Spending the Honeymoon in My Father's Place

Chapter 1: The Beginning of the Honeymoon

The afternoon sun filtered through the branches of the old maples beside Kirkwood Hall, dropping dappled coins of light on the concrete. Class had just let out and the sidewalk filled with students, laughter and sneaker squeaks and the clatter of wheeled backpacks rolling over the seams in the pavement.

I came out with the crowd, slow. Dark gray hoodie, jeans soft from too many washes, backpack slung off one shoulder. Everyone around me was arm in arm and loud about where they were going that night. I just watched my sneakers and the spots of light jumping at my feet.

My phone buzzed in my hoodie pocket.

I stopped, stepped out of the flow, and leaned against the cold tile of the wall. The screen said **Dad**. My thumb hovered over the green button for a second before it pressed.



"Hey."

"You at school?" He talked faster than usual. Typing underneath it.

"Yeah. Just got out."

"There's something I need to tell you." No warm-up, no *how's the semester*. "Your mom and I were supposed to fly to Maui next week. The trip for our twentieth anniversary."

"I remember."

"The project blew up. I can't get away. Flights are booked, the villa's booked, all of it's nonrefundable." The typing stopped. His voice came through clearer. "Your mom's been looking forward to this for a year. She'll be crushed if we cancel. I've been thinking — if you can get your classes covered next week, take the time off and go with her."

The corridor thinned out. Sunlight had crawled down to the base of the wall and lit a line of dust in the grout.

I didn't answer right away. I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my knuckle. The ear the phone was pressed against had gone hot.

"So... me and Mom."

"Yeah. The itinerary's already set. Couples have fun. Mothers and sons have fun too." A shrug in his voice. "I'll talk to your mom about it. Think of it as keeping her company and giving yourself a break. Don't worry about the money."

Somewhere off past the quad, a basketball thudded against asphalt, and a few guys yelled.

"The classes... I'll figure out how to reschedule." My voice dropped. I turned and rested my forehead on the cool tile. "How many days?"

"Seven days, six nights. Tuesday morning." He sounded relieved, softer now. "I'll text you the itinerary. I'll handle your mom — your only job is to keep her company and make sure she doesn't feel alone out there."

"Okay."

"That's settled, then. I've got another meeting."

"Okay."

The dial tone. I took the phone from my ear and, before the screen went dark, caught the lock screen wallpaper — the three of us on a beach in Florida the summer I turned thirteen, both of them flanking me, all three of us squinting into blinding light. Mom in a huge sun hat, laughing at something off camera.

I put the phone away and hitched my backpack up. The corridor was empty except for me. Sunlight had climbed my calves, warm, almost cozy.

I walked to the stairwell and stopped with my hand on the cold metal rail, looking down. The glass doors of the lobby stood open onto a plaza so bright it looked bleached, and beyond that, the green tunnel of the campus paths.

The wind came up the stairwell, carrying cut grass.

I pulled my student ID out of my other pocket and rubbed my thumb over the photo. White shirt from orientation, hair shorter than it is now, eyes aimed slightly up at the camera like I hadn't been ready when the shutter went.

I put it away, took a breath, and went down. My footsteps echoed alone, one after another.

The bus air conditioning was cranked so high the hair on my arms stood up. I held the rail and watched rooftops and treetops and a parked crane slide past the window while Dad's voice ran loops in my skull. *The project is impossible to leave. Everything's booked and nonrefundable. Your mom has been waiting for this.*

The whole thing was absurd from start to finish. A twentieth anniversary. A honeymoon. And it was going to be me and my mother. He'd said it like it was the most ordinary thing on earth, like he'd asked me to grab a package off the porch.

But a package doesn't come with rose petals.

I sighed at my own reflection and squeezed the rail. The announcement chimed and I got off.

It was already going dusky. A cool evening breeze came at my face, damp and green, temperature just this side of perfect. The gas station on the corner blazed white and a cluster of middle schoolers jostled at the door over the ice cream case, their laughter carrying.

I walked home the usual way, turned into the development, past the holly bushes clipped into spheres, and looked up at our building. The kitchen window was lit.

Warm gold coming through the gap in the curtains.

I stood downstairs and looked at it longer than I needed to. That light used to mean one thing — somebody's home, somebody's cooking, everything's fine. Tonight it sat differently in my chest. I couldn't name it and didn't want to.

Upstairs, my keys had tangled with my student ID. I squatted by the door and picked at them until the strap of my backpack slid and knocked my arm and the whole ring hit the concrete with a bright metallic *crack*. I picked them up, got them in the lock, turned twice.

The door swung in. Warm yellow light poured out over the ivy on the shoe cabinet, every leaf of it wiped to a shine. The smell hit me: pot roast, and under it, cornbread.

I toed off my shoes, dropped my backpack on the arm of the couch, and went toward the kitchen.

"You're home?" Mom's voice, a little muffled by steam, the end of it lifting.

"Yeah."

I leaned in the doorway and didn't go further. The kitchen was fogged up. The Dutch oven hissed on the burner. She stood with her back to me, stirring, beige cardigan pushed to her elbows, a stretch of pale forearm showing. Her hair — honey blonde, shoulder-length, wavy — was gathered loosely at the back of her head and the damp strands that had escaped were stuck to her neck. The light over the stove found her profile and traced her nose, her mouth.

"Wash up. Dinner's about ready."

"Okay."

I went to the bathroom and ran hot water over my hands, thinking about how to bring it up. There wasn't much to think about — Dad said he'd already told her. But *he told her* and *she can actually stand it* are two different countries, and somebody has to walk the distance between them.

When I came out, the food was down. Pot roast on my side, cornbread cut into neat triangles. Mom had a bowl of chicken noodle and a small dish of cucumber salad.

I sat, took a piece of meat. It came apart under the fork. Salt and sweet, dead even.

"Good?" she asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "It's really good."

She spooned up some broth, blew on it, drank. Didn't say anything. I ate for a while, then went first. "Dad called me."

Her spoon touched the rim of the bowl and rang once, soft. She didn't look up. "Yeah. He told me too."

I set my fork down and looked at her. She felt it, looked up, smiled. "What?"

"He made it sound so reasonable," I said. "I almost believed him."

"Me too." Her voice was low, and under it, a little self-mockery she couldn't quite keep out of it. "He said there's a meeting he can't move and asked if I'd cancel my

ticket. I said it's already booked and nonrefundable, forget it. So he thought about it, and then he said — why don't you take Ethan."

She looked back down and drank, like she didn't want me seeing her face. But I saw it. The smile was there and it was flat, pressed thin at the edges, nothing like her real one.

It went into me like a pin.

"And what about you?" I asked. "Do you want to go?"

She paused. Then she looked up. Her eyes are blue-gray, wide-set, the outer corners tipping down a little, and they go soft and unguarded when she looks at people, like she's never once thought to protect herself. She opened her mouth, hesitated, then said, "I really want to go. I've been looking forward to it for so long. You don't know — I picked out those excursions last year. Your dad promised me then. He doesn't even remember."

I had nothing.

She caught herself, waved a hand. "It's fine. You know your dad. He didn't do it on purpose, he's just busy, he can't leave a project. I know he didn't mean it."

She said it very quietly, almost to herself.

I put my head down and shoveled rice. Chewed a long time. Tasted nothing.

"I can get my classes covered," I said. "Most of next week is electives. I just have to email the professors. We can go together."

She didn't answer for a while. Then, softly, "Then thank you for the trouble."

"Mom. It's not trouble."

"I mean it — it was supposed to be your dad. Now it's you. Feels like you're being drafted."

"Then I'm drafted." I put a piece of meat in her bowl. "I've never even been to Hawaii. Eat."

She looked at the meat, smiled, and let it go.

