Chapter 1 — "Second String"

By four-thirty on the last Friday of May, the air inside the Ridgeway High athletic complex sat at ninety-two degrees and smelled of rubber weight plates, damp turf, and floor wax.

Someone on the custodial crew had propped the double doors between the weight room and the main basketball gymnasium open with a pair of forty-five-pound iron discs. They were hoping for a cross-breeze off the practice fields, though none came. Outside on the bermuda grass, seventy teenage boys in royal-blue mesh jerseys straggled toward the water troughs after the final 7-on-7 period of spring workouts, their helmets dangling from their fingers by the facemasks.

Brad Rhodes walked in out of the glare with his playbook binder tucked under one muscular forearm and his coaching whistle resting against his sweat-darkened gray Mustangs polo. At twenty-eight, he still filled out a coaching shirt the way he had in Tuscaloosa. He stood six-foot-one and two hundred and five pounds, broad through the shoulders, with sandy-brown hair and a square, sunburned jaw.

Beside him, twenty-five-year-old receivers coach Matt Hollis peeled damp wrist tape off his thumb and complained about the drive up Highway 280.

"If we don't wrap Saturday film by eleven-thirty tomorrow, I'm a dead man," Matt said, tossing the ball of gray tape into a trash barrel by the squat racks. "Told that girl from Birmingham I'd meet her at the pool bar at noon. If I show up smelling like sophomore linebackers—"

Matt stepped into the open gymnasium doorway and stopped talking.

Brad didn't have to look past Matt's shoulder to know what had killed the sentence.

Across the polished maple floor, underneath the state-playoff banners and the painted blue mustang rearing at center court, the girls had rolled out three strips of royal-blue foam mat for the final ten minutes of varsity competition cheer camp. Twenty cheerleaders in matching shorts sat cross-legged along the edge of the foam with water bottles between their sneakers. All of them were looking up at their coach.

Savannah Rhodes stood in the center of the mat with her hands on her narrow hips.

Savannah and Brad had been together ten years now—four in high school in Vestavia Hills, four at the University of Alabama, and two married in a brick ranch three miles down Dogwood Lane. Even so, seeing his wife across a crowded gym still gave Brad the same punch in the ribs he'd felt at sixteen.

At twenty-seven, Savannah looked twenty-two and moved like a Division I athlete who never took an offseason. She was five-foot-four and a hundred and ten pounds of compact, sun-toasted perfection. Her skin carried a golden-bronzed glow, slick now with a fine, healthy sheen of post-workout sweat across her sculpted shoulders and straight collarbones. A tiny gold pendant rested on a whisper-thin chain in the hollow of her throat. Her smooth, straight, glossy dark-brown hair was parted cleanly down the center and gathered high into a sleek ponytail that swung between her shoulder blades whenever she turned.

Today she wore a fitted gray *RIDGEWAY CHEER* racerback tank top knotted tightly at the side of her narrow taut waist

over a white sports bra. A two-inch strip of flat, honey-brown stomach showed above a pair of high-cut crimson athletic shorts from her college spirit-squad days.

"Watch my left hip again, Kelsey," Savannah called out. Her warm, musical Alabama voice carried effortlessly across the hardwood without sounding sharp. "When you pull the heel up, you're letting your pelvis roll back toward your bases. Keep your chest up and lock the standing knee first."

Without warming up, Savannah reached down with her left hand, hooked two fingers around the heel of her clean white sneaker, and pulled her toned, golden-bronzed leg straight up beside her left ear into a standing heel-stretch.

Her balance didn't waver a millimeter. Her standing quad flexed smooth and lean from knee to hip. As her left foot went straight into the air beside her ponytail, the hem of those crimson shorts rode a full inch higher up the back of her right thigh, pulling taut across her high, compact, muscular little ass. Ten years of collegiate cheer squats and tumbling passes were packed into two firm, apple-round cheeks that jutted out from the base of her lower back like a shelf. They sat high enough to show a clean, sun-bronzed crescent of under-cheek below the crimson seam.

Kelsey nodded. Kelsey had it. Savannah held the stretch anyway, a moment past what any sophomore flyer needed to see, and the corner of her mouth tucked in like she was keeping a secret from the whole gym.

Brad felt it the way he always did, pride first, square in the chest, and right behind it something lower and more possessive. Every man in the building was looking at her, and he was the only one who got to drive her home.

Beside Brad in the doorway, Matt Hollis actually swallowed.

Ten feet to their left, two sixteen-year-old offensive tackles who had been racking dumbbells by the water fountain stood motionless with forty-pound hex weights in their hands. Both boys stared out across the basketball court with their mouths open.

Brad rapped the plastic edge of his playbook binder twice against the steel doorframe.

The metal clatter made both sophomores jump. Their heads snapped around and their ears went beet-red. They practically tripped over their own cleats shoving the dumbbells onto the bottom rack before bolting out the side doors toward the locker room.

"Keep your eyes in your head, Hollis," Brad said dryly, though the corner of his mouth twitched up.

"Man, I'm trying," Matt muttered under his breath, dragging a hand down his face. "Look at her. That ought to be illegal in a public school building. If I had Savannah Milner waiting on me at home on a Friday afternoon, I wouldn't leave the house between Memorial Day and August. You know you're the luckiest bastard in the state of Alabama, right?"

"Every day," Brad said.

Out on the blue foam mat, Savannah lowered her left sneaker smoothly to the floor without a sound. She smoothed the back of her crimson shorts down over her tight cheeks with both palms. Her face was remarkably balanced and symmetrical: high, sun-warmed cheekbones, a faint summer dusting of golden freckles across a small straight nose, a clean jawline, and full, naturally plump lips shining with a fresh swipe of lip balm. Above her cheekbones, strong, naturally arched dark eyebrows framed

a pair of light, vivid green eyes that stood out from thirty yards away.

"Better," Savannah told the sophomore flyer, clapping her hands once. "That's camp, ladies! Roll the mats to the wall, grab your water bottles, and I'll see y'all Monday morning at nine sharp for summer weights."

As the girls broke into chatter and bent to roll the foam strips, Savannah turned her head toward the weight-room doors and spotted Brad standing there with his binder.

She didn't wave. She just held his eyes across the width of the gym for three slow seconds while her full lips settled into a calm, slight, closed-lip smile.

There was a natural, built-in mischief in Savannah's green eyes—a warm, playful bedroom look that made a man feel like she was sharing a private joke with him under the bleachers. Brad had watched her give that exact look to the seventy-year-old usher at First Baptist, to the guy slicing turkey behind the Publix deli counter, and to half the boosters in Tallapoosa County. She didn't have the faintest idea what it did to a man's blood pressure. That was just how her face was put together.

When she gave it to Brad across a hot gym, his cock stirred against the front of his coaching shorts.

"Lord have mercy," Matt groaned softly, turning back toward the coaches' hallway. "I'm going to shower before you fire me. See you at nine for film."

Brad grinned and stood in the doorway watching Savannah sling her white canvas tote bag over one bronzed shoulder and walk across the court toward him. She had a crisp, athletic stride from the hips. Because her ass sat so high and tight, every step made the back hem of her crimson shorts lift and catch against

her cheeks while her sleek ponytail swung in time behind her neck.

Before she reached the foul line, rubber-soled shoes scuffed down the cinderblock hall from the athletic director's office.

Head Coach Donnie Pruitt came around the corner wiping the back of his red, creased neck with a small white hand towel. Pruitt was sixty-two, with a buzzed fringe of gray hair, a whistle cord permanently grooved into his collar, and khaki coaching shorts pulled up within three inches of his armpits. He had coached the Ridgeway High Mustangs for thirty-one falls and won two 6A state championships in the nineties. Back in March, he had announced to the school board that this coming December would be his last season.

"Good period on the deep outs today, Brad," Pruitt said, nodding toward the practice field doors. "Young Tanner's finally getting his back foot planted before he throws the comeback."

"Shortened his drop by half a step on Tuesday," Brad said, straightening up automatically. "Keeps his elbow from dropping when the pocket crowds him."

"Looks clean." Pruitt tucked the hand towel into his belt and lowered his voice a notch as Savannah approached across the hardwood. "Boone Strickland called the office twenty minutes ago. Wants you, Hollis, and the offensive boys to swing by the Ford lot out on 280 tomorrow around noon once y'all finish morning film. The new summer Gridiron Club polos came in from Birmingham, and he wants to buy y'all lunch and hear how 7-on-7's looking."

Brad felt the familiar quickening in his chest whenever Boone Strickland's name came up. "We'll be there by twelve-fifteen."

"And don't forget Sunday after church," Pruitt added, tipping two fingers to his forehead as Savannah walked up beside Brad. "One-thirty out at the Country Club pool pavilion for the summer kickoff cookout. Boone's smoking three briskets, and the whole Gridiron board's gonna be out there."

"Wouldn't miss it, Coach Pruitt," Savannah said warmly, shifting her tote bag onto her forearm. "I'm making a double pan of my mom's pecan pie bars tomorrow afternoon."

Pruitt's weathered face softened into a grin. "Now you're talking, Sav. Tell Brad if he eats half the pan in the truck on the way over like he did at the Labor Day picnic, I'm making him run gassers on Monday."

Savannah laughed—a bright, easy sound that made the single small dimple in her left cheek pop. Once Pruitt strolled back down the hall toward the locker room, she stepped right into Brad's chest.

Up close, the heat coming off her skin smelled of clean twenty-seven-year-old athlete sweat and the sweet, warm cinnamon body lotion she put on every morning after her shower. She rose up onto the balls of her white sneakers, making her toned calves flex and the back of her crimson shorts ride higher up her ass. Looping one arm around Brad's neck, she pressed her soft, balm-slicked lips against his jaw.

"Hey, Coach," she murmured against his skin.

"Hey yourself." Brad slid his free hand down to the bare, warm two-inch strip of skin at her waist, right above the low elastic waistband of her shorts. "You know you nearly killed two of my sophomore tackles with that heel-stretch five minutes ago, right? Hollis had to go take a cold shower."

Savannah pulled back three inches, looking up into his face with those clear, mischievous green eyes and that slight, knowing smile. "I was demonstrating hip alignment for Kelsey, Coach Rhodes. I can't help it if you boys don't have any discipline."

"My football players are sixteen and you're wearing your college shorts." Brad let his hand slide two inches lower, giving the firm, high shelf of her right ass cheek a quick squeeze before anybody walked out of the weight room. The muscle under the thin crimson nylon was tight as a drum. "Come on. My truck or yours?"

"We took yours this morning, remember? My car's in the driveway." She tucked a loose strand of dark-brown hair behind her ear, her fingers brushing the row of tiny gold hoops and diamond studs along her cartilage. "Did Coach Pruitt say Mr. Strickland called?"

"Yeah. Wants me and the offensive staff out at the dealership tomorrow at noon to talk summer passing league, and then the Country Club cookout Sunday." Brad pushed the steel exterior door open for her, holding it while she stepped out into the blinding late-May sun of the coaches' parking lot. "Pruitt didn't come right out and say it, Sav, but Boone doesn't call the offensive coordinator out to his office on a Saturday unless he's getting ready to talk December."

Across the asphalt, the stadium towered over the pine trees. It held seven thousand aluminum seats, a pristine turf field, and a six-figure LED video board over the north end zone with *STRICKLAND FORD & TRACTOR — PROUD SPONSOR OF MUSTANG FOOTBALL* emblazoned across the bottom in four-foot letters.

