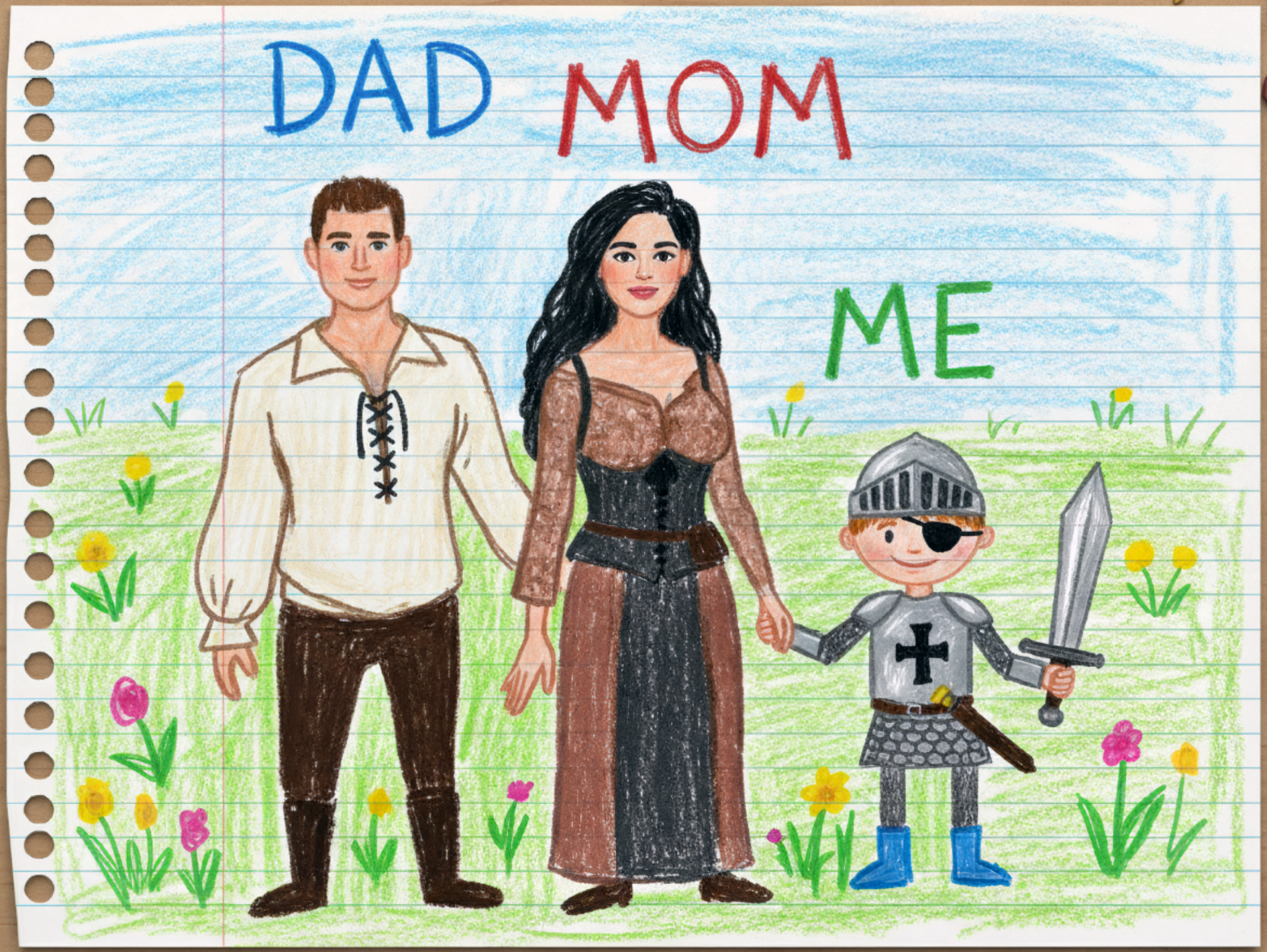
The texts kept coming. Every two weeks, then every week. The tone changed. Less friendly reminders, more direct threats. "Time is running out." "We're losing patience." "Remember what happens to those who disappoint us." And always, always the same warning: Don't go to the police. Don't tell anyone. One word to the authorities and the deal is off.

They'd kill me. That's what "the deal is off" meant. Or take me back down to hell. And then they'd go after Alan and Dustin. Make it look like an accident. A home invasion. Something tragic but explainable. Bella had made that very clear.

I kept telling myself I'd start looking tomorrow. Next week. After Dustin's birthday. After the faire. I was a coward, Ben. I had nine months and I pissed away most of them because I couldn't face what I had to do. I couldn't work up the strength to hunt someone, to evaluate them, to decide they deserved what happened to me. Until…

Late March, I was cleaning Dustin's room while he was at school. Alan was at work. Just normal domestic stuff. Folding clothes, picking up toys, trying to bring order to a ten-year-old's chaos.

I found it under his bed. Must have fallen off his desk. When I put it back, when I saw what he drew…


DAD
MOM
ME

I sat on his bed and cried for twenty minutes. Because I knew, in that moment, exactly what I had to lose. And exactly what I was willing to do to keep it.

That's when I knew I couldn't keep running from it. Couldn't keep pretending it would just go away. I had to find someone. Had to complete the mission. Because losing this - losing them - wasn't an option.

You want to know when I became willing to turn someone over to Bella? *That* was the moment. When I realized I wasn't just fighting for my own survival anymore. I was fighting for a little boy who'd already lost one mother and didn't deserve to lose another. So yeah, I started hunting.

I didn't have to look far. A week after finding that drawing, *he* walked through the door. The Stinker. That abusive asshole from the basement.

"Did anybody miss me?" he said. "Four months in Denver for work, and this is the first place I come back to. That's how you know a bar's doing something right!"

Then he looked right at me. Right. At. Me. And you know what he says?

"Damn, Frank," he said. "You've been hiring better looking girls while I was gone. Where'd you find this one?"

The asshole didn't recognize me. Two years of having his cock in my mouth, of enduring his abuse, his degradation, his entitled bullshit. And he had no idea who I was.

I got him beer. "First one's on the house. Welcome back."

"Now that's what I call service. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Kristine," I said, and he just waved.

That's when I knew. When I knew exactly who deserved what Bella had planned. Not some random asshole from a nightclub. Not some guy who was just drunk and stupid. *Him*. The Stinker. The man who'd made my life hell in that basement and didn't even remember my face.

Kris... what did you do?

I started planning.