Outside, lights were coming on in the houses across the way, blinking through the dark. The fixture over the table was warm and the food still steamed. I was working a fork through the roast when I caught, from the corner of my eye, her lifting the meat to her mouth.

After dinner I cleared and washed. She stood by the sink a moment, watching, then said, "I'll go print the itinerary. You should look at it."

"Okay."

Hot water over the plates, grease sliding off. I bent and set them in the rack one by one. My face floated in the window glass with half the living room behind it.

I dried my hands and went out. She was on the couch already, tablet on the coffee table next to a stack of paper dense with English, barcodes, order numbers. She looked up at my step and patted the cushion. "Come here."

I sat at the other end. She shifted closer and handed me the tablet. "The flight's Tuesday morning. The hotel's here — six nights."

The booking sat there, plain as a receipt. Flight number, departure, arrival, baggage allowance. I scrolled. The hotel block read **Moonview Lodge — Deluxe Honeymoon Villa (King Bed)**, and between the check-in and check-out dates there was a six-day hole.

My eyes stuck on *honeymoon villa* and *king bed* like my brain needed a second to do the math.

"King bed," I said.

"Mm." Her voice had gone stiff, a dry embarrassment in it. "When your dad booked it, he booked for the two of us. So that's what came. I called the front desk this afternoon — they said it's a package, the room type's fixed, it can't be changed."

"Oh."

"Besides, it's peak season. Even if we wanted to switch, there's nothing else open."

"Yeah."

Silence for a few seconds. I stared at the confirmation, and the words *honeymoon villa* sat there burning like a brand. She reached over and took the tablet back, deliberately skipping that page, and swiped to the next. "Look at this first — the package inclusions. I went through some this afternoon. A few look fun."

I leaned in.

Rows of service names, each with a time slot and the words **for two**. A couples massage. A catamaran sail for two. A candlelight dinner on the sand. A couples portrait session. A private outdoor soaking tub.

I read them twice and thought: when somebody built this package, did they assume every party checking in was a real couple?

"They're all two-person things," Mom said quietly, like she was afraid I'd missed it.

"Yeah. I see that."

"Your dad probably didn't read the inclusions. He just picked the highest-rated one."

"Why is the highest-rated one always like this?"

"Because it's a honeymoon package."

She laughed at her own line. When she laughs, fine lines gather at the corners of her eyes, and they're pretty. She's got one of those young faces — oval, fair, the kind that only ever shows its age at the eye corners and the mouth. Under the lamp her sweater's wide neck had slid, showing the shelf of her collarbone and a hand's width of pale throat. Under the bone, the faint, full shape of her, softened by the knit.

I stared at the neckline, decided I didn't know where to look, and looked down at the tablet.

"So do you want the massage?" she asked.

"Do you?"

"I'm thinking about it. But it's for two. If it's weird for you, we skip it."

"A couples massage is two people lying next to each other while somebody else does the work," I said. "We're not massaging each other. It's fine."

"True."

She nodded and tapped the box, checking it. Then scrolled. "What about the sailboat? Your dad said he wanted to try that."

"Then let's go. Two to a boat, there's got to be an instructor around."

"Okay."

She checked it. Careful little movements, like she was signing something.

Next was **Couples Portrait Session**, with a sample photo: a young couple on a beach at sunset, her head against his chest, both of them beaming. The wind lifting her hem and his shirt, warm, romantic, like a frame from a commercial.

We looked at it at the same time.

Nothing.

"Well..." Her voice went dry. "Never mind."

"Yeah. Never mind."

We said it on top of each other and stopped on top of each other. Then she laughed, a real one this time, like she'd set something heavy down. "Fine. We skip that. We'll look at the rest later."

I nodded, calm on the outside, and let out a breath on the inside. Couples photos. With my mom. I'd rather run ten laps.

She went through a few more and settled on the massage for the first afternoon, the sail for the second morning, and the chef's tasting for two at the reef-side grill on the fourth night. She checked each one, saying, "I'll put this together tonight and send it to the concierge so they can schedule it."

"Okay."

She set the tablet down and picked up the paper stack, folded it square, and smoothed the edges. Then, like it had just occurred to her: "Oh — where's your ID? I need it for the booking."

"In my backpack. Hang on."

I got up, went to the entry, and dug into the zip pocket. The ID was there with a couple of old movie stubs and an expired gym card. I carried it back. She'd stood up and was sliding the papers into a folder.

I handed it over. Her fingertips brushed the back of my hand — cool, still damp from the dishwater.

"Have a seat, I'll put this away and be right back."

She went into the bedroom with the folder. The door didn't catch all the way and a long warm strip of light fell down the hallway floor.

I sat back on the couch, head against the cushion, staring up at the ceiling. The tablet was still lit. **Honeymoon Package**. The words stood out sharp in the dim room.

I closed my eyes and told myself: this is going to be stranger than I think.

But not unmanageable.

A few minutes later she came out. She'd changed out of the cardigan into a soft pink lounge set, the top still loose at the neck, one collarbone showing. She set a glass of water in front of me. "Drink. You haven't had anything all afternoon."

"Thanks, Mom."

She sat at the far end of the couch, an arm's length away, and looked at me sideways. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Go ahead."

"It's the bed." Her fingers found the hem of her top and twisted it. "I checked the details. It says the bed's oversized, extra wide, plenty of room for two without being cramped. If it's uncomfortable for you... I can take the couch. There's a pull-out in the living room, I saw it."

"Mom. No." It came out of me almost before she finished. "We finally get to go on a vacation and you're going to sleep on a couch? If the bed's big, we take a side each. Besides — it's not like we've never slept in the same bed."

Then I heard myself.

Sure, we had. When I was six. Now I'm twenty-two, five-ten, an adult man with a whole confusing private life happening under his clothes, and negotiating *whether or not to share a bed with Mom* is somehow a different category of conversation.

My ears were hot. I grabbed the water and drank. The cold slid down and pinned the restlessness down for a second.

She probably heard the squeak in my voice, because she only hummed and didn't push. She looked down and smiled. "We'll see, then. Go get your classes sorted. Tell me if you need anything."

"Okay."

I stood to go, got two steps, and turned back. "Mom."

"Mm?"

"Let's have a good time this time," I said. "Don't worry about Dad. We can have fun without him."

She looked up at me. The lamp came down over her face and lit the fine hairs on her cheek and something in her eyes I couldn't name. She laughed, soft as a feather landing. "Mm."

I went to my room and shut the door.

Insects ticking out in the garden. The night breeze pushed the curtains in and laid a cool hand on my arm.

I sat at the desk, picked up the textbook I hadn't finished, and put it back down. A family photo sat in the corner of the desk, years old, from junior high. Dad's hair had less gray in it. Mom stood beside him smiling like she had nothing to hold back.

I turned the photo face down. It didn't feel right. I turned it back up.

Whatever.

I texted my advisor that I needed five days next week for a family thing. Then I opened the weather app and checked Kahului. Eighty-five degrees, sun, humidity like a wet towel.

I put the phone down, opened the closet, and looked at a rack of dark t-shirts and plaid. Down at the very bottom was a light blue short-sleeve shirt Mom had bought me last summer, saying I looked good in light colors. It still had the tag.

I held it up against myself in the mirror.

The guy in the glass was tall and thin, pale, collarbones and shoulder blades faint under the light, hair sticking up from the pillow. I looked at him a while and hung the shirt back up. Whether I needed it depended on my mood tomorrow.

Outside, the streetlight threw leaf shadows on the ground. A breeze lifted a corner of the curtain. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the flight on my phone: Tuesday morning, nonstop to Maui, my mom and me.

I took the itinerary out of my pocket and read the line again. *Honeymoon Villa (King Bed).*

"Honeymoon," I said, to nobody.

I folded it and put it away, turned off the lamp, and lay down. In the dark, a soft noise came through the wall — Mom going to bed too.