In a town like Ridgeway—fifteen thousand people tucked against the pine-wooded coves of Lake Martin—the county school board paid Brad fifty-four thousand dollars a year to teach driver's ed, third-period physical education, and call plays on Friday nights. That wasn't why they had moved down from Tuscaloosa two years ago. They had moved because of the Ridgeway Gridiron Club: the program's boosters, a private circle of thirty local timber owners, bank presidents, and dealership millionaires who pooled their own money to bankroll Mustangs football like a college franchise. Those boosters paid for the weight room, bought the charter buses for road playoffs, and wrote a separate forty-five-thousand-dollar private check every year to supplement the Head Coach's salary.

And Boone Strickland was the president of the Gridiron Club. He wrote the biggest checks, and when Boone nodded, the school board rubber-stamped the hire the following Monday.

Brad unlocked the doors of his pickup and watched Savannah climb up into the passenger seat, her bronzed thigh flexing smooth and lean as she tucked one leg neatly under the other on the warm leather.

Everybody in Ridgeway treated Brad and Savannah Rhodes like a matched set of Crimson Tide royalty. When they walked into the steakhouse on Friday nights after a win, boosters bought their ribeyes. They introduced Brad to out-of-town guests as *"our boy from Saban's quarterback room at Alabama, married to the prettiest cheerleader who ever stood on the sidelines."*

Only Brad carried the quiet reality of those four years in Tuscaloosa.

Savannah had been the star. Every Saturday afternoon in the fall, a hundred thousand people in the stadium and eight million more on CBS watched Savannah Milner in her crimson pleated skirt at the corner of the end zone. In the fourth quarter of the LSU night game her sophomore year, a CBS cameraman had zoomed all the way in on her face during an injury timeout. Her bronzed skin was dewy under the stadium lights, her light green eyes looking straight into the lens with that calm, slight, devastating smile. The director in the production truck had held the shot for five full seconds while the announcers talked about third-down conversions. By the time Brad took her to Waffle House on University Boulevard at midnight, her Instagram had gained fourteen thousand followers and three NFL rookies were in her message requests.

During those exact five seconds on national television, Brad had been standing thirty yards up the sideline between the forty-yard markers in a pristine #14 crimson jersey without a single smudge of paint or grass on the shoulders. He had been holding a laminated play chart to his chest and signaling in formations with two colored wristbands for a five-star starter from California.

Four seasons. Forty-eight Saturdays. He had taken eleven garbage-time snaps against Southern Miss and Mercer, and one real series in the third quarter against Tennessee his redshirt sophomore year when the starter rolled his ankle. Brad had trotted out with his heart hammering in his throat, handed the ball off twice, stared down his tight end on third-and-six, and thrown a flat interception straight into a linebacker's chest. Then he had spent the fourth quarter on the bench watching a true freshman throw two touchdowns.

He had held a clipboard his entire adult life.

In seven months, Donnie Pruitt was walking out the door. For the first time since Brad was seventeen years old at Vestavia Hills High, nobody was going to be standing in front of him on the depth chart.

Their rented three-bedroom brick ranch on Dogwood Lane sat under two big water oaks five minutes from the high school, with a fenced back patio and a central air-conditioning unit that hummed nonstop from May through October.

At five o'clock, Brad sat on the edge of the king mattress in nothing but his gray mesh gym shorts, thumbing through his phone while the shower ran behind the closed bathroom door. When the water shut off, he tossed the phone onto the quilt beside him.

A minute later the latch clicked and a drift of steam came out ahead of her.

Savannah walked out with a white bath towel tucked above her breasts and her phone in one hand. She hadn't washed her hair, only rinsed the gym sweat off her skin. She had taken out her ponytail elastic so her straight, glossy dark-brown hair fell in a smooth, shining sheet a few inches past her bare shoulders. It was parted cleanly down the middle and tucked behind one ear where her gold double-hoops glinted.

"I took the chicken out of the fridge to thaw," she said, setting her phone on her dresser before turning toward the bed. She stopped two steps from the rug when she saw him sitting on the edge of the mattress watching her.

That calm, slight curve touched the corners of her plump lips, and her light green eyes warmed under her dark arched brows.

"Coach Rhodes," she said softly. "That chicken has to go in the oven by five-forty-five."

"That leaves us forty minutes," Brad said, reaching out to catch her by her slim, bronzed wrist and pull her between his knees. "Come here."

Savannah didn't pretend to fuss. She stepped between his bare legs and rested both small hands lightly on his shoulders. Brad hooked two fingers into the tucked corner of her bath towel at the center of her chest and tugged it loose.

The white terrycloth dropped straight down her body and pooled around her bare size-six feet, where her ten toes were painted glossy summer white.

Even after seeing her naked a thousand times, the visual contrast when Savannah's clothes came off made Brad's breath thicken in his throat.

All week long on the back patio while Brad was at the fieldhouse, she tanned for forty minutes after school in a tiny white string bikini to keep her summer color up. Her shoulders, collarbones, flat twenty-four-inch stomach, and toned cheerleader thighs were a deep, glowing golden-bronze. At her chest and hips, that bronze gave way abruptly to razor-sharp, milky-white bikini triangles that made her look doubly naked.

Her breasts were perky, high-sitting B-cups—firm, round, natural handfuls that sat high on her ribcage with zero sag and never needed a bra under a sundress. Inside those stark white triangles, her small, rose-pink nipples were centered on neat, quarter-sized pale pink areolae. They were already stiffening into hard little points as the cold bedroom air hit her damp skin.

Brad set both hands on her narrow waist. She was so compact through the middle that his thumbs nearly touched across

her flat stomach. He slid his palms back over the crisp white ribbon of untanned skin on her hipbones to cup her ass. Two milky-white triangles covered her compact, muscular little cheeks, framed by her tan lower back and thighs. Below the sharp horizontal tanline at her pelvis, she was completely bare and smooth, her neat, tucked-in outer lips forming a clean pale-pink seam between her thighs.

"God Almighty, Sav," Brad muttered. He leaned forward to press his open mouth into the warm valley between her white breasts before drawing her left nipple between his lips.

Savannah let out a soft gasp. Her fingers threaded into his sandy-brown hair as her back arched cleanly, pushing her firm little breast deeper into his mouth. "Mmm—your belt buckle isn't even off and your hands are freezing—"

Brad reached one hand sideways to toss his iPhone off the quilt onto the nightstand to make room for her knees, and his thumb bumped the side button. At the same instant, a group-text banner from Matt Hollis popped up at the top of the screen, unlocking the phone via FaceID as it landed face-up beside the lamp.

The screen opened directly onto the Instagram app Brad had left running in his office before afternoon practice—specifically, the Explore search grid.

Twelve square thumbnails glowed bright in the bedroom. It was a wall-to-wall mosaic of tall, heavily contoured bottle-blondes on boats in Miami and pool decks in Scottsdale, wearing neon dental-floss bikinis with heavy, overflowing DD chests pushed up to their chins.

Above him, Savannah went still for half a second. She glanced down past his shoulder at the glowing phone on the

nightstand. Then she reached past his ear, picked the iPhone up with two fingers, and held it six inches in front of his nose.

She tipped her head back and laughed—bright, warm, and completely unselfconscious, the dimple in her left cheek popping deep as her bare B-cups bounced right at eye level.

"Hold on a second, Coach Rhodes," Savannah teased, looking down at him with those vivid green eyes sparkling with pure amusement. She tapped one bare, white-painted toe against his shin. "Why does your phone think you're a fifty-eight-year-old divorced uncle in Panama City? Look at the middle row. If that girl falls off that yacht, she's floating on her chest all the way to Cuba. Do I need to call the First Baptist deacon board on you?"

Brad laughed, feeling a quick heat climb the back of his ears. He took the phone out of her fingers, locked the screen, and tossed it face-down onto the nightstand. "Blame Matt Hollis. He spends half of morning film air-dropping me links to girls he met at Tin Roof in Birmingham, and now my whole phone thinks I live in a strip club."

"Uh-huh. Poor innocent Coach Rhodes, corrupted by his receivers coach." She didn't have a single ounce of real jealousy in her voice. Why would she? She had been the girl every guy in the room stared at since she could remember. Right now she could feel Brad's six-and-a-half-inch cock straining hard against the front of his gray gym shorts against her bare thigh.

Savannah put a hand on his shoulder and lifted one smooth, bronzed knee onto the mattress beside his hip. "Take those shorts off if you want me on this bed before dinner."

Brad stood up long enough to shove his gym shorts and briefs down his legs and kick them onto the rug. His cock sprang up hard and dark-pink against his stomach—six and a half inch-

es, clean, athletic, and familiar. He dropped onto his back across the center of the king bed, stacked two pillows behind his head, and caught Savannah by both firm, white-tanline ass cheeks as she crawled over his waist.

"Don't get comfortable facing me yet," Brad said, giving her right cheek a light smack that made the tight muscle bounce once and hold its round shape. "Turn around and come down here over my face. I've been watching you in those crimson shorts for two hours and I want to taste you while you put that mouth on me."

Savannah looked down at him with that slight smile, touching the tip of her tongue to her cinnamon-balmed upper lip. "Five minutes like this, babe. You know you get carried away."

She turned gracefully on her knees above him, swinging her right leg over his chest until she was straddling his head on hands and knees facing the foot of the bed. Her straight, glossy dark-brown hair fell forward around her shoulders as she lowered her weight over his torso. She braced her forearms on the mattress on either side of his hips while her high, compact little ass hovered directly above his face.

From this angle, looking straight up between her smooth, bronzed thighs, the contrast of her stark-white bikini triangle was unreal. Brad gripped both of her firm cheeks in his palms and spread them wide apart. That opened the pale rose-pink seam of her pussy and exposed the tiny, tight, untouched pink pucker of her ass just an inch above it. She was already shining with clear arousal along her inner lips.

Brad lifted his head off the pillow and buried his mouth straight between her thighs. He dragged the flat of his tongue from the bottom of her wet entrance all the way up over her

clit before his nose brushed the warm, pale crease between her cheeks.

Right alongside the hot, clean, sweet-musky taste of her arousal, a wave of warm fragrance filled his nose. It was the rich, sweet-spicy scent of the cinnamon body lotion she'd smoothed over her thighs and ass two minutes ago in the bathroom steam.

Brad lifted his mouth half an inch off her skin, chuckling against the pale inside of her thigh while his thumbs held her compact cheeks open. "Good Lord, Sav, you really get that lotion everywhere—I'm an inch from your ass and it still smells like cinnamon, just a little... sweeter."

Down at his waist, Savannah had just leaned in and parted her lips over the tip of his cock.

She lifted her mouth off the wet head with a soft pop. Twisting easily at her narrow twenty-four-inch waist, she looked back over her bare bronzed shoulder and fixed him with those light green eyes and that mischievous bedroom smile.

"Are you really complaining that your wife's ass and pussy smell like candy, Coach Rhodes?"

Brad grinned up at the twin white triangles of her ass and gave her left cheek a firmer squeeze. "Not complaining a bit. Get back to work down there."

Savannah laughed softly in her throat, turned back toward his knees, and lowered her head over his lap.

She settled both of her small palms neatly onto the tops of Brad's muscled quads, never wrapping her fingers around the base of his shaft. As she leaned down, her straight dark hair fell in two silky curtains past her sculpted cheekbones. Her full, cushiony lips parted wide and slid down over the flared head and the top two inches of his cock.

The instant her warm, wet mouth closed around the sensitive tip, Brad groaned straight into her pussy and pressed his tongue flat and hard against her clit.

Savannah's thighs jumped on either side of his ears. A breathy moan—"Mmm—right there, babe"—vibrated through her closed lips straight into the head of his shaft.

