The guy locked up in our basement is a bad man. He must be.

The only men who end up in our basement are bad ones. That’s what my father tells me. I only didn’t believe him once. So he said, “C’mere, Bel,” and showed me pictures and news stories about what the man had done to other people.

“Danny, that’s too much. She’s too young to be looking at all that,” Mama kept saying.

But she never told him not to do it. So I got shown. And I stopped not believing him after that.

Until now.

The guy Daddy’s been keeping downstairs doesn’t look like a man. I thought that back when Daddy dragged him through the house, unconscious. And I think it now as I walk down the stairs to our unfinished basement, having already decided what to do.

I come to a stop outside the cell Daddy installed. Steel bars hang from the ceiling with a small gap left beneath. High enough to pass a plate through without me needing to open the door, but not high enough for the bad men to have any hope of escaping.

But the guy inside the cage Daddy built looks like a boy—a teenager. Maybe even the same age as me. Scrawny under all the blood from the cuts. And though his face is a mangled mess, I remember thinking the first day I came down to give him food that he was way too young to be here.

He’s going to die today. Or as Daddy calls it, “take a walk in the woods.”

I know because Daddy left the house with a shovel earlier this afternoon, grumbling about having to “do this shit in the winter.” And later on, Mama told me to go downstairs to take the bad man’s order. She only makes special meals for the bad men when it’s their last.

But this isn’t a man, I think as I stare at the figure in the cage.

It’s freezing down here. No matter how high Mama and me turn up the heat, we can’t ever get it warm. Even in summer. And it’s winter now.

The boy accepted the hot plates of food with chattering teeth the first few times I slipped the one meal a day Daddy allows under the bars.

Not today though. Now the boy just lies on the concrete floor, a pile of blood covered bones, not saying anything. But I know he’s awake, because the one eye that isn’t swollen shut stares back at me, angry and electric. He has long lashes. I thought that when he first came in—that he was one of *those* boys. Pretty like you see on TV.

My mama says I’m pretty like the girls on TV. And Daddy says that’s why he told her to name me Bella, because I was the most beautiful baby he’d ever seen, even prettier than his real kids when they came out. Still, I don’t spend a lot of time at the mirror like Mama, and I’m not down here because I want somebody to tell me I’m pretty.

“You can have anything you want,” I tell the boy, loud enough for Mama to hear up in the kitchen beyond the open basement door. “Anything. Mama’s going to the store special for you, and she’s a real good cook.”

It’s been a week. And a week is usually enough time for the bad men to become desperate for my father’s beatings to end with a meal made specially for them. But the bad boy only stares at me through one eye. Like he’s imagining coming through the cage and ringing my neck.

“Please, just say something,” I whisper. “We need her to leave the house.”

“You don’t have his order yet?”

I look up from the cell. Mama’s at the top of the stairs. Just far enough down to see her heeled black boots and some dark brown leg beneath her wool midi skirt. But not far enough for her to see into the cell.

She never comes down here. Daddy says she’s not as strong as me.

And I agree, which is why I don’t say what I’m really thinking. That this boy is too young to be taken for a walk in the woods. That we should let him go before Daddy gets home from digging his winter grave.

If Mama were capable of going against Daddy on anything, we wouldn’t be living in the woods a good fifty miles away from any major city in Massachusetts.

Instead, I say, “Spaghetti and meatballs. That’s what he wants.”

“For real?” Mama asks, still just half a body at the top of the stairs. “That’s all?”

“That’s all,” I confirm. Hoping she believes me.