A patch of light from the window lay on the ceiling and rocked gently, like water.

I shut my eyes.

Tuesday. Maui. A king bed. A massage for two.

...Whatever. We'd see.

Going back to my room, I locked the door. Firmly. Like I could shut all the *honeymoon* talk out of the living room. Then I felt stupid — there was nobody in here to lock it against. A sparrow landed on the AC unit outside the window, cocked its head at me like it thought I was acting strange today, and left.

Whatever.

I sat down and woke the monitor, squinting at the glare, and opened the student portal. It took me two tries to type the password right; the first time I put in my login instead.

The leave request form sat there, white and blue, like a piece of furniture nobody had dusted in years. I put the cursor in the reason field and it blinked at me, patient.

Reason. Reason. Reason.

Accompanying my mother on a belated twentieth-anniversary honeymoon because my father has a deadline — sure, but say that out loud and my advisor would want details.

So I typed four words: **Family trip**.

Nothing wrong with *family.* Nothing wrong with *trip.* Together they were sincere and vague, an airtight all-purpose excuse. I added a note — itinerary confirmed with parents, coursework and assignments submitted remotely — and hit submit with my eyes shut.

Green text: *Request submitted. Awaiting approval.*

Step one. Done.

I leaned back and let my head hang, thoughts drifting. Plane. Sea air. Hotel. Hot tub. A couples massage. *Couples.* What had I told her this morning? *Two people lying side by side getting massaged, we're not touching each other, it's fine.* Sure. But get in the actual room, with the therapist standing there, the two tables a nightstand apart, the air thick with oil — was that atmosphere going to be *fine*?

Whatever. We'd see.

I pulled up the itinerary she'd texted and scrolled it page by page. Flight. Baggage. Villa. Airport pickup. *Moonview Lodge — Honeymoon Villa.* King bed, sleeps two.

I stared at *king bed* for three seconds, locked the phone, and set it face down.

What kind of trap design is this? Honeymoon villa, king bed, breakfast for two. Three phrases, perfectly interlocking, logically airtight, no holes. As a computer science major I had to respect the product logic. As the guy who had to sleep in it, less so.

I opened the closet again. Dark t-shirts and plaid, row after row, like I'd only ever shopped in one aisle. Down at the bottom, the light blue shirt, tag still on, Mom's voice in my head: *You look sharp in light colors.*

Might actually come in handy.

My phone buzzed on the desk.

Mom: *Sent you the itinerary, save it. Oh — I'm going to run to Kroger for sunscreen and beach stuff. Want to come?*

I read *want to come?* three times. It didn't read casual. It read prepared, and a little careful.

I typed: *Yeah.*

I put the phone down, stood, and went out. When I opened my door she was already at the entry with her shoes half on.

I stopped.

The living room light came down on her and made everything about her legible. A pale floral chiffon dress, hem just past the knee, a long white leg showing under it. White flat sandals. A thin white cardigan loose on her shoulders. She was bent to get her heel into the sandal, and the neckline hung away from her chest, showing a white wedge of skin that flashed with each small movement, bright enough to be a distraction.

She straightened, saw me, and looked me up and down.

"You're wearing that?"

I looked down at myself. Gray t-shirt, black sweatpants, canvas shoes.

"It's Kroger."

"Do guys your age not even try before they leave the house?"

"I tried. I washed my face."

She gave me the look that means *fine, you're hopeless,* took a canvas bag off the hook, and opened the door. "Let's go."

The hall light laid a warm halo around her and made the edge of the cardigan fuzzy. She turned to wait for me, and the pearl in her ear caught the light against the

smooth line of her neck. Standing behind her, some old awareness surfaced in me from a corner I hadn't checked in years: this is my mother, and she's also a woman.

It went by so fast I could hardly catch it. I bent down and turned the key twice.

The elevator was empty and quiet. She looked at her phone, probably a list. I stood behind her shoulder and let my eyes cross her profile, then snapped them to the floor numbers.

The doors opened and the evening came in, earth and grass. Not fully dark. Clouds stacked in the west like poured orange syrup.



She walked ahead. The skirt swung with each step. Her calves looked white as paper in that light, her ankles thin, the sandal straps printing faint lines across the tops of her feet.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Kroger's fine. It's big, it's got everything, and I can get fruit."

She turned and smiled. "Anything you want?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Okay. You pick when it's your turn. Mom's treat."

Mom's treat. So easy, so familiar. The night before field trips she used to stand in the same aisle and say it: *Take whatever you want, Mom's treat.* One extra bag of chips and I'd be lit up for a week. A bag of chips doesn't do that to me anymore, but the words still land soft.

The store wasn't far. A block, the glass doors, and the air conditioning hit like a wall. I sneezed. She already had a cart and was steering it into the toiletries like she'd rehearsed.

"Sunscreen — I can't find the bottle I have at home." She stopped at the shelf, picked up a spray, read the back, put it down. "Have you used this brand?"

"No."

"Then pick one that works for you. You're fair, you burn. Don't get the ones that want to turn you bronze."

"I don't want to be bronze."

"Then look." She smiled and stepped aside, showing me the row.

Bottles in a dozen colors, all identical. I grabbed a light blue one that said *cooling, oil control.* She took it, checked the label, nodded, and put it in the cart.

"Now bug spray. Maui's going to be mosquitoes." She took a spray and a box of patches and added a bottle of aloe to the cart, in case of burns. The cart filled up and something in me settled. Shopping with Mom for a trip — so ordinary it's invisible. Except for the *honeymoon* sign hanging over it, which changed the color of everything.

The snack aisle. She stood in front of the beef jerky a while. Calories, fat, whatever she does in her head. Then she put a bag in the cart anyway.

"You don't count calories on vacation," she said.

"You never used to buy that."

"I loved it in college. Your dad stopped caring about snacks, so I stopped buying it."

Quiet. But it went into me like a stone in a pond, ring after ring. How long since she'd bought herself anything just because she liked it?

I didn't ask. I just reached over and dropped a second bag in the cart.

"Why two?"

"One for you, one for me."

She looked at me and let it go. I pushed the cart and pretended not to see her face.

From the dairy case I grabbed two yogurts. She said my stomach's sensitive and cold stuff isn't good for it, then added a third. "Take one more. I'll drink it."

At the end we picked out two straw hats. One tan, one lighter. She put the light one on, looked in the mirror, and asked, "Does it look okay?"

"It's nice."

"Really?"

"Really. It's elegant."

She glanced at me in the mirror, mouth curving, took the hat off, and put it in the cart. She was pleased. She wasn't going to say so.

Then the register, and a snag.

The cashier — young, ponytail — clocked the sunscreen, looked up, and smiled. "Beach?"

"Yeah. Maui." Mom turned to her and smiled back, eye crinkles showing in the store light.

"Nice." The girl kept scanning. "With your husband?"

Two full seconds of nothing.

I stood there with a bottle of water in my hand, nearly dropped it. Mom's smile slipped a notch and she waved her hand, voice going dry. "No, no. With my son."

"Oh! Got it." The girl ducked her head, scanned something, and said nothing else. The awkward had already leaked over the counter.

I pulled out my phone and pretended to answer something. Out of the corner of my eye, red climbed her ears. She bent over the bag and packed the groceries fast.

Outside it was full dark. Streetlights on, a warm breeze, and the sweet gardenia stink off the beds by the sidewalk.

We carried a bag each and walked side by side.

After a block I said, quietly, "She was just making conversation. It's nothing."

"I know." A pause. "I just didn't have it ready. When people ask like that, I don't know what to say."

"Anyway. Tomorrow there'll be more of it."

"True."

She sighed, but it wasn't a sad sound. The streetlight came down on her lashes. I watched the pavement and said nothing.

After a long while: "What did you put on the leave request?"