To Savannah, kneeling over him with the cool air conditioning brushing her bare back and Brad's hot mouth working steadily between her legs, every flick of his tongue against her clit sent a sharp, sweet ache tightening between her thighs. She sucked gently on the top two inches of him, keeping her lips tight and soft around the ridge of the head while the tip of her tongue swirled across the slit. Her own sweet lip gloss mingled with a warm, salty drop of his pre-come.

For forty-five seconds she bobbed her head in a neat, shallow two-inch rhythm with both hands parked politely on his thighs. Her lips dragged up and down the top third of his shaft while her hips rocked back into Brad's face.

Then Brad slid one hand off her ass cheek to grip her hipbone. Groaning into her wet slit, he bucked his pelvis upward off the mattress, pushing another two inches of his six-and-a-half-inch length past the middle of her tongue toward the soft arch at the back of her throat.

The head bumped the back of her palate. Savannah's throat spasmed instantly in a sharp, reflex gag.

She pulled her head straight up off him with a wet gasp, coughing once behind the back of her wrist while saliva shone on her plump lower lip. Sitting back an inch on her knees above his face, she rubbed the hinge of her left jaw with two fingers and

looked back over her shoulder at him with rosy cheeks and an apologetic little smile.

"Oof—wait, babe, you bumped the back of my throat," she said, breathing fast through her parted lips as Brad gave her clit one more long lick from below. "My jaw's already getting tired anyway... let me turn around, I want to feel you inside me."

Brad let his head fall back onto the pillows with a fond chuckle, wiping his wet chin with the back of his forearm. They had been together ten years, and sixty seconds of sweet, hands-free tip-play before her jaw got tired was the exact limit of Savannah's oral repertoire. She had never once taken him to the base, never used both hands on him, and never let him finish in her mouth.

And because she was already climbing off his chest to turn around and straddle his waist—her golden-bronzed body glowing, her stark-white B-cups rising and falling with her breath, her light green eyes dark and warm—Brad had never once felt short-changed.

Savannah swung her left leg back around so she was facing him and planted both knees in the mattress on either side of his hips. Reaching down between their stomachs, her small fingers touched his shaft for the three seconds it took to guide the spit-slick head between her wet, swollen pink outer lips.

"Look at me while you put it in, Sav," Brad said, setting both hands on the crisp white tanlines of her hips.

Savannah held his eyes directly, her lips parting as she lowered her hundred-and-ten-pound weight smoothly down his length.

Her pussy was grip-tight—snug, hot, and shaped exclusively to him after ten years of high-school-sweetheart marriage. Even

slick from his tongue, her inner walls clung to every inch as she sank down, dragging a low groan out of Brad's chest until her bare, pale-pink mound settled tight against his pelvis with all six and a half inches buried inside her.

"Oh, God," Savannah whispered, dropping her small palms onto his pecs and letting her eyelids flutter half-shut as she rolled her hips forward once at the root. "That feels so good, babe... you always fill me right up."

She started to move above him with the clean, effortless core control of a former college cheerleader. She lifted her compact white-tanline ass three inches off his thighs before dropping her hips back down, grinding her clit against the base of his shaft at the bottom of every stroke. Her straight dark-brown hair slid across her bare, bronzed shoulders in a glossy curtain. The tiny gold pendant on its thin chain swung in the hollow of her throat while the wet, rhythmic *schlick* of her arousal filled the bedroom.

Brad reached up and cupped both of her perky, high-sitting B-cups in his palms, brushing his thumbs across her small, stiff pink nipples. "Half the coaches in the county were breaking their necks watching you across the gym today, and none of 'em ever get to see these white tanlines."

"Hush," Savannah gasped, though that slight, pleased curve touched her full lips even as her breath hitched on a deep downward stroke. She slid one hand from his chest up to the back of his neck, leaning forward so her breasts pressed into his palms and the sweet scent of her warm sweat drifted over his face. "Quit talking about the gym and hold my hips—help me go a little faster, Brad, right there—"

Brad gripped her narrow waist and bounced her up and down on his cock for another half-minute until her thighs start-

ed to quiver against his ribs. Then, keeping himself buried to the hilt inside her, he rolled her smoothly over onto her back across the center of the mattress and settled his two-hundred-and-five-pound frame between her open legs.

"Wrap your legs around me, baby," Brad murmured against her mouth.

Savannah lifted her toned legs and crossed her slim ankles comfortably behind the small of his back. Her white-painted toes flexed in the air while she looped both arms around his broad shoulders. It was their favorite position—chest to chest, her back flat on the cool sheets, her pelvis tilted just enough for the front of his shaft to rub her clit on every forward stroke.

Brad braced on one forearm beside her pillow and drove into her in long, athletic strokes, the mattress springs creaking in a steady rhythm under them.

Savannah took over the pace from beneath him. She dug her heels into the hard muscle of his lower back, pulling him down harder into the cradle of her hips while her pelvis snapped upward off the sheet to meet every thrust. Her dark, arched eyebrows drew together in a sweet, helpless furrow. Her straight brown hair fanned out dark across the white pillowcase as her full rose-pink lips parted in short, ragged gasps against his jaw.

"Right there, Brad—don't change a thing, stay right on that spot—" Her small fingernails dug into the back of his shoulders, her flat stomach pulling tight against his ribs as the heat between her legs crested. "Hold me tight, babe—I'm gonna—yes, Brad, right there, right there!"

She buried her face against the side of his neck, a high, breathless cry breaking in her throat as her tight inner walls clamped and fluttered in fast, warm squeezes around his shaft.

Her heels locked hard behind his spine, her whole hundred-and-ten-pound frame arching into his chest while the climax rolled through her hips.

Feeling her pulse and squeeze around him pushed Brad straight over the edge two strokes later. He groaned against her gold hoop earrings, buried his nose in the warm, cinnamon-scented hollow of her neck, and drove deep to the hilt. He pumped four hot bursts inside her while Savannah held the back of his head and stroked his damp hair until his hips slowed to a stop.

For a couple of minutes neither of them moved. Brad lay propped on his elbows so he wouldn't crush her, kissing her warm cheekbone and then the soft, plush cushion of her bottom lip before rolling onto his side and pulling her against his chest.

"Forty minutes on the nose," Brad said, grinning as he looked at the bedside clock.

Savannah laughed breathlessly against his sternum, her cheeks pink under her golden tan as she sat up on the edge of the mattress with a hand between her thighs. "And now I have to rinse off all over again, Coach Rhodes. Go turn the oven to four hundred for me?"

"Wait—put the shirt on first."

She smiled over her bare shoulder and made a quick two-minute trip to the bathroom with a warm washcloth. Walking back to the laundry basket at the foot of the bed, she pulled on a clean pair of white cotton boy-shorts and Brad's soft, washed-thin gray *ALABAMA FOOTBALL* cutoff T-shirt. The shirt hung to mid-thigh on her five-foot-four frame. With no bra underneath, her small pink nipples pressed two neat points against

the soft gray cotton as she padded barefoot out into the hallway toward the kitchen.

Alone on the bed, Brad sat up and reached for his gym shorts.

As his hand brushed the nightstand, he glanced down at his iPhone lying face-down on the stack of magazines.

Without quite deciding to do it, he picked the phone up and tapped the glass.

The screen lit up right where Savannah had laughed at it ten minutes ago: the Instagram Explore grid. Brad's eyes went straight to the center square. It showed a tall, bleached-platinum blonde on the back of a cigarette boat in Miami, with piercing ice-blue eyes, dark matte lip liner, and a narrow waist flaring into wide hips. Heavy, full DD breasts spilled out of the strings of a neon-pink bikini.

Down the hall in the kitchen, metal pans clinked as Savannah opened the oven door and hummed along to the country station on the counter speaker.

Brad stared at the blonde on the tiny glass screen for five quiet seconds. He loved his wife—knew with every cell in his body that Savannah was a natural ten out of ten who made every overdone girl on the internet look cheap. Yet he had been with only one woman for ten years, with the rest of his life stretched out ahead of him. Looking at all that shameless Miami cleavage on the screen, he wondered for just a second what a girl built like that even felt like when she didn't care about Sunday morning.

Then he clicked the side button, dropped the phone on the comforter, and walked down the hall to help his wife with dinner.

On Saturday morning, Brad and his offensive assistants spent two hours in the dark fieldhouse meeting room breaking down Friday's 7-on-7 cutups. At noon they drove out Highway 280 to Strickland Ford & Tractor.

If high-school football was the municipal religion of Ridgeway, the six acres of sun-baked blacktop just north of the Lake Martin bridge were its cathedral. Four hundred gleaming F-150s, lifted King Ranch diesels, and green John Deere utility tractors sat lined up in laser-straight rows beneath a sixty-foot flagpole. Every Friday night in the fall, Boone Strickland's name glowed across the bottom of the stadium scoreboard he had bought for the school. Every spring, three seniors on the offensive line walked into summer jobs washing trucks on the back lot for fifteen dollars an hour.

Boone hadn't inherited three dealerships. His daddy, Earl Strickland, had come back from Korea and run a dusty two-bay tractor-and-implement shed down by the Central of Georgia railroad tracks. Everybody in Tallapoosa County knew the story Boone loved to tell at Gridiron Club steak nights. Back in 1985, while Boone was a two-hundred-and-thirty-pound pulling guard for the Mustangs with mud in his earholes, starting quarterback Rick Vance had thrown for two thousand yards, gone home from Homecoming with the head cheerleader, and inherited Vance Chevrolet from his granddaddy. Fourteen years later, Rick Vance's gambling debts put Vance Chevrolet into bank foreclosure. Thirty-two-year-old Boone walked into the Regions Bank conference room with a cashier's check for sixty cents on the dollar, took the *VANCE* sign down with his own boom crane, and kept Rick on salary for two years as his used-car manager just to hear the quarterback call him *Boss*.

Now Boone owned the Ford store in Ridgeway, the Ford-Lincoln lot over in Sylacauga, an equipment leasing outfit, two thousand acres of Tallapoosa pine timber, and the presidency of the Ridgeway Gridiron Club.

When Brad, Matt Hollis, and offensive line coach Rusty Cates pushed through the glass showroom doors out of the ninety-four-degree glare, two salesmen in striped ties standing by a platinum F-250 straightened up and nodded like Brad was already the man in charge.

"Morning, Coach Rhodes. Boone's waiting on y'all upstairs—said to head right on up."

Rusty and two younger grad assistants peeled off at the top of the carpeted stairs to load the first four cardboard boxes of royal-blue Gridiron Club golf polos down to the trucks. Brad and Matt walked into the wide, wood-paneled corner office overlooking Highway 280.

Inside, the air conditioning sat at a crisp sixty-six degrees and smelled of wintergreen peppermint, expensive lime-and-cedar golf cologne, and smoked pork.

"There's my offensive mastermind!" Boone Strickland boomed from behind his walnut desk, rising out of a tufted leather executive chair with his arms spread wide. "Come on in here and shut that door behind you, boys, before you let the May heat in. Grab a sandwich off the tray—I had Big Oak send over five pounds of pulled pork and white sauce."

At fifty-eight, Boone was five-foot-eleven and two hundred and sixty pounds of pampered, country-club-rich Southern fat-cat bulk. He hadn't touched a wrench or lifted a hay bale since the Clinton administration. A high, round, hard bourbon-and-steak potbelly stretched the mother-of-pearl buttons of a hun-

dred-and-forty-dollar pastel peach Peter Millar golf polo above a braided brown leather belt and freshly pressed khakis. His skin was soft and pink-tan across his jowls and thick neck, warmed by nine-hole golf-cart rides and top-shelf liquor. Above a wide, genial mouth sat a neatly trimmed silver-and-white mustache and a full head of side-parted silver hair that made him look like a wealthy county commissioner.

When he came around the desk and shook Brad's hand, his palm was big, meaty, and pillow-soft. He had thick fingers with manicured nails, soft silver hair across the back of his hand, and a gold Rolex President glinting on his left wrist.

"Appreciate the shirts, Boone," Brad said, returning the grip. "Looked in the top box on the way in—the stitched mustang on the sleeve looks sharp."

"Can't have my coaches walking into the 7-on-7 tournament at Hoover looking like a 3A program," Boone chuckled. He walked over to the walnut sidebar, where a green-labeled bottle of Weller 12 sat beside three crystal rocks glasses. "It's past noon on a Saturday and film's done. Put a little splash of Kentucky wheat in you boys before you take those boxes out."

While Boone pulled the cork and poured three neat two-finger measures of amber bourbon, Brad took a paper plate with a pork sandwich and wandered along the wood-paneled wall behind the long leather sofa.

The wall was a shrine to University of Alabama football. There was an autographed crimson helmet in an acrylic display case, a framed ticket stub from the 1979 Sugar Bowl, an oil portrait of Bear Bryant leaning against the goalposts in his houndstooth hat, and half a dozen large press photographs from championship seasons.

Halfway down the row, Brad stopped with his sandwich halfway to his mouth.

Hanging at eye level in a mahogany frame was a twenty-four-by-thirty-six-inch high-gloss press photograph from the SEC Championship game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta. The photographer had shot it from the low turf well in the corner of the end zone right after a third-quarter Crimson Tide touchdown. Eight Alabama cheerleaders were caught in crisp focus under the dome lights with their crimson-and-white pom-poms high in the air. Dead center in the front row was twenty-two-year-old Savannah Milner.

Her pleated crimson miniskirt was flared high on her golden-bronzed thighs from a jump turn. Her straight, glossy dark-brown hair spilled past her shoulders, her light green eyes shone bright under the stadium lights, and her full glossy lips were parted wide mid-cheer.

Brad blinked, stepped a foot closer to the glass to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him, and broke into a grin over his shoulder.

"Wait a second," Brad said, pointing a finger at the center of the glass. "Boone, you know that's Sav right in the middle of that picture, right?"

Across the room at the sidebar, Boone turned with two crystal glasses in his big, soft-palmed hands. He ambled over, pushed his tortoiseshell reading glasses up onto his forehead with one knuckle, and squinted at the center of the photograph before letting out a warm, booming laugh under his silver mustache.

"You don't say?" Boone shook his head in genial amazement, handing Brad one of the glasses and tipping his own toward the mahogany frame. "Well, I'll be damned. Look right there in the

front row. Hell, son, I bid four grand on that frame at the Crimson Tide charity auction up at the Cahaba Grand in Birmingham four springs ago. Did it just 'cause we whipped Georgia by seventeen points that night. I've walked past this wall every morning for four years and never once put two and two together that was your wife. Small world in this state, ain't it?"

"Sure is," Brad laughed. He took a sip of the warm, honey-smooth bourbon while looking back at twenty-two-year-old Savannah behind the glass. Two years ago, Coach Pruitt's old offensive coordinator had taken a head coaching job down near Mobile. Brad had mailed his graduate-assistant packet down from Tuscaloosa on a prayer. Boone Strickland had been the one at the Gridiron Club lunch table who championed bringing the young Alabama quarterback to town. He had even put up an extra ten thousand dollars out of the club treasury to top up the coordinator stipend so Brad and Savannah wouldn't take a pay cut leaving the university. Seeing Savannah's college picture already hanging on the wall of the man who had brought them to Ridgeway felt like one more sign that this town was meant to be theirs.

By the sofa, Matt Hollis set his empty paper plate in the trash. He hoisted the last cardboard box of golf polos under his left arm and covered a yawn with his free hand.

Boone eyed the dark bags under the twenty-five-year-old's eyes and chuckled around a bite of peppermint. "Hollis, you look like an old coonhound that spent the night under a porch. Donnie work you that hard on the projector this morning, or were you up Highway 280 chasing skirts in Birmingham till three?"

Matt grinned like a freshman who'd just scored a touchdown. He shifted the box onto his hip and dug his iPhone out

of his coaching shorts. "Little bit of column B, Mr. Strickland. Met a bartender up at Tin Roof in Lakeview last night after we broke camp. Twenty-three years old, just moved up from Destin last month."

Matt tapped his screen twice and turned the phone toward Brad and Boone.

Filling the display was a bathroom mirror selfie the girl had texted him at two in the morning. She was a tall, deep-tanned, bleached-platinum blonde in a skin-tight white tube top cut barely four inches wide across her chest. She had piercing ice-blue eyes framed by black strip lashes, full lips outlined in dark matte liner, and a tiny waist flaring sharply into wide hips, with heavy DD cleavage pushed together right under her chin.

Brad stared at the screen. Less than twenty hours ago, he had sat on the edge of his mattress looking at that exact Miami-boat-blonde aesthetic on his own phone while Savannah made dinner. Seeing a real-life version six inches from his hand made his pulse thump once in his throat.

Before he caught himself, Brad let out a low, appreciative whistle.

"Jesus, Matt," Brad said, his eyes lingering on the shadowed valley of her chest a second too long. "Where do you even find girls built like that in Birmingham?"

"Right behind the draft taps if you tip twenty bucks on the first Miller Lite," Matt laughed. He slid the phone back into his pocket and backed toward the door with the box. "And I'm supposed to meet her at her apartment pool by one-fifteen, Coach. If I don't hit 280 right now she's gonna find somebody with a Malibu wake-boat. Appreciate the shirts and the bourbon, Mr. Strickland!"

"Drive safe, son, and don't let her wear you out before Monday weights," Boone called out cheerfully.

Once Matt's sneakers clattered down the showroom stairs, Boone walked over to the walnut office door and pushed it shut until the brass latch clicked. That sealed the two of them inside the cool, wood-paneled room. He picked up the Weller 12 bottle from the sidebar, walked back to where Brad stood by the desk, and poured another two generous fingers of amber liquor into Brad's crystal glass.

"Sit down a minute, Coach," Boone said warmly. He settled his two-hundred-and-sixty-pound frame against the front edge of his walnut desk and crossed his ankles in his brown leather boat shoes. "Wanted five minutes with you without the young boys in the room anyway."

Brad sat back in one of the deep burgundy leather armchairs across from the desk, holding the glass on his knee. "Yes, sir. What's on your mind?"

Boone took a slow sip of his bourbon, his pale blue eyes looking down at Brad over his silver mustache with an easy, kingmaker warmth. "Donnie told you he's turning in his keys after the December state playoffs?"

"He mentioned it back in March," Brad said carefully.

"Well, I had breakfast over at the Country Club yesterday morning with Bill Hendley from the bank and the other three boys on the Gridiron executive board," Boone said, swirling the liquor in his glass. "Couple of 'em asked if we oughta put out quiet feelers to that offensive coordinator over at Opelika or that fella down in Enterprise once the season wraps up." Boone paused, letting the silence hang in the cool sixty-six-degree air just long enough for Brad's stomach to tighten. Then a wide, reassuring

smile broke under his silver mustache. "I told 'em hell no. We didn't bring a boy from Nick Saban's quarterback room down to Ridgeway two years ago just to let somebody else take the steering wheel when Donnie retires."

Brad sat up straighter in the leather chair, the bourbon warming his chest all the way to his fingertips. For four years at Alabama he had stood on the white paint in a clean #14 jersey holding a laminated chart while another guy ran onto the field through the smoke. For two years here he had drawn up the game plans while Donnie Pruitt wore the head coach's headset and gave the postgame interviews to the newspaper.

"Long as we keep the train on the tracks between now and Thanksgiving, Brad," Boone said, pointing one manicured finger at him, "that corner office at the fieldhouse is yours. So is that forty-five-thousand-dollar Gridiron Club supplement check. Nobody else is getting interviewed."

"You won't regret it, Boone," Brad said, his voice rich with pride. "Give me two seasons with the keys to this program and a full summer of my own install. We won't just beat Central in the region—we'll hang fifty on 'em before the fourth quarter starts."

"That's what I told Bill Hendley," Boone rumbled, raising his crystal glass in salute before taking a swallow. He chuckled softly in his chest, shaking his silver-haired head as he glanced toward the closed door where Matt Hollis had left. "Just gotta keep young Hollis out of the Birmingham emergency room on Sunday nights first. Though I'll tell you what, son—I saw the way your eyes lit up when he turned that phone screen around a minute ago."

Brad gave a quick, self-conscious laugh, looking down into his amber glass as his ears warmed.

"Shoot, don't look embarrassed around me," Boone chuckled, leaning back against the walnut desk like an indulgent rich uncle swapping stories in a hunting blind. "Don't tell me a boy who wore a crimson quarterback jersey in Tuscaloosa for four years didn't get his fill of big-titted blondes like that before he settled down."

Two pours of hundred-proof Kentucky bourbon on an empty stomach had loosened Brad's tongue. So had the heady rush of having the richest man in the county hand him a ninety-nine-thousand-dollar-a-year head coaching job. Brad let out a sheepish laugh and shook his head.

"Honestly, Boone? Not a single one."

Boone lowered his glass an inch, raising his silver eyebrows in genuine surprise. "Come on now. You're pulling an old man's leg. Four years on campus at the University of Alabama and you never dipped a toe in the deep end?"

"Swear to God," Brad said, leaning an elbow on the leather arm of the chair with a half-embarrassed grin. "Don't get me wrong, Boone—Sav's a ten out of ten. I outkicked my coverage in tenth grade back in Vestavia Hills and I know it. Every coach I've ever worked with tells me I oughta be in the state penitentiary for grand theft. It's just... we started going together when I was sixteen and she was fifteen. Neither one of us has ever been with anybody else. Not in high school, and not a single weekend in college."

Boone took a slow, appreciative sip of his Weller 12, his pale blue eyes staying fixed on Brad's face over the rim of the crystal. "Ten years with the same girl. You telling me neither one of you ever took a lap around the track? Never even tried a blonde on for size?"

"Closest I ever came was junior-year spring break down in Panama City Beach while Sav was in Orlando competing at College Cheer Nationals," Brad admitted, laughing a little louder as the second pour of bourbon hit his blood. "Went down to the beach for four days with three guys from the quarterback and receiver rooms. Around one in the morning the second night, we were down in the resort hot tub drinking beer. This twenty-one-year-old blonde from Florida State with big fake DDs out to here climbed right across my lap without her top on. She pressed 'em right under my chin and told me my girlfriend was in Orlando and nobody in Panama City cared."

"Lord have mercy," Boone chuckled, his round belly shaking under his peach polo. "And what'd you do, son?"

"Stared straight down at those things for about ten full seconds with my heart beating out of my ears," Brad said, shaking his head at the memory. "Then I grabbed her by the shoulders, set her back in the water, climbed out of the tub, and called Sav from the tenth-floor balcony. Thought I deserved a medal for about three years." Brad took another drink from his glass and shrugged with a quiet, wry smile. "Sav's the best thing that ever happened to me, Boone. She's a sweet First Baptist girl, teaches seventh-grade science, coaches her squad, makes dinner from scratch almost every night. I wouldn't trade her for the world. It's just... I'm twenty-eight years old and I've only ever touched one woman since I was a sophomore in high school. When Matt shoves pictures of some wild bar blonde with ten-thousand-dollar tits under my nose every weekend, you catch yourself wondering what the rest of the world even feels like."

Boone threw his silver head back and let out a deep, booming, grandfatherly laugh that filled the wood-paneled office.