"Family trip."

"Family trip." She rolled it around. "That's good."

The way she said it had a different flavor than *then thank you for the trouble* on the couch. A little self-deprecating. A little like being protected.

I looked at the road and hummed.

At home the entry light came on. I bent to my shoes. She set the bags down. "Leave those, we'll put them away later. Why don't you pack your clothes. Let's see if the small suitcase holds it."

She dug in the storage closet and came out with a silver-gray 20-inch. One corner was dented, the wheels were fine.

"Here. This should get you through a few days."

"Okay."

I carried it to my room and opened the closet. T-shirts, shorts, swim trunks — no swim trunks. I dug and came up with a black pair of athletic shorts. Held them, looked at them, put them back.

"Guess I'm buying swim trunks tomorrow," I said to the room.

"What?" from the living room.

"Nothing! I said I found clothes!"

I came out with the tan straw hat on my head to see how it looked. It was too big; the brim dropped to my eyebrows. I was checking it in the glass of the sliding door when Mom came out of the storage room, stopped, and burst out laughing.

"Why are you wearing that?"

"Testing it."

She came over, hooked two fingers under the brim, lifted it, and tilted it slightly to one side like she was squaring a picture frame. Took half a step back, looked me over, eyes crinkling, and nodded.

"It's great. I'm keeping this one. I'll wear it when we go out."

I laughed. Outside, cicadas. The lamp threw two shadows on the glass, one tall, one short, close together. Folded t-shirts on the couch, sunscreen and snacks on the coffee table, a bag gaping open with a green bottle of bug spray showing.

It was really happening.

I took the hat off, hung it on the rack, and bent back to my suitcase.

I woke just after six the next morning.

The alarm hadn't gone off. The sky outside was barely up, gray-blue leaking through the curtains and lying on the ceiling like a little pool. I stared at it and tried to catch the dream — water, sand, warm wet wind. Nothing specific, just heat and wet and my bare feet in sand the tide had left.

I lay there until my phone lit, then got up.

When I came out, eggs and the smell of toast going slightly too far. Mom was at the stove in a white shirt dress, soft fabric, belted at the waist, hem an inch or two above the knee. The morning came in off the balcony and gilded her. She was sliding a fried egg onto a plate, quick and easy, bent forward — the collar of the dress hung away from her, the fabric pulled snug across her chest, full and round, shifting with the movement. Under the white, the darker lift of her, unmistakable.

I stood in the doorway half a second too long.

"Morning," I got out, eyes pinned to the suitcase in the corner.

"Morning." She turned and smiled. The light found the fine lines at her eyes, but her eyes themselves were clear. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and showed me the long pale line of her neck. "You washed up? Eat. We have to get to the airport."

I mumbled something, sat, and stared at my plate. Toast, eggs, two glasses of milk. The sun moved across the table. I kept my head down and chewed, and every time she reached or leaned, I buried my face in the glass. I finished it and poured another.

"Your dad's going to meet us at the airport," she said. "He'll drop us and go back to the office."

"Mm."

"He's got a meeting this morning. He said he could make the drop."

"Got it."

"It's not that he doesn't want to take us. He's just busy."

"Yeah."

My answers were thin and there was a question stuck in my throat: how does a man too busy to go on his own honeymoon have time to drive us to the airport? I didn't ask. She'd explain and I'd accept. It's the arrangement.

After breakfast I changed. The light blue shirt, collar still stiff as new. In the mirror: tall, thin, fair, a hollow at the base of my throat, narrow shoulders, straight waist. I pushed my hair down and it sprang back up. Whatever.

"Ready?" from the hall.

"Coming."

I took the silver suitcase out. She was coming out of the bedroom with the big light blue one, bent over adjusting her canvas strap, the sheer curtain light on her face, gentle. She straightened, met my eyes. I looked away first and headed for the door.

The cab idled at the curb. The driver was a heavy guy in his fifties, friendly. As we loaded the trunk he looked us over. "Airport?"

"Yeah."

"Going somewhere fun?"

"Yeah."

And then, like something else had gotten into my mouth: "Honeymoon."

Time stopped. I didn't dare look at her. What was that? A honeymoon. *Their* honeymoon. Except — mine and hers. I nearly bit through my tongue. Mom came in behind me, not loud: "He's just keeping me company. It doesn't count as a honeymoon."

The driver checked us in the rearview, working it out. "Mother-daughter vacation? That's great."

"I'm a guy," I said.

Two seconds.

"Oh. Father and son."

I quit. Shut my mouth and looked out the window. Beside me her shoulders were shaking, knuckles pressed to her lips. Her reflection in the glass had a crescent-moon mouth.

I sighed at the window. Great. First one of the trip and it hadn't even started.

She leaned back and dozed with her eyes shut. Sun through the window lay along her face; her lashes put a small shadow on her cheek. Her lips had a shine to them, balm. A button at the collar of the dress had come undone somewhere, and from where I sat the smooth fabric showed the slow rise and fall of her breathing. Under the white, full and soft and somehow more obvious for being covered.

I looked out the window again.

At the departures curb, Dad was already there. Dark trousers, gray shirt, sleeves rolled to the forearm, like he'd walked straight out of a conference room. He came over with long strides, took the suitcase off Mom, and clapped my shoulder. "Traffic?"

"Fine."

"We've got time. Let's get the bags checked."

He went ahead. Mom followed, the white dress swinging. I came last and watched their backs, which is a view I don't have much of. He walks in front, she stays half a step behind, and there's a gap between them that's neither close nor far. Today was the same. Except today I watched her eyes go past his back and land somewhere further out, and something I couldn't name moved in me.

At the counter they talked low, and I couldn't hear it. Her head was down, her fingers working the strap of her bag. He had his hands in his pockets, shoulders tipped in, giving her some ordinary instruction. I looked at my shoes.

Our turn. The agent scanned Mom's license, glanced up at us. "You two together?"

"Yes, together," Mom said.

"Ms. Claire Whitaker... and your son?" The agent smiled, like she'd read the booking note. "Both bags checking?"

"Please."

The two suitcases — one silver, one blue — rolled up the belt and disappeared behind the black curtain. The curtain swung and settled. The bags went first. I was next. It was real now.

Dad stopped at the yellow line. I turned and looked at him, hands in his pockets, face calm, the tall windows throwing his shadow out long behind him.

"Go on in," he said.

"Okay," Mom said. "Get back to the office. Don't be late."

"Got it. Text me after security."

"Okay."

We turned for the checkpoint. My legs felt heavy. A few steps on, I looked back. He hadn't moved. Then he lifted a hand a little and turned and was gone into the crowd.

I followed her.

The line at security was long. I stood behind her while it inched, announcements droning, air cold and chemical, and the smell of her shampoo coming off the back of her head, faint and floral.

Her turn. She bent to take her sandals off and set her bag in the bin, and the neckline of the dress dropped away from her — a wide white expanse, the pale edge of her bra against it, holding the full, heavy weight of her, hanging like fruit, the shape of it coming through the fabric. It lasted a second and went into me like a slow-motion shot.

I got electrocuted head to toe.

She straightened, went through the detector, picked up her things, and turned. "Come on. What are you staring at?"

"...Nothing. Coming."

I dumped my phone in a bin and hurried through. No beep. The officer handed my things back and I grabbed them and basically jogged. Then slowed.

It's Mom. It's Mom. It's Mom. The white of her chest, bent over, would not come off the inside of my skull.

The gate was at the far end. We rode the moving walkway, planes taxiing past the glass on either side. She stood in front of me and the walkway carried us. A corner of her skirt lifted and showed a patch of skin behind her knee. I looked at my shoes, then the ceiling. My inner voice got more insistent: *You're a son on a trip with his mother. That's all.*

The waiting area was crowded. We found seats by the window. Sun through the glass made half my face hot. I took my hoodie off and put it on my lap, checked the board — **on time**. She took the straw hat out of her bag, considered it, didn't put it on, put it back.