Pushing off the edge of the desk, he walked over to Brad's chair and clapped one big, meaty, soft-palmed hand squarely on Brad's shoulder. His gold Rolex was cool against the collar of Brad's shirt.

"Shoot, son, you been eating the same home-cooked meal since tenth grade. Ain't nobody in the state of Alabama blaming a red-blooded man for looking at the dessert cart when the waiter rolls it past the table," Boone rumbled warmly, giving Brad's shoulder a firm, knowing squeeze. "That stays right here between us boys. Now go on and finish that bourbon, take a couple of those pork sandwiches home in a foil pan, and bring that pretty wife of yours out to the Country Club pool pavilion around one-thirty tomorrow after church. I got thirty pounds of prime brisket going on the hickory smoker before the sun comes up."

At noon on Sunday, the bell in the white brick steeple of First Baptist Church of Ridgeway chimed twelve times across the town square. Four hundred people in Sunday linen and seersucker streamed down the wide limestone steps into the late-May sunshine.

Walking down the center steps beside Brad with an empty glass baking dish tucked in the crook of her arm, Savannah smiled, nodded, and spoke to a dozen people every twenty feet.

"Morning, Mr. Abernathy—tell Miss Clara we missed her in the choir loft today."

"Bye, girls! Have a great first week of summer, Emma!"

On the sidewalk by the church magnolia trees, three twelve-year-old girls from Savannah's seventh-grade life-science class waved back with both hands and whispered excitedly to each other. All three of them had started parting their hair straight down the middle in October to copy Mrs. Rhodes.

Savannah wore a pale yellow eyelet wrap sundress that ended at mid-thigh. Its thin shoulder straps left her glowing, golden-bronzed shoulders and straight collarbones bare around her thin gold chain and pendant. Her smooth, straight, glossy dark-brown hair fell a few inches past her shoulders with a soft natural turn at the ends. She wore almost no makeup—just a sweep of mascara on her dark lashes below her strong, arched brows. Her light green eyes shone bright against her sun-warmed skin, and a fresh touch of gloss gave a soft satin sheen to her full, naturally bee-stung lips.

At the bottom of the steps beside the church bulletin board, Carol Hendley stepped into their path with her husband Bill right behind her. Carol was forty-four, wife of the Regions Bank president on the Gridiron Club board, and chairwoman of the First Baptist hospitality committee.

"Savannah, hon, I already told Martha Pruitt," Carol said in a bright church-foyer soprano, touching Savannah's forearm. "If you don't bring another pan of those pecan pie bars out to the Country Club pavilion this afternoon, the men are gonna riot. There wasn't a crumb left on that plate after the ten-thirty fellowship hour."

"I baked a second pan last night just for the pool, Miss Carol," Savannah said warmly, letting that easy dimple pop in her left cheek.

While Carol talked, Savannah didn't have to turn her head to notice fifty-year-old Bill Hendley standing half a step behind his wife's shoulder. His eyes dropped from Savannah's green gaze down to her bare, bronzed collarbones before Carol's eyes flicked sideways like a hawk. Bill cleared his throat and asked Brad about the offensive line.

Every time Carol Hendley smiled at her on Sunday morning, Savannah remembered the Wednesday night before Homecoming last October. Savannah had walked down the back tiled hall toward the church fellowship kitchen carrying a warm foil pan of homemade cinnamon rolls. Before she rounded the doorway, she had heard Carol Hendley and Brenda Tatum talking over the running faucet at the double sink: *Well, no wonder the high-school boys show up to Wednesday night youth group—have you seen Savannah in those little practice shorts? If I looked like a Sports Illustrated model at twenty-seven, my husband wouldn't sleep either.*

Savannah had backed quietly down the hall that night without making a sound, her cheeks burning under her tan. The next morning she had started keeping a pair of loose gray Mustangs sweatpants folded in the trunk of her car to pull on over her cheer shorts whenever she stopped at Publix after practice.

She had grown up in Vestavia Hills in a two-story brick house where her father was a bank vice president and deacon. Her mother was a former college majorette who still called every Sunday afternoon to ask what Savannah wore to service and when she and Brad were giving them grandbabies. They had raised Savannah on one iron rule: a pretty girl in a small Southern town had to be twice as gracious, twice as modest, and ten times more careful with her name than anybody else in the room.

When they got back to Dogwood Lane at twelve-thirty to change for the Gridiron Club cookout, Savannah walked into the bedroom, stepped out of her yellow sundress, and pulled open the middle cedar drawer of her dresser.

Right in the front corner sat her two string bikinis. One was the tiny white backyard tanning bikini she wore behind their

six-foot privacy fence on weekday afternoons; the other was an emerald-green triangle string bikini with thin hip ties that left half of her firm ass cheeks bare. Tucked underneath them at the bottom lay the sheer emerald-green lace teddy with the thong back she had ordered online for their first wedding anniversary in Tuscaloosa. Brad had grinned at it, carried her to bed, and peeled it off her in ten seconds flat three years ago.

Savannah looked at the emerald-green string bikini for two seconds. She thought of Carol Hendley, Martha Pruitt, three county school-board members, and thirty middle-aged football boosters sitting around the Ridgeway Country Club pool. She reached to the back of the drawer instead.

She pulled out a classic, modest navy-blue one-piece swimsuit with wide shoulder straps and a conservative scoop neckline.

Stepping out of her white cotton bikini panties, she slid her toned tan legs into the navy one-piece and pulled the straps up over her bare shoulders in front of the full-length mirror on the closet door.

Savannah turned sideways to check the coverage and let out a quiet, helpless sigh.

There was only so much a conservative swimsuit could hide on five-foot-four and a hundred and ten pounds of former SEC cheerleader. The unpadded navy Lycra stretched drum-tight across her perky, high-sitting B-cups, showing the clean, firm roundness of her breasts without an ounce of sag. It tapered sharply inward along her narrow waist and flat stomach. Worse, in profile, her compact, muscular little ass jutted out so high and shelf-sharp from the base of her lower back that even the modest leg-cut of the one-piece pulled upward across her round cheeks. A clean, golden-bronzed crescent of under-cheek showed above

her hamstrings, along with a quarter-inch peek of the razor-sharp, milky-white bikini tanline near her hipbone.

To be safe, she took a long white linen sarong wrap out of the closet and knotted it snugly around her narrow waist so it fell to mid-thigh. Then she slipped her bare size-six feet into tan wedges and dropped her yellow wrap sundress into her canvas tote bag for later.

By one-forty-five, the flagstone pool pavilion at the Ridgeway Country Club was in full swing.

The club sat on a pine-shaded bluff above the ninth fairway with a wide, sparkling blue cove of Lake Martin visible beyond the boat slips at the bottom of the hill. Under the open cedar-beam roof of the pavilion, ceiling fans turned lazily through the ninety-three-degree heat. Sweet hickory smoke drifted from a black offset smoker parked by the lawn. Forty Gridiron Club boosters in pastel golf shirts and linen shorts stood around the pool deck with cold beers and plastic cups of bourbon. Their wives sat under the white canvas umbrellas with plates of smoked brisket, potato salad, and Savannah's pecan bars.

Within three minutes of walking onto the flagstone, Brad was pulled over toward the sixth-fairway railing by Coach Pruitt, Bill Hendley, and two defensive coaches to talk about August two-a-days.

Savannah chatted with Martha Pruitt by the food tables for twenty minutes. Then she walked over to the sunny shallow end of the pool where two of the younger assistant coaches' wives sat on the warm stone coping. Slipping out of her wedges, Savannah untied the white wrap and folded it neatly on the lounge chair behind her so the hem wouldn't get chlorinated. She sat down on

the stone edge in her navy one-piece and dipped her bare, white-painted toes into the cool blue water.

Across the pool deck, beneath the largest shaded umbrella ten feet from the smoker, Boone Strickland held court in a wide wicker armchair.

He wore a bright canary-yellow golf polo stretched tight across his high, round two-hundred-and-sixty-pound potbelly, khaki shorts above pink-tan sixty-year-old knees, and leather boat shoes without socks. A country-club attendant in a white apron stood beside his elbow refilling an ice bucket while Boone talked timber leases and football with the county probate judge. He gestured with a crystal rocks glass of Weller 12 in one big, soft-palmed hand.

Brad thought Boone Strickland walked on water. All the way over in the truck, Brad had talked about how generous Boone was. He had told her all about how Boone had pulled him aside at the dealership yesterday to practically promise him the Head Coach job in December.

Savannah had smiled and agreed because she loved seeing Brad happy. Yet sitting there with her feet in the pool water, she felt a quiet, instinctive distaste. She had felt it every time she'd been around Boone Strickland since their welcome dinner at the steakhouse two years ago.

She couldn't point to a single impolite word he had ever spoken to her. He always stood up when she approached a table, always called her *Mrs. Rhodes* or *darlin'* in that booming, grandfatherly Alabama drawl, and always asked how her cheer squad was shaping up.

It was his eyes.

When Savannah reached sideways to set her sunscreen bottle in her tote bag, she felt a prickle across her bare shoulders. She glanced across the thirty feet of shimmering blue pool water toward the smoker.

Boone was still listening to the probate judge talk. His tortoiseshell reading glasses were pushed up onto his side-parted silver hair. Over the rim of his crystal bourbon glass, his pale blue eyes were fixed straight on the bare length of Savannah's thighs and the tight navy Lycra hugging her waist.

When a normal man at the club got caught staring at her—the way Bill Hendley had outside church an hour ago—he blinked, colored up around the ears, and looked down at his shoes.

Boone Strickland didn't blink and didn't look away. When Savannah's green eyes met his across the pool, he held her gaze for two full seconds under that neatly trimmed silver mustache. Then he lifted his bourbon glass half an inch in a slow, genial salute, as if she were sitting there for his benefit, and took a sip.

Savannah looked away first, a small knot tightening between her shoulder blades. Pushing down on the stone coping with both toned arms, she lifted her hundred-and-ten-pound frame out of the water in one smooth motion. As she stood up with water beading on her bronzed calves, the damp bottom of the navy one-piece tugged slightly into the high, firm cleft of her ass. She quickly smoothed the wet fabric down over her cheeks with both hands. Then she retied the wrap loosely around her waist and picked up her empty plastic iced-tea cup.

By three-thirty, the afternoon heat on the flagstone felt like an open oven door. Brad was still twenty yards away by the fair-

way railing with Coach Pruitt, drawing pass routes in the air with his hand.

Wanting two minutes out of the sun—and out from under the shaded umbrella by the smoker—Savannah walked across the terrace and pulled open the tinted-glass door into the clubhouse bar breezeway. Inside, the self-serve iced-tea and lemonade urns sat along a narrow mahogany bar counter.

The breezeway was empty and chilled to an icy sixty-five degrees.

The second the glass door swung shut behind her, cutting off the patio chatter, the cold air hit her sun-warmed skin and raised goosebumps from her wrists to her bare shoulders. Beneath the damp, unpadded navy Lycra of her one-piece, her small rose-pink nipples contracted instantly into two tight, visible buds against the dark fabric.

Savannah stepped up to the brass rail running along the front of the narrow mahogany bar, set her plastic cup under the silver spigot of the unsweetened tea urn, and pressed the lever down.

Behind her, the glass patio door hissed open and clicked shut.

Soft leather boat shoes padded quietly across the indoor carpet.

"Smartest girl at the party, coming in out of that sun, Mrs. Rhodes."

Savannah turned her head politely over her right shoulder, expecting Boone to walk past her toward the men's locker room or the end of the counter.

Instead, Boone strolled straight up to the narrow mahogany bar directly behind her to reach the built-in stainless-steel ice

well and the white porcelain bowl of sliced limes sitting six inches to the right of the tea urn.