"I'll wear it when we land. It looks stupid here."

"You look fine."

"Really?"

"Really."

She smiled like something opening. I looked away.

My phone rang. Dad.

"Hey."

"You through security?"

"Yeah. At the gate."

"Which gate?"

"B-twenty-five."

"Okay, stay put, don't wander." A pause. "Your mom hasn't been sleeping. Let her nap on the plane. Don't sit there on your phone the whole time."

"Got it."

"All right. Text when you land."

"Okay."

I looked at the screen after. She turned. "What did he say?"

"Text when we land."

"Anything else?"

"That you should sleep on the plane."

"He's got time for that," she said, half to herself. She looked down at her boarding pass and ran her fingertip along the print. I didn't answer. Sun crawled across the floor.

Outside, a jet rolled for the runway, silver in the light. It spooled up, lifted, shrank, went into a thin rag of cloud. The gate called our row. We stood. We shuffled forward.

At the door they scanned us and tore a corner off. Wind came through the jet bridge, metal and fuel. Light cut the bridge into stripes. I walked behind her and watched her calves in the moving stripes, warm white, ankle, knee, the small curve of thigh under the hem.

I gave myself an order: today you do not look at anything else.

The cabin was colder than the terminal. Window seat for me, aisle for her. The seats were narrow; once we were in, there was an armrest and not much else between our shoulders. I pressed to the window and put my backpack at my feet. The vent stirred the hair by her ear. She put the hat under the seat ahead, took out a paperback, read two pages, closed it.

"Why don't you nap?" I tried.

"After takeoff. If I sleep now I'll be up all night."

"Mm."

We pushed back. She reclined and shut her eyes. Sun through the window made the fine hair on her face transparent. With her eyes closed the lines at the corners smoothed out; she looked relaxed and far away, like an old photograph left in the sun.

The engines deepened. Acceleration pressed me back and the ground blurred. A cool hand landed on the back of mine on the armrest, stayed a second, and withdrew like a butterfly.

"Don't be nervous," she said, eyes still closed.

"I'm not nervous."

"Your hands are cold."

I let it go.

We punched through the cloud deck and the light turned to a flood. Outside, the clouds were stacked to the horizon like a quilt. The sun gilded the tops. She opened her eyes and looked too. Neither of us said anything.

After a long while, softly: "Your dad used to say when he retired he'd take me to look at clouds."

"Mm."

"He said that right after we got married." A pause, flat. "He had time then. He'd sit through a whole movie. Then he got busier."

She didn't look at me while she said it. She looked at the clouds.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"Let's look at them properly this time."

She turned her head, glanced at me — brief, but there was moonlight-on-water in it — and smiled. "Mm."

She dug the jerky out of her bag, opened it, and handed me a piece. I took a bite; sweet and salt melted slowly. She took a bite of her own and her eyes crinkled as she chewed. "Tastes exactly like it used to."

"You brought that from home?"

"I thought about it all night and decided a bag of this on the plane would be perfect."

"Then you brought the right thing."

The cloud sea went on outside like another country. The cabin was quiet, the reading lights making small warm circles. We sat in ours and chewed from the same bag like two kids sharing candy.

I don't know how long before I slept. When I woke there was a blanket on my shoulder that smelled like our detergent. She was leaned back, the paperback open on her lap, eyes closed, breathing slow. Her lips were parted a little. Sun through the window lay on her chest, and with every breath the full weight of her rose and fell under the dress. The button at her collar had come undone again — deep shadow, the pale edge of her bra, a secret half-kept.

I looked away slowly, took the blanket off, and laid it over her. She stirred and didn't wake. I sat back and listened to my own heartbeat under the engine noise.

The descent announcement came. I stowed the tray and didn't wake her. She only opened her eyes when we broke the clouds and the sea was there.

She looked at the blanket, then at me, said nothing, and folded it.

"I can see the water," I said.

She looked. The sun smashed on the surface into running silver. Her eyes went bright in it.

"Yeah," she said. "We're here."

The tires touched and we braked hard. Outside was green and strange, palm fronds whipping in the wind, low buildings bleached white. Seatbelts clicked open. A voice welcomed us to Kahului.

I got my backpack down. She stood, put her paperback away, put on the straw hat, and shouldered her bag. We went up the aisle. The door opened and the air came in — warm, wet, heavy as a sun-hot blanket, salt and green and heat. I squinted stepping out. The light was almost solid.

She stopped beside me and looked at the sea, so bright it was almost clear. She pressed the brim of her hat down, the wind pulling at her skirt, and turned and smiled at me.

"Let's go get the bags."

"Okay."

Two shadows, one tall, one short, moving forward.

We were in Hawaii.

Chapter 2: Misunderstanding

The road narrowed. The tall stuff gave way to low white bungalows with tin roofs, and then the bungalows gave way to palms and broad unfamiliar leaves so dense they broke the afternoon into pieces.

She sat beside me with the window cracked. The wind pulled the loose hair around her ears and she let it, too lazy to lift a hand.

"Hot?" I asked.

"A little. It's good, though." She squinted at the water flashing blue out the window, and there was joy under her voice, barely held in. "Even the air tastes sweet."

I breathed. Damp, green, wood, salt. Not sweet, exactly. Nothing like the stairwell at the dorm. I cracked my window too and the air coming in loosened something in my chest.

The resort entrance was smaller than I'd pictured. A weathered wooden sign, **MOONVIEW LODGE**, and a narrow stone path going in. The car stopped and a guy in a linen shirt was already there with a cart.

"Welcome to Moonview."

Dark skin, bright teeth, an easy local drawl. He loaded the bags and led us in.

The lobby had no front wall at all, just a high wooden roof and slow ceiling fans moving flower-smelling air. The floor was dark wood, smooth, warm through the soles.

The desk clerk had a ponytail and the same linen shirt. She gave us the training-manual smile. "Aloha, welcome to Moonview Lodge. Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes." Mom handed over her license. "It's under Mark Whitaker."

The clerk typed, the screen lighting her face. She looked at it a while, then up at me, then at Mom, and her smile got brighter.

"Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, welcome."

One second of nothing.

I felt my eyebrow go.

"Uh," I said, "I'm not Mr. Whitaker."

She blinked.

"Mark Whitaker's my dad. He couldn't make it. This is my mom. It's just us."

"Oh! I'm so sorry." Professional embarrassment crossed her face. She looked between us again, recalculating. "Well — Mrs. Whitaker, would you like to change the room? Since you booked the honeymoon package, so..."

"No, leave it," Mom said. "It's fine as it is."

"Of course, of course." She typed faster. "Check-in's the same as usual. Your honeymoon villa — sorry — your deluxe honeymoon villa is ready. I'll text the schedule of included activities for two to your phone."

When she said *honeymoon* her tongue tripped on the end of it. I pretended not to hear.

"And the villa's in the quietest corner of the property, backed by bamboo, very private. Nobody will bother you."

"Thank you."

"Have a wonderful stay."

She swallowed *happy honeymoon* and went with *stay.* I'd bet her internal notes said: *relationship unclear, do not ask.*

A second guy ran us out in a cart along a white pebble path with bamboo packed so tight on both sides it made two green walls. The wind moved the leaves and blotted out the rest of the world.

He stopped at a freestanding villa.

"Here we are. The Plumeria Villa."

He carried the bags up, opened the door, handed me the key, and ran through the switches. Then: "Anything you need, dial zero. Best wishes to you both—" a pause while he checked the note, and then the safe choice: "Enjoy your stay."

I nodded.

The door shut and the world went quiet.

Just us, at the threshold.

And this: a honeymoon villa with one bed in it.

I stood in the entry looking at the spare flip-flops and took a slow breath.

The room smelled like dried grass and plumeria. Sliding shoji screens, a low table, a vase of birds of paradise, one lamp. Straight ahead, a wall of glass stood wide open onto a dark wooden deck, and past that, the sea. The wind came in wet and warm and lifted the white gauze curtains high like two wings.

In the middle of the floor, on a low platform, a king mattress. White. Wide enough for a third person to lie between two and not touch either.

On it sat two swans folded from towels, necks twined. Around them, a heart of pink petals.

A heart.

Dad. Do you have any idea what you booked?

"This place is beautiful."

She was already past me, barefoot on the wood, out to the glass. The wind took her skirt and she pushed her hair back and turned her face to the water, lit up gold, the thin white fabric showing the soft shape of her waist.

I looked down at the flip-flops.

"Yeah. It's pretty."

"Look — is that a beach?"

I looked. Below the deck, not far, a curve of white sand. A small crescent bay walled by reef on both sides, one narrow mouth. The water a pale green you could see straight through.

"Looks like it's only reachable from here." She bent over the railing to look down, pleased. "There are steps. The beach is right down there."

Bent over, the skirt pulled tight and her waist dropped and her hips came up round as a peach, and the sun through the white cloth drew the shape of it, the seam of it, everything.

I looked away fast.

"Yeah. That's the beach. Very tropical. My eyes need some distance right now."

"Mom," I said, voice dry, "should we unpack?"

"Sure."

She straightened and turned. The wind rushed in and blew her skirt up around her legs and the collar of the dress out and back down. Then she bent for her suitcase, and the collar dropped away in a deep curve and there was all of it — white, heavy, held up in a pale bra, swaying with the bend, two dark shadows where the light couldn't get.

My brain went offline. And the thing in my jeans came up hard, faster than a monitor waking.

Hold.

I turned around and gave her the back of my head.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. Checking the view."

I walked out onto the deck. Wind in my face, no help at all below. The denim pulled and ached. I gripped the rail and looked at my feet and cursed myself twelve ways.

That's my mom. That's my mom. That's my mom.

Some part of me wasn't buying it. It stood up like a flagpole, hot, and I could feel the wet already soaking a spot in my boxers. I held the rail and breathed.

"Is it really sunny out?" She was right behind me.

I froze. She stood in the doorway, leaning half out, and from that angle I got her collarbone and the front of her. She looked at the water. "You're standing in the sun. You'll burn."

"It's fine."

"Come in and get your hat."

"Mm."

I waited a few seconds until things had calmed down, then turned, head down, and went inside.

It was cooler in. She'd already opened her case and was squatting by it, laying clothes out. Squatting pulled her hem up over her knees and showed the round of her calf, white as milk, a thin blue vein inside it.

I squatted at my own case and unzipped.

We unpacked without talking. Hangers clicked. Zippers.

"Hey," she said first.

"Mm?"

"I should apologize for this." Her back was to me, voice half under the rustle of clothes. "When your dad booked it, I didn't look close. The reviews were good, the view was good. I never thought he'd book this kind of room."

"It's fine. It's a bed. It's big."

"It's big." She repeated it. "One on each side, plenty of space. It's practically two beds."

"Yeah. Practically."

We propped each other up with total confidence. But the awkward sat between us like a skin. I stared at the blue shirt in my case and understood this trip was going to be a stress test.

"I'm going to wash my face."

She stood, gathered her things, and went to the bathroom. She walked past the swans, glanced down at them, said nothing, and shut the door.

Water ran.

I squatted there looking at the petal heart. Then I got up, went to the bed, picked up a swan, and unfolded it.

Just a towel.

I stared at it and folded it back. It came out a crumpled square. I put it down and laughed at myself.

The water ran.

I went to the glass and pushed it wider. Wind came under my shirt, cool. The sun was sliding down and laying a silver road on the water.

The waves were long and steady, like the earth breathing.

"Done."

I took a breath before I turned.

She stood in the bathroom doorway, face still steamed, damp strands on her forehead, skin flushed pink from the heat. She'd changed into a light gray linen maxi dress and a small pearl necklace, and she was smiling. "What's for dinner? The guy said something about a set menu for two."

"Said it's on the beach. Grilled stuff."

"Let's walk down when the sun's lower."

"Okay."

She turned and pulled the sheer curtain back. Sun flooded the floor.

I stood by the door and felt the knot in my chest ease. The other stuff was still there, but with the sea and the wind and her, it got set aside.

I texted Dad: *Landed, settled in, all good.*

The reply came instantly. *Great. Have fun.*

I put the phone away and looked out. She was at the rail, looking down at the empty beach, head tipped, sun soft on her cheek.

I looked away, picked up a bottle of water, and drank. Cold down the throat, into the stomach, pushing the heat down.

The sea was far, the sky was high, the wind was soft.

I swallowed the water, went in, and took my old beach shoes out of the case and set them by the door.

Might need them tomorrow.

With the unpacking done, the room had the feel of lemonade left out too long.

I squatted by my case, pushing the last shirt into the closet, and cut my eyes at the swans. Still twined. The petals still there. As long as nobody touched them, they'd keep lying there with their necks wrapped like they had a right to.

Honeymoon villa, king bed, rose petals, towel swans — none of it left a corner to hide in. I'd pulled all-nighters on projects that took less out of me. Standing in this room felt like the product manager had aimed it straight at my scalp.

I shut the closet and stood. The sun came in honey-colored. She was at the window, holding the curtain back, hair moving, and when she turned her eyes caught the light.

"This place is really beautiful."

"Mm."

"Look over there — do you think there'll be a sunset?"

"Probably."

"Then we can look at the moon after dinner."

"Mm."

"You're a regular silent gourd, you know that?"

"...I'm used to it."

She smiled and didn't push. I picked up my phone and typed: *In the villa, all fine. They've set up a beach barbecue for dinner, heading down now.*

The reply was instant. *Okay. If you need money tell me. Don't let your mom hold back.*

I looked at *don't let your mom hold back* for two seconds and locked it. He means well and it comes out like a memo. She turned from the window. "Did you text him?"

"Yep. He says have fun."

She pressed her lips together, thinking, then hummed and went to her case. "I'm changing. I smell like an airport."

"What does an airport smell like?"

"Cold air and airplane disinfectant. Don't tell me you can't smell it."

"Your nose is a weapon."

She ignored me, dug out a dress, shook it out, looked at it, and then looked back at me. There was a hesitation in it. I went back to my bag. The bathroom door shut, water ran, fabric rustled.

I sat on the edge of the platform with my key and phone. The water stopped and the door didn't open. A few seconds later, a small scuffle against the bottom of the door, like a stuck zipper.

"Um." Her voice came through the crack, low, embarrassed. "I can't reach the zipper. Could you...?"

I blanked.

"Come out, I'll get it."

The door opened a hand's width and she leaned out sideways, one shoulder first, her back to me. The dark blue dress covered most of her, but the zip stood open from her nape to her waist, a strip of white skin all the way down. She turned her head, ears red from the steam, and gathered her hair in front over her shoulder.

"I can't get it even reaching."

"Okay."

I stood behind her. Shower gel in the air, white soap, sweet. I pinched the pull. My knuckles brushed the warm skin at the top of her spine and my mind went white for a second.

"...Go ahead."

"Okay."

I pulled it down from her waist to her neck and tried to keep my hand steady. Halfway, my fingers found a raised band under the fabric — a bra strap — and stopped on their own before I moved off it and took the cloth edge instead. When it closed, a shallow groove ran down her back and shadowed under the fabric. She shook her hair down, glanced back, and smiled. "Thanks."

"Mm."