He didn't grab her or touch her skin in the quiet hallway. He didn't need to. He simply stepped into the space behind her as if a two-hundred-and-sixty-pound millionaire who paid the club's mortgage didn't have to walk around anybody. He planted his big, soft-palmed left hand on the mahogany bar edge eight inches to her left while his right forearm reached past her right shoulder for the metal ice scoop.

In one casual motion, he had caged her compact five-foot-four, hundred-and-ten-pound body between the brass bar rail in front of her stomach and the canary-yellow wall of his polo-clad belly behind her back.

Savannah went rigid with her fingers still on the tea lever.

There couldn't have been three inches of air between the bare skin of her shoulder blades and his barrel chest. She could feel the humid furnace heat radiating off his high, round potbelly right behind the small of her back, and every breath she took was full of him—wintergreen peppermint, lime-and-cedar golf aftershave, and the sweet-oak reek of Weller 12 bourbon coming off his neck. His neatly trimmed silver mustache was barely four inches from her right temple, level with the small gold double-hoops and diamond studs climbing her ear.

"Donnie was telling me yesterday your girls looked like a million bucks at stunt camp on Friday," Boone rumbled pleasantly right above her ear. He dropped three cubes of ice into his crystal glass and took his time fishing two lime wedges out of the bowl with his manicured fingers. "Told the Gridiron board this morning we're putting twelve thousand dollars into new spring mats for your squad before August camp starts up."

Savannah kept her eyes fixed straight ahead on the stainless-steel tea urn. She held her shoulders angled slightly inward so the stiffened points of her nipples wouldn't brush the inside of his right forearm if she breathed too deep. Her pulse ticked visibly in the bronzed hollow of her throat beside her thin gold necklace.

"Thank you, Mr. Strickland," she said in her politest schoolteacher voice, letting go of the tea spigot and lifting her cold plastic cup. "The girls worked very hard this spring. They'll appreciate that."

Boone didn't lift his left hand off the mahogany bar to let her step out. He leaned his weight onto his wrist—his gold Rolex gleaming six inches from her bare waist—and looked down at her in profile. His pale blue eyes moved slowly from the center part of her glossy dark-brown hair down her high, sun-warmed cheekbone to her full, shining bottom lip. Then his gaze dropped openly down her bare throat into the scoop neck of the damp navy one-piece.

"Told Brad yesterday over at the dealership I want the two of y'all out at my place on Lake Martin for the Fourth of July weekend next month, darlin'," Boone said in that warm, grandfatherly drawl, as if he were inviting her to a Sunday-school social instead of crowding her against a bar rail. "Got four hundred feet of private deep-water shoreline out on Willow Point, guest rooms upstairs with their own screened porch, and the big pontoon on the lift. Ain't nobody from First Baptist or the county school board out in my cove to make you wear a schoolteacher swimsuit all weekend."

A cold, unpleasant prickle crawled down Savannah's spine from the base of her skull to the small of her back.

If any man her own age had trapped her against a bar counter and made a comment about her swimsuit while staring down her neckline, she would have turned around and taken his head off.

Instead, every instinct drilled into her since she was a little girl in Vestavia Hills—*be gracious, don't make a scene, remember who signs your husband's check*—held her frozen in place for two long seconds while her skin crawled. She lifted her chin, met his pale blue eyes without a trace of her usual smile, and gave a tight, two-inch nod.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Strickland. Brad mentioned it—that's very generous of you."

Before he could pick up the cocktail napkins, Savannah dipped her shoulder cleanly under his left arm. She stepped out from between his belly and the brass rail and walked straight back out through the glass door into the ninety-three-degree heat, her cold cup pressed against her sternum.

Out on the sunlit patio, she walked straight to her lounge chair and reached into her canvas tote bag for her yellow sundress. She wanted cotton over her shoulders and she wanted to go home.

Before she could pull the dress out of the bag, the clear *ting-ting-ting* of a silver serving fork against crystal rang out across the pavilion.

Every conversation around the pool quieted down.

Boone Strickland stood at the center of the flagstone terrace in front of the smoker. He held his crystal bourbon glass raised in his left hand, a wide, ruddy smile beaming underneath his silver mustache.

"Before everybody packs up the coolers and heads home to beat the heat," Boone called out across the water, his booming

voice carrying to every table, "I want y'all to raise a glass with me. Everybody in this club knows Donnie Pruitt's hanging up his whistle in December after we bring one more 6A state trophy back down Highway 280. Now, the county school board don't take a formal vote till winter. Still, anybody who watched our offense put up thirty-eight points a game last fall knows we don't need no statewide search committee. The future of Mustang football is standing right here on this patio. Brad, Savannah—come on up here a second!"

Whistles and applause broke out around the pool deck. Bill Hendley clapped his hands over his head; Rusty Cates banged on the side of the cooler.

Walking across the flagstone from the fairway railing, Brad was practically glowing. His square jaw was high and his chest was out. He looked twenty-one years old again as he caught Savannah by her left hand at the lounge chair and tugged her gently with him into the center of the terrace beside Boone.

"Come on, babe," Brad whispered happily out of the side of his mouth.

Savannah put her church-aisle smile on her lips and stepped up beside Boone's right shoulder as Brad stood on Boone's left.

Boone threw his left arm warmly across Brad's broad shoulders. With his right arm, he reached around behind Savannah.

Instead of resting his hand politely on her upper back, Boone slid his big, meaty, soft-palmed right hand all the way down to her right hip. His palm landed right where her wrap had parted over the high, tight shelf of her ass.

His manicured fingers spread wide across her bare flank and the damp navy Lycra at the crest of her hipbone. His thumb

pressed squarely into the soft dip of her waist while the cold gold links of his Rolex rested against her skin.

"That's why I'm hosting Coach Rhodes and his better half out at my place on Willow Point over the Fourth of July weekend," Boone boomed out to the smiling crowd of boosters and wives. He kept his palm planted firmly on Savannah's waist for five, six, seven slow seconds while he spoke. "Gonna throw a couple prime ribs on the grill, put 'em out on the boat, and get to know our next Head Coach properly before August camp starts up. Raise 'em high, everybody—to Brad and Savannah, and to the Mustangs!"

"To the Mustangs!" forty voices echoed across the water.

Under the hot spread of Boone's fingers on her bare hip, every muscle in Savannah's stomach and back locked tight. She kept her polite smile frozen on her full pink lips because Carol Hendley and Martha Pruitt were looking right at her from ten feet away. Slowly, Savannah cut her green eyes sideways across Boone's barrel chest toward her husband, waiting for Brad to look down and see where the fifty-eight-year-old man's hand was resting.

Brad never looked down once. He was grinning from ear to ear, raising his plastic cup toward the Gridiron board members and shaking Donnie Pruitt's outstretched hand. He was completely blind in the warm spotlight of finally being called the starter.

The instant Boone lifted his hand off her hip to clink glasses with the probate judge, Savannah stepped briskly out from under his arm and walked back to her lounge chair. She pulled her sundress over her head right on top of her damp navy swimsuit. Ty-

ing the cotton sash tight around her waist, she picked up her glass baking dish and her tote bag.

Twenty feet behind her by the smoker—just out of Savannah's earshot while she thanked Martha Pruitt for the afternoon—Brad gripped Boone's big hand in a grateful two-handed shake.

"I don't know what to say, Boone," Brad said earnestly. "Saying that in front of Pruitt and the board means the world to me and Sav."

"Earned every bit of it, son," Boone chuckled, giving Brad's bicep a warm squeeze. Across the flagstone, Savannah bent slightly at the hips to slide her sandals into her tote bag, the yellow eyelet skirt pulling taut against the high, compact shelf of her ass. Boone's pale blue eyes rested on her for a second before he leaned in toward Brad's ear with a genial, man-to-man wink under his silver mustache.

"And tell Sav she don't need that one-piece out at my cove in July, Coach—ain't nobody out there on the water but us."

The air conditioning inside Brad's pickup blew cold across the dashboard as they turned off Country Club Drive onto the two-lane blacktop toward Dogwood Lane. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted gold through the loblolly pines.

In the passenger seat, Savannah sat with her knees pressed together beneath the hem of her sundress. Her canvas tote bag rested between her feet on the floorboard. Without realizing she was doing it, she rubbed the heels of her fingers up and down the right side of her waist through the eyelet cotton—right over the spot where her damp navy swimsuit sat underneath.

Forty minutes later, she could still feel the wide imprint of Boone Strickland's palm on her hipbone. Every time the dash-

board vents cycled across her lap, she caught the faint trace of wintergreen peppermint and lime-and-cedar aftershave that had rubbed off his wrist onto her skin during the toast.

She opened her mouth to tell Brad what had happened ten minutes before that toast inside the clubhouse bar breezeway. She wanted to tell him how Boone had walked straight up behind her at the narrow mahogany counter, caged her against the brass rail with his two-hundred-and-sixty-pound belly three inches from her bare back, looked right down her neckline, and told her nobody out at Willow Point was going to make her wear a schoolteacher swimsuit.

Then she glanced across the center console at her husband, and the words stopped in her throat.

Brad had his left forearm propped on the windowsill and his right hand on the top of the steering wheel. He looked happier than Savannah had seen him since the afternoon he opened his scholarship letter at seventeen. For four years he had stood on the Alabama sideline holding a laminated chart for somebody else. For two years here he had drawn up third-down plays while Donnie Pruitt wore the head coach's headset. Today, forty of the most important men in Tallapoosa County had raised their glasses and called him the future of the program.

"Did you see Bill Hendley's face when Boone said they didn't need a search committee?" Brad said, grinning out through the windshield as he tapped his palm against the leather wheel. "Bill pulled me aside by the gate while we were walking out. He told me once the school board makes it official in December, I oughta come sit down with him at the bank. He wants to lock us into an employee-rate jumbo mortgage before spring."

Savannah looked at the bright, boyish pride in his square jaw. "For the four-bedroom brick place over on Willow Creek?"

"The one with the wrap-around porch and the two acres running down to the water," Brad said, turning his head to smile at her. "Forty-five-thousand-dollar Gridiron Club supplement on top of the head coaching step-up puts us right where we wanted to be, Sav. We close on that house by New Year's. We fence the backyard in March, and you can start picking out paint colors for the nursery next spring."

Savannah's throat warmed. That four-bedroom brick house under the oaks on Willow Creek—and a baby with Brad's sandy-brown hair once her cheer season wrapped in the spring—was everything they had been saving and praying for since they packed a U-Haul in Tuscaloosa.

If she told Brad right now that Boone Strickland had crowded her against the indoor bar and made a creepy comment about her swimsuit, one of two things would happen. Either Brad's quarterback pride would make him confront the fifty-eight-year-old millionaire who held the keys to his promotion, or Brad would have to swallow it. Then he'd feel ten inches tall every time he walked into the fieldhouse.

She had handled plenty of staring boosters since she was nineteen years old on the sideline. She could keep a table or a boat cushion between herself and Boone Strickland for forty-eight hours in July. She wasn't going to ruin the biggest week of her husband's career.

So Savannah left the clubhouse bar out of it completely. She tucked a straight strand of glossy dark-brown hair behind her ear so her gold hoops glinted as she tried a softer angle.

"Brad... do we really have to stay the whole Fourth of July weekend out at Mr. Strickland's lake house?" she asked gently. "Willow Point's only twenty minutes from town. Couldn't we just drive out Saturday afternoon for the cookout and the boat ride, and drive back home to sleep in our own bed?"

Across the console, Brad blinked over at her in genuine surprise. "Drive back and forth? Sav, why? The man's got a four-million-dollar timber-frame estate out on the point with four guest suites and a double-decker dock."