Dry voice. She didn't notice, turning for the mirror. I stood and watched her. The blue skirt moved with her step; light cloth, cut to her waist exactly. She turned in front of the glass checking the drape, adjusted a strap, and the side of her drew a full round line and a small white wedge at the neckline.

I turned around, grabbed a glass, and drank cold water in a gulp.

She wears things like this at home, but they're loose cotton, long and pale — *mom* clothes. This dark blue one wasn't showing much and still managed to put *mom* and *woman* in the same sentence.

Worse: when I looked down, my boxers had a damp spot and my jeans had a shape. I bent to retie a shoe in the shadow of my own bent body.

First afternoon in the honeymoon villa and I'd gotten hard watching her back while she zipped a dress. That landed on the back of my head like a two-by-four.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready. Let's go."

I turned. She was at the door already, bent into a yellow flat. Bent, the neckline fell forward. I looked away, squatted, and fought with my other lace three times before it went tight.

The path to the dining area went through bamboo. The sun was down behind the trees and the light came through the leaves in gold coins. Wind moved them. She walked half a step ahead, her skirt brushing the plants with a papery sound. She stopped now and then to look at a flower.

"What's this one?"

"No idea."

"You're a computer science major and you don't know a plant?"

"Why would a CS major know plants?"

"What if you build a plant ID app someday?"

"That's automation," I said.

She laughed and shook her head and kept walking. The air smelled like sun-baked green and salt. A few steps and the view opened and the beach lay out with a sheet of gold on the water.

The restaurant was right on the sand. White canvas tents, wooden tables under them. The table nearest the water stood alone on the beach with a checkered cloth, one white flower in a short bottle, and a silver bucket with a bottle of sparkling wine in it, wire on the neck.

A candle lamp burned on the table, flame bending in the wind, a small circle of yellow on the cloth.

I stopped and looked at the bucket.

"Honeymoon package," I said. "Even the wine."

"Looks like it." Her voice was resigned, with a laugh caught at the end. "Should we open it?"

"Do you want some?"

"A little. Will you drink with me?"

"Sure."

A server came, white linen blouse, two menus. Well-trained smile, eyes going between us and settling on me. "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, good evening. This is your honeymoon dinner. May I walk you through it?"

A millisecond of freeze.

I sighed internally for the hundredth time. "Uh, actually—"

"Please do, thank you."

Mom said it beside me, steady, easy, like she'd heard it a thousand times. She didn't even look at me. The server, oblivious, opened the menu and listed the courses: grilled shrimp, scallops, garlic oysters, a seafood platter, a vegetable dish, two soups, fruit. Mom tipped her head and listened, candlelight lying on her lashes.

"That one, please."

"Shall I open your wine?"

"We'll do it, thank you."

The server nodded and went, footsteps eaten by sand. I sat down and looked across at her. She was pulling the pearl necklace out from under her collar, rolling the beads. She hadn't corrected the girl. Just smiled and nodded like a real honeymooner.

I drank some water. Something in me rose like the tide on the sand and washed around my ankles.

"Why didn't you correct her?" I finally asked.

She looked up, something unreadable in her face. "What's the point? They'll say it at the massage tomorrow. They'll say it on the boat the day after." She paused, softer. "It's a few days. Let them."

I swirled the ice. The cubes rang on the glass.

"Come on. Let's open the wine."

She bent for the bottle and the neck of the dress slid away from her chest — a wide white expanse, the full round of her held up in pale lace, the crease so deep it swallowed the candlelight. Her skin shone under it like a shell washed a thousand times. I could see the thin line the bra edge had pressed into her.

I looked at the sea.

Windy tonight, I thought. *Windy.*

She lifted the bottle, untwisted the wire, pressed the cork into her palm, and turned. It popped and foam ringed the neck. She poured us each a little and pushed one across.

"Cheers."

"Cheers."

The glasses touched and rang. Bubbles climbed and burst in the candlelight. She drank and squinted like a cat in a sunbeam.

"That's good."

"You can tell from one sip?"

"It's sweet and sour and cold and it has bubbles."

"You're drinking soda."

"Soda's good too."

The wind took a strand of hair across her cheek. She tucked it back, showing her neck and the pearl. I drank. The bubbles bit my tongue.

"You remember the boat's at nine tomorrow?" she said.

"Remember."

"I'll set an alarm."

"Okay."

"And the massage's tomorrow afternoon."

"Mm."

"You don't regret saying you'd come with me?"

"No regrets."

She glanced at me. The flame moved in her eyes. She looked down, speared a piece of fruit, and chewed without another word.

The sun went under. Rose in the sky. The waves were long. A server brought grilled seafood, shells red, oysters open and pale under garlic and scallion, still spitting from the coals. A string of lights hung under the canvas, swinging yellow.

I put a shrimp on her plate. She looked up, smiled, and bent to peel it, fingers shining. Then she reached across and set it on my plate.

"Eat. Don't worry about me."

"Mom—"

"You've never once peeled a shrimp without shredding it."

"That's because they're small."

"These aren't small."

She said it with such conviction, holding one finger to her lips to hush me. I looked at the shrimp, clean and whole and shining. I put it in my mouth. Sweet, char, garlic. My throat got tight and I couldn't talk while I chewed.

She peeled one for herself, quick, pried it open in pieces, ate it, and her eyes crinkled. "Delicious."

"Mm. Delicious."

"Let's get another order."

"...Okay."

Good shrimp at this restaurant. I'd remember that.

"Your dad used to look at his phone the whole time we ate," she said, casual. "Bite, check. Bite, check. I'd tell him it was getting cold and he'd say it's fine. After a while I stopped eating with him much."

I stopped with my fork halfway up.

She didn't look at me. She was pushing oyster shells around with her fork, voice still soft. "I'm used to eating alone, honestly. Since you went to school it's just me. I cook once and eat it twice, and half the time I don't bother cooking at all. So tonight, with somebody sitting across from me, eating slow, talking slow — it's nice."

She picked up her glass and drank and let it sit.

The wind moved her hair onto her cheek. This time she didn't brush it away. She just sat and let it blow on her.

"I'll come home more," I said, before I'd cleared it with myself.

She looked up, a smile at the corners of her eyes. "You've got classes. Don't make it a chore. Come when you want."

"Mm."

The server brought more shrimp. This time I got one before she could and peeled it, badly. The shell was hot, juice ran to my wrist, garlic under my nail. I did three. Two shredded. One came out mostly whole and I put it on her plate.

She looked at the crooked thing and laughed. "You really can't peel shrimp."

"If it's edible it counts."

"You shredded yours to bits and got mine whole."

"Just luck."

"Sure. Just luck." She smiled, picked up the whole one, ate it, and said slowly, "Thank you."

The last of the sunset went. Stars came out one at a time, like grit on black velvet. The candle still moved, lighting half her face and leaving the other half in soft dark.

"What did your dad text?" she asked.

"Reminding me to pay."

She smiled. "That's him."

"How so?"

"His concern for people never quite sounds like concern."

I drank the last of the wine. It had gone warm and flat and sweet. I set the glass down and it clicked on the wood.

"Let's go," I said. "We've got an early one."

"Okay."

She stood, took her bag, pushed her chair in with a careful hand. The wind lifted her skirt and she stood in it a second, then turned and smiled.

"Show me the way back? I think I lost it."

"Over there." I pointed at the bamboo.

"Oh." She looked, then back at me, still smiling. "Let's go."

She walked ahead and I followed. The tide went out behind us and the bamboo closed over us again. The path lights threw our shadows long, one tall, one short, close together.

The shadow was warm.

I put my head down and followed the light.

The private beach was real.

Twenty steps off the deck, over a strip of sand with cactus and scrub, and then it opened.

A small crescent bay. The sand so fine it made no sound. The water, with the afternoon sun in it, a green you could see through, like glass laid down on the beach. The reef broke the swell down to ankle-high laps.