"I know, hon, he's just... a lot," Savannah said quietly, smoothing the skirt down over her thighs. "He stares, Brad. All afternoon while I was sitting by the shallow end, every time I looked up toward the smoker he was watching me over his bourbon glass with those reading glasses on his forehead. And when he called us up for that toast, he didn't put his hand on my shoulder. He had his palm right down on my hip the whole time he was talking to the club."

Brad let out an easy, reassuring laugh and reached across the center console to lay his warm right hand over her bare, bronzed knee.

"Babe, Boone's fifty-eight years old!" Brad said fondly. "He's an old-school Southern car dealer—he grabs everybody like he's running for county commission. He had me in a one-armed bear hug by the smoker for ten minutes until my ribs hurt. Yesterday at the lot he nearly knocked my shoulder out of the socket. Did you hear what he just did for us in front of Pruitt, Hendley, and half the board? He ended the coaching search six months early."

Right on the tip of Brad's tongue sat what Boone had leaned in and whispered by the smoker ten minutes ago while watching Savannah bend over her tote bag: *And tell Sav she don't need that*

one-piece out at my cove in July, Coach—ain't nobody out there on the water but us.

Brad looked across the cab at Savannah's face. Her dark, arched eyebrows were drawn slightly together above her vivid green eyes, and her shoulders still sat a little stiff beneath the thin straps of her yellow sundress.

He knew instantly that if he repeated Boone's joke about leaving the one-piece at home in July, Savannah wouldn't laugh the way she'd laughed at his Instagram Explore page on Friday. She would dig her heels in right here in the truck and refuse to spend the night at Willow Point at all. Calling Boone Strickland up in June to turn down his Fourth of July hospitality after the man had just publicly named Brad the next Head Coach of the Mustangs was out of the question. Besides, Boone had been drinking Weller 12 in the sun since noon. It was just an old country-club bull bragging about how private his cove was.

So Brad kept the comment to himself and gave her bare knee an affectionate squeeze.

"It's five full weeks away, Sav," Brad said warmly. "Two nights out on Lake Martin over the Fourth, we eat his prime rib, and we ride around on his pontoon boat while he tells his stories. By Christmas the job's official and we're signing the papers on the Willow Creek house. You can put up with forty-eight hours of Boone Strickland for the house on the creek, can't you?"

Savannah looked out the passenger window at the sunlit pines rushing past, then turned her head back toward him. The tension in her shoulders eased an inch, and her pink lips curved into a small, warm, yielding smile.

"For the Willow Creek house and the wrap-around porch?" she said softly. "Yes, sir, Coach Rhodes. I can handle two days."

"That's my girl."

Five minutes later, Brad pulled the pickup into the shaded carport on Dogwood Lane.

By the time they walked through the back door and set the empty baking dish on the kitchen counter, the late-May sun was dropping low behind the water oaks in the backyard. Warm amber-gold light slanted through the master-bedroom blinds.

Brad walked down the hall into the bedroom with his pulse still humming from the afternoon—from the applause around the pool, the way the older men had shaken his hand, the feeling that after waiting his turn since high school, the field was finally his.

He had barely kicked off his leather boat shoes at the foot of the king bed when Savannah walked in behind him. She pushed the bedroom door shut with one bare foot after slipping out of her wedges. Then she stepped straight up against his chest.

She wanted the Country Club completely off her skin. She wanted the memory of that icy sixty-five-degree bar breezeway gone. She wanted the smell of old bourbon and wintergreen peppermint, and the soft-palmed feel of a fifty-eight-year-old man's fingers on her hip, buried under her husband's hands until she couldn't remember it at all.

Rising up onto the balls of her bare feet, Savannah looped both bronzed arms around Brad's neck and pulled his mouth down to hers. She kissed him deep and open-mouthed, her full lips soft and sweet with cinnamon gum as her tongue slid against his.

"Mmm," Brad groaned in surprise, his hands coming down to her narrow waist. "Thought you wanted to rinse the pool water off first."

"Don't make me wait for the shower, babe," Savannah whispered against his lips. She looked straight up into his eyes with her green gaze dark and intense under her arched brows. "Take this swimsuit off me right now."

Brad didn't need to be asked twice. He caught the sash of her dress, tugged the knot loose at her slim waist, and slid the thin straps off her shoulders. The cotton slipped down her torso and fell in a soft ring around her bare ankles.

Underneath, the one-piece was still cool and faintly damp around the leg openings from the shallow end of the pool.

Brad hooked both thumbs under the wide navy shoulder straps and peeled the tight Lycra slowly down her arms and past her chest. Her perky, high-sitting B-cups sprang free inside their razor-sharp, milky-white bikini triangles. They were two firm, natural handfuls tipped with small rose-pink nipples already pebbled into tight little points. Brad drew her right nipple into his hot mouth and sucked hard enough to make her arch her spine and thread her fingers into his hair.

Dropping to one knee on the rug at the foot of the bed, Brad worked the clingy navy swimsuit down over the flat, golden-bronzed muscle of her stomach. He peeled it past the crisp white horizontal ribbon of untanned skin across her hipbones and down over her compact, muscular little ass until the Lycra pooled at her feet.

Savannah stepped out of the suit completely naked. She braced one small hand on Brad's broad shoulder while her straight, glossy dark-brown hair spilled past her collarbones and her thin gold pendant swung in the hollow of her throat.

Still kneeling in front of her on the rug, Brad gripped both of her firm ass cheeks in his palms, pulled her hips forward, and

pressed his open mouth straight against her smooth, bare pale-pink pussy.

"Oh—Brad!" Savannah gasped aloud. Her knees went weak the instant his hot tongue parted her outer lips and stroked flat and wet from her entrance up over her clit.

She hadn't realized how tightly wound the afternoon had left her until his mouth touched her. She looked down between her breasts at the top of her husband's sandy-brown head between her thighs. His strong twenty-eight-year-old hands kneaded her compact ass cheeks while his tongue worked her clit in fast, hungry circles. A sudden rush of clear, hot wetness spilled over his chin.

"Right there, babe—don't stop," Savannah breathed. Her small fingers tightened in his hair as she widened her stance on the rug and rolled her hips gently against his mouth. "God, that feels so good..."

Brad stayed on his knees for two full minutes. He licked and sucked at her swollen clit until her smooth, athletic thighs began to shake against his cheeks and her breathing broke into shallow, high gasps.

Then he stood up, wiping his glistening chin with the back of his hand while he yanked his golf polo over his head and shoved his khaki shorts and briefs down his legs. His six-and-a-half-inch cock sprang free, hard and dark-pink against his flat stomach, a clear bead of pre-come shining at the tip.

He caught Savannah by her narrow waist and turned her smoothly around to face the side of their king mattress.

"Put your hands down on the edge of the bed, Sav," Brad said, his voice rough in the golden dusk as his right palm slid

down over her bare hip. "Let me see you from behind while I put it in."

Trained on tumbling mats since she was four, Savannah hinged cleanly at the hips and planted both forearms on the edge of the white quilt. She let her chest dip toward the mattress with her straight dark hair spilling forward over her shoulders. Arching her lower back, she pitched her high, compact, apple-round little ass sharply back toward him. Two sculpted, milky-white bikini triangles were framed by her golden-bronzed back and thighs, her bare pale-pink lips parted and shining wet between her legs.

Brad stepped up between her bare heels and set his left palm squarely over the smooth skin of her right hip and waist. His hand covered the exact spot where Boone Strickland's big, soft-palmed hand had sat in front of forty people an hour ago.

Savannah felt the warmth of Brad's familiar hand on her flank and let out a low, shivering exhale. She pushed her ass back two inches against his palm as if his touch were soap and hot water scrubbing the afternoon away.

With his right hand, Brad guided the wet head of his cock between her puffy pink outer lips and pushed his hips forward, sliding all six and a half inches deep to the hilt in one smooth, slick stroke.

"Oh, God—yes, Brad," Savannah moaned into the quilt. Her bare white-painted toes curled against the bedroom rug as her grip-tight inner walls stretched and clamped warmly around his familiar length.

Brad gripped both sides of her waist and started to move in a steady, driving rhythm. He pulled two-thirds of the way out before driving his hips back tight against the firm, high shelf

of her ass. The bedroom filled with the wet, rhythmic *schlick* of her arousal and the crisp slap of his pelvis against her compact cheeks. The muscle was so tight and toned from ten years of cheer squats that every time his hips smacked against her backside, her white-tanline cheeks bounced once and held their round shape.

"Feel how tight you are for me tonight, Sav," Brad groaned. He looked down between their hips at her small, pale pink rim clinging snug around his wet shaft on every outward pull before swallowing him back to the root. He slid one hand up her smooth spine between her shoulder blades while his other thumb dug into her hipbone. "You were driving me crazy in that suit all afternoon."

"Don't talk about the pool—just hold onto me, babe," Savannah gasped. She reached her right hand back behind her hip to cover Brad's fingers on her waist and press his palm harder against her skin. Her breasts swayed firm and high beneath her ribcage with every thrust from behind, her small pink nipples brushing the cotton quilt as she pushed her hips back to meet him stroke for stroke. "Harder, Brad—right there, just like that, I want to feel you all the way inside me—"

For two full minutes he took her standing at the edge of the bed. Her breath came hot and sweet with cinnamon over her shoulder until a fine sheen of sweat glistened across her bronzed shoulder blades.

Then, keeping himself buried to the hilt inside her, Brad wrapped his right forearm snugly under her ribs around her narrow waist and stepped up onto the mattress with one knee. He lifted her hundred-and-ten-pound frame up onto the bed with him, rolling onto his left side and pulling her bare back snug

against his chest with her toned right thigh hooked high over his hip.

"Stay right here against me," Brad breathed against her temple, kissing the warm, fragrant skin just below her gold double-hoop earrings. His left hand came up under her arm to cup her right breast, rolling her hard nipple between his thumb and forefinger. At the same time, his right hand slid down her flat, bronzed stomach and pressed the pad of his thumb in tight, slick circles directly over her throbbing clit.

Savannah's head tipped back against his shoulder. Her glossy dark-brown hair slid across his jaw as his familiar six and a half inches filled her from behind while his thumb worked her clit in front.

At the peak, Savannah took the rhythm over completely.

She hooked her bare right heel tight behind Brad's calf to lock him in place and reached her small hand down her stomach to wrap her fingers over his wrist so his thumb couldn't slip off her clit. Then she began snapping her compact hips back onto his cock faster and harder. The air around the pillows smelled hot and rich with sweet cinnamon sweat, saliva, and the raw, musky scent of her slick cunt gripping his shaft.

"Don't move your thumb—stay right on it, Brad, please—" Her dark brows drew together as her flat twenty-four-inch stomach pulled in tight under his forearm, her short, ragged gasps breaking against the side of his neck. "Right there, babe—keep going, I'm coming—come inside me, Brad, right now!"

A high, breathless cry broke from her parted lips as her climax rolled through her pelvis. Her bare toes curled hard in the air, her thighs shaking on either side of his hip while her tight in-

ner walls clamped down in fast, rhythmic squeezes that milked every inch of his shaft.

Two hard thrusts into her fluttering grip tore a low groan out of Brad's chest. He buried his face in the warm hollow of her neck beneath her gold earrings, held her breast tight in his palm, and drove deep to the root. He pumped burst after hot burst deep inside her while Savannah pressed the back of her head into his shoulder and rode out the slow, warm waves until both of them lay still on the tangled sheets.

Ten minutes later, after a warm washcloth and a glass of tap water shared in the dark bathroom, they lay curled under the top sheet with the ceiling fan turning on low above the bed.

Savannah lay half on top of Brad's chest with her left knee tucked over his thigh. Her cheek rested over his collarbone and her breathing was slow, deep, and completely relaxed. Whatever cold prickle Boone Strickland had put between her shoulder blades at the Country Club had dissolved in her husband's arms.

"Two days at Lake Martin in July," she murmured sleepily against his skin, her eyes already closed. "And then in December we go tell Mr. Hendley we want the house on Willow Creek."

"Count on it, Mrs. Rhodes," Brad whispered, kissing the clean center part of her dark hair.

Within two minutes her breathing went deep and even against his ribs.

Brad lay awake in the dim bedroom with his left arm curled around his wife's shoulders. He watched the four wooden blades of the ceiling fan sweep through the shadow above the mattress. His hand rested lightly on her bare hip above the sheet. In the quiet room, with five weeks of summer stretching between tonight and the Fourth of July, Boone Strickland's warm, genial

whisper by the Country Club smoker drifted back through his head one more time—*tell Sav she don't need that one-piece out at my cove in July, Coach, ain't nobody out there on the water but us.*

At nine-thirty that night, four-lane Highway 280 north of the Lake Martin bridge was dark and empty except for the headlights of a solitary log truck droning south toward Dadeville.

On the ground floor of Strickland Ford & Tractor, the main showroom chandeliers were turned off for the night. Only the amber security bulbs glowed across the chrome grilles of the new F-250s and the polished hood of a crimson Bronco by the front glass.

Upstairs in the spacious, wood-paneled corner office, the walnut door was locked from the inside and the thermostat hummed steadily at sixty-six degrees. Only the green-shaded brass banker's lamp on the corner of the desk was switched on. It cast a warm pool of light across the desk while the rest of the room sat in shadow.

Boone Strickland leaned back in his wide tufted leather executive chair with his brown boat shoes kicked off on the carpet. The top three buttons of his canary-yellow Country Club polo were undone above his two-hundred-and-sixty-pound belly. In his left hand he held a crystal rocks glass with two neat fingers of Weller 12.

Slowly, Boone lifted his right hand—big, meaty, soft-palmed, with manicured nails and the gold Rolex President ticking on his wrist. He brought the open palm up underneath his neatly trimmed silver mustache.

He closed his eyes and inhaled once through his nose.

Five hours had passed since the toast on the Country Club flagstone. Even so, right there in the warm creases of his palm

where he had held Savannah Rhodes's little waist in front of forty people, he could still smell her. Sweet, clean cinnamon body lotion and sun-warmed twenty-seven-year-old skin.

He remembered the exact feel of her under his hand on that patio. Every taut, athletic muscle in her hundred-and-ten-pound frame had gone stiff as a fence post the second his fingers spread across her hip above that high, tight little ass. And she had stood right there under his palm for seven full seconds without moving an inch. She had held that polite First Baptist smile on her full pink mouth while her twenty-eight-year-old husband grinned like a boy who had just been handed the keys to a new truck.

Boone opened his pale blue eyes, took a slow swallow of bourbon, and looked across the dim office at the wood-paneled wall between the signed crimson helmet and the portrait of Bear Bryant.

In the soft glow of the banker's lamp hung the twenty-four-by-thirty-six-inch mahogany-framed press photograph from the SEC Championship game in Atlanta. Twenty-two-year-old Savannah Milner stood dead center in the corner of the end zone. Her crimson pleated miniskirt was flared high on her bronzed thighs, her light green eyes shining, and her plush rose-pink mouth parted mid-cheer.

Bid four grand on that frame at the charity auction in Birmingham, he had told Brad yesterday afternoon with a straight face. *Never once put two and two together that was your wife.*

Boone let out a low, quiet chuckle through his nose in the empty building.

Five Decembers ago in the concrete service tunnel underneath Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Boone hadn't looked like the silver-mustached county benefactor who signed Brad

Rhodes's coaching checks. He had been fifty-three years old, carrying two hundred and ninety pounds of winter steak weight. His jowls were covered in a grizzled salt-and-pepper full beard, with half a bottle of Makers Mark sweating through a rumpled crimson blazer.

He had taken a wrong turn coming off the Champions Club suite elevator looking for the donor parking lot and walked through a pair of gray fire doors straight into the spirit-squad loading bay. Twenty-two-year-old Savannah Milner had been standing ten feet from the open door of an idling charter bus in her sleeveless crimson shell top and short pleated skirt. Her bare tanned stomach and toned legs glowed under the overhead lights while she laughed with two teammates and smoothed cinnamon lip gloss across that lush bottom lip.

Drunk, rich on timber money, and used to every girl in Tallapoosa County smiling when Boone Strickland looked her way, he had walked straight into her path with his donor lanyard swinging on his belly. He had stared openly at her wet pink mouth and clapped a sweating palm onto her bare hip above her skirt. Then he had slurred that a girl built like her had no business riding home on a bus—he had a twin-engine King Air sitting at Fulton County Airport that could have the two of them in Destin before midnight.

Five years later, the sound of her laugh still burned in Boone's belly like battery acid.

She hadn't even looked frightened of him. She had looked at his grizzled beard and his bourbon gut and tipped her head back right in front of six other Alabama cheerleaders with that bright, effortless campus-royalty laugh. *"Mister, you're older than my daddy—go find your wife."*

Before Boone could get another word out of his mouth, her twenty-three-year-old boyfriend had rounded the corner of the equipment truck in a spotless #14 crimson jersey without a single grass stain on the numbers. The boy had planted both forearms dead in the center of Boone's chest and shoved him backward into the galvanized steel crowd barrier hard enough to knock the breath out of his lungs. Then he had stood over Boone barking at a Georgia state trooper. Stadium security had stripped the fifteen-thousand-dollar Champions Club lanyard right off Boone's neck while the whole cheer bus watched through the tinted windows.

Neither one of those golden kids had ever bothered to look down at the name printed on the plastic card.

On Monday morning back in Ridgeway, Boone had stood at his bathroom mirror for twenty minutes and shaved the full beard off down to the neat silver mustache. That April in Birmingham, he had paid four thousand dollars at the Crimson Tide charity auction for the framed end-zone photograph hanging on his wall. Two springs ago, Donnie Pruitt had walked into the Gridiron Club lunch at the steakhouse and laid three Offensive Coordinator resumes on the tablecloth. *Bradford Rhodes — Graduate Assistant, University of Alabama* sat on top of the stack. Boone had smiled into his iced tea. He had offered to add ten thousand dollars to the coordinator stipend out of the club fund so the boy couldn't turn it down, bringing the backup quarterback and his cheerleader straight home to Ridgeway.

Boone set his crystal rocks glass down on the walnut coaster, pushed himself up out of the leather chair, and walked around behind his desk.

He folded back the corner of the patterned rug and dropped onto one knee beside the round steel door of the floor safe set into the concrete slab. He spun the brass combination dial left-right-left by memory until the tumblers clicked. Lifting the steel lid open, he reached past the banded stacks of hundred-dollar bills and the manila envelopes of vehicle titles. He pulled out a black leather three-ring binder and laid it open across the green desk blotter directly under the banker's lamp.

Inside the clear plastic sleeves—and stacked loose inside the leather pocket at the back—were a dozen duplicate eight-by-ten high-gloss prints of that SEC Championship photograph. Beside them sat printed color screenshots pulled from her University of Alabama cheer rosters and the Ridgeway High athletics page. There was Savannah under the lights with her skin dewy and glowing. There was Savannah in her high-cut crimson practice shorts by the gymnasium bleachers. And there was Savannah looking straight into a camera lens with those light, vivid green eyes and that calm, slight, unintentionally mischievous curve of her full lips.

With his manicured fingers, Boone slid three loose eight-by-ten glossies out of the back flap and laid them side by side across the desk. Two of the prints were warped and curled along the white borders. The glossy photo paper was yellowed and crusted stiff with five years of dried, flaky white streaks across her pictured chest and mouth. The third was a newer print from the stack with only two glazed tracks dried across her crimson skirt.

Standing behind the desk in the cool sixty-six-degree quiet of his office, Boone unbuckled his braided brown leather belt. He unbuttoned his starched khakis and shoved both his trousers

and his white cotton briefs down past the overhang of his round two-hundred-and-sixty-pound belly.

His cock sprang out iron-hard above the open binder—over eight inches long and obscenely, freakishly fat, a dark-red cylinder of meat as wide around as a twelve-ounce beer can. A prominent blue vein ran down the top of the shaft to a wide, flared, plum-colored head already leaking a clear, glistening bead of precome from its slit.

Boone wrapped his big, soft-palmed right hand around the middle of the shaft. His fingers barely closed around his own girth while the gold Rolex on his wrist glinted under the green glass shade. He began to stroke himself in a slow, steady rhythm.

He didn't look at the wider squad photos tonight. He stared straight down at the close-up print of Savannah's face lying in the center of the blotter: her balanced, sun-bronzed cheekbones, those clear light green eyes beneath her dark arched brows, and the soft, cushiony pillow of her bee-stung bottom lip.

In his head, it wasn't five years ago in that concrete tunnel in Atlanta anymore.

It was three-thirty this afternoon inside the Country Club bar breezeway. Her compact five-foot-four, hundred-and-ten-pound body had been boxed in three inches in front of his belly, her small nipples peaked hard through that damp navy schoolteacher swimsuit. Her pulse had jumped fast in her bronzed throat beside her little gold chain while she stared straight ahead at the tea urn and had to call him *Mr. Strickland, sir*. He could still feel her narrow waist under his palm out on the flagstone while her husband stood two feet away grinning from ear to ear and talking about hanging fifty points on Central.

And he could still hear what that boy had told him sitting right across this walnut desk yesterday afternoon with two fingers of Weller 12 in his hand: *We started going together when I was sixteen and she was fifteen, Boone. Neither one of us has ever been with anybody else.*

Boone's breathing turned raspy through his nose beneath his silver mustache. He braced his left hand on the edge of the desk beside his bourbon glass while his right fist worked faster up and down the veined cylinder of his cock. The wide plum-colored head shone slick with pre-come as his low-hanging, silver-haired sac swung against his thighs.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Strickland," Boone muttered under his breath to the quiet room.

A low grunt rumbled up from deep in his barrel chest. His shaft swelled inside his fist and jerked forward once, twice. A hot, rope-thick jet of white cum arched off the flared head and splattered straight across the center of the eight-by-ten glossy, landing dead across Savannah's parted rose-pink lips and chin. A second white rope lashed across her light green eyes and dark arched brow. A third and fourth pulsed out over her bronzed throat and the collar of her crimson cheer top. It pooled glossy and white under the desk lamp while Boone milked a fifth slow drop from the slit and let it fall right onto the picture of her mouth.

"There's your lip gloss, sweetheart." Boone chuckled.

For a long moment Boone stood over the walnut desk in the cool air conditioning. His round belly rose and fell as he looked down at the twenty-seven-year-old face gleaming wet and white across the photograph.

Then he reached into his hip pocket, pulled out a clean white linen handkerchief, and wiped his soft palm and the wide head of his cock dry. He tucked himself back inside his briefs and buckled his khakis under his belly. Lifting the freshly glazed photograph by two dry corners, he slid it into the back pocket of the leather binder to dry beside the others.

He dropped the binder back into the floor safe and spun the brass dial shut. Clicking off the green banker's lamp, he walked downstairs to his King Ranch pickup with five weeks of summer sitting between tonight and the Fourth of July.

About the Author

If you enjoy the story, consider joining the discord, signing up for my newsletter, or checking out some of my story-inspired video renditions! You can find everything on my linktree : https://linktr.ee/sire_rickenbach

Read more at https://linktr.ee/sire_rickenbach.