I stood at the bottom of the steps with my toes in the hot sand and breathed. Salt, wet green, hot sand.

Flip-flops on the steps behind me.

I turned and nearly choked.

I'd figured she wouldn't change. She'd worn a long-sleeve shirt and a beach cover-up on the boat that morning — *sunscreen matters.* But in the villa she'd hesitated, then dug her suit out of the bottom of the case. "It's a private beach. It'd be a waste."

Dark blue one-piece. High neck, wide straps, high-cut leg — cut so it looked modest enough for a swim class, right up until she was in it. On her it did nothing conservative at all.

It pulled in at the waist. It rode high on the hip and left her backside round and full. It pulled across her chest and made a soft cleavage that moved with each step down. She had a sheer white shirt over it and it hid nothing; the wind pushed it against her and drew her whole shape.

I looked back down at my toes.

"Cold?" She crouched on the steps and put her hand in.

"It's warm."

"Coming."

She took the shirt off, folded it, and set it on the step. Without it her skin in the sun was almost hard to look at. She walked to the water, thighs full, calves shaped, ankles thin, her feet sinking and lifting in the sand, leaving prints. At the ankle she stopped like the cool had startled her, took a small breath, and went on.

The wind moved over her and the suit clung and showed the swell of her and the tuck of her waist. Knee-deep she bent and scooped water onto her calves. Bent, from behind, her waist and hips drew one clean arc, like a stalk bent by wind.

I stood and studied a hermit crab like it was the most important thing in the world.

"Coming down?"

"I'll sun a minute first."

"There are fish. One just went past my foot."

"Yeah, I see fish here too."

"You haven't looked."

"I see them out of the corner of my eye."

She decided I was an idiot and gave up, and walked along the waterline. The wind moved her hair and she gathered it and tied it into a low tail with the band on her wrist. The line of her neck to her shoulder to her ear was white as paper in the light.

I sat on the dry sand and hugged my knees.

This is ordinary. My mom in a swimsuit, walking a beach in front of me. Mother and son on vacation. Nothing to be tense about.

My body was more honest than my brain. The front of my trunks had already started to tent and there was no arguing with it. I bent over and pulled a towel across my lap and pretended to sunbathe.

"Take some for your dad."

She was at the water, calling back. The wind brought it in ragged.

"Even if he can't be here, looking at the pictures counts as seeing it together."

"Okay."

I got up, brushed the sand off, and pulled my phone out. From where I stood the whole sea was behind her. Dark blue, white skin, gold light dancing on the blue. She stood there with the tail of hair moving, like a bright painting.

I raised the phone and found focus.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

She turned her head. And in that second something natural and a little shy came up in her face, and she pushed a strand back behind her ear, and the sun broke in her eyes. I pressed the shutter.

Blue sky, sea, and a woman standing in it, younger looking than she is.

"Done?"

"Got it."

"Let me see."

"Wait, let me take a couple more."

She turned, walked a few steps, bent, and picked up a shell. Held it to the light. Turned and waved it at me. I shot again.

"Why are you taking pictures of me?"

"To show Dad what he missed."

She paused. Then smiled. "Then take a good one."

"You're already beautiful. You don't need me for that."

It came out before I checked it. I don't usually say things like that. Maybe the wind was too warm, the sand too soft. She paused again, didn't answer, and turned back to the water. There was red behind her ear. Sun or otherwise, I couldn't tell.

I looked down at the phone like the shots mattered.

She stayed at the water, kicking it, head down, small kicks, not really playing. The sun was right in front of her and laid gold over her. The blue of the suit shone.

Ordinary, and hard to look away from.

"Did you send them?" she asked, turning.

"Sent."

"What did he say?"

"Said 'good.'"

"Just good?"

"Mm."

She smiled. Something in it wasn't quite a complaint — more like accepting the word *good* and setting it down. She looked at her sandy feet and up again. "Take one of the sunset for him. He's said before he wanted to see one here."

I nodded and raised the phone.

The sun was already at the water. Red-gold came through the clouds and burned a road across the sea. I lifted the phone for the whole thing. Then, before the shutter, I turned it back on her.

She didn't know. She was side-on to me, watching the sun. The wind put hair across her forehead and into her eyes; she squinted and pushed it away. The strap of her suit had slipped and showed half a round shoulder. The low sun made honey of the white of her. Her neck, her collarbone, the slight flare of her nostrils — all of it soft.

The shutter got lost in the waves.

I looked at the screen. Blown out, bad composition, her fingers half over her face, the strap down on her arm. And something about it I couldn't name. I looked at it a while and sent it to Dad with the other.

His reply was shorter.

I put the phone away, went over, and sat beside her. Clean dry sand, two shadows. She glanced at me and sat too. A hand's width apart. We watched the sun go down. Gold, rose, then a thin gray-purple. The sea followed it down and settled into deep indigo.

"Tell me something," she said. "When your dad sees that sunset, will he actually feel bad?"

"He'll probably say he'll go next time he can."

"He says that every time."

It was just a fact the way she said it. The wind pulled at her hair and she gathered it and didn't quite get it, and a few strands drifted down, red in the last light. I watched them.

"It's not his fault. That's what providing looks like," she said, softer. "If you ever have a girlfriend, don't be like him. However busy you are, take her to a sunset at least once."

"I won't be like him."

"Easy to say."

"I mean it."

She turned and looked at me, and whatever she saw held her a second. She looked away. "I know you mean it."

The waves came up over the sand at our feet and pulled back with a soft hiss.

"You should've stood over there for that picture," she said, pointing at the rocks. "Better angle. You'd get the whole sunset."

"Want one of you?"

"I don't need one. I've seen it."

She glanced over. It was going dark and I couldn't read her face, but her mouth was curved. She stood, brushed her legs off, and walked to the rocks. After a few steps she turned back. "Want to stand here together? I'll take one of the two of us."

I meant to say no. But because of the earlier thing, "Sure" came out.

I got up and went. She held the phone up, back to the sea, front camera on us. She wasn't close, but our shoulders were nearly touching. On the screen, a strange face and a strange sea. The wind moved the tail of her hair against my arm.

"Get closer or you won't get the sun."

"Turn it a little that way."

"Come over a little more."

I moved half a step and my shoulder met hers. Warm, even through the suit. She smiled and pressed the shutter. The screen lit with us and the water and the sun.

"Send that to your dad?"

"No," I said. "Keep that one."

She didn't ask why. I pocketed the phone and turned and watched the last of the light go under. A small orange scar on the horizon, fading.

"Come on," she said. "It's getting dark. Dinner."

"Mm."

She went ahead. Her flip-flops and the waves on the steps. At the deck she turned and asked, like it was nothing, "Did you really send all those to your dad?"

"Mm."

"He'll like the sunset one."

"Probably."

She went in and turned on the bathroom light. It came out the door and pulled her shadow long. I stood at the rail until the sea was fully black, then took out my phone and quietly saved the one of her in the sunset with her fingers in her hair.

Locked it. Put it away.

I went in and shut the door.

Chapter 3: Contact

By the time we got back from dinner the moon was up over the water. Silver on the black, edging every ripple. The breeze came through the open slider and filled the curtains and let them drop.

I stood in the entry watching the curtain go out and come down, my head still buzzing.

Dinner. The shrimp. Her smile in the candlelight. On a loop, frame by frame. Worse: her flip-flops next to her sandals, sand still in the straps. The beach, the suit, the photo — all of it stacked on my chest.

"You want the shower first or me?"

She was at the bathroom door with a hand on the frame, looking back. She'd retied her hair after dinner and the loose strands lay soft on her forehead in the lamp light. Still in the blue dress, with a thin shawl over it now, the neck open at that angle.

I looked at the closet. "You go."

"Okay. Going in."

She went in and started to close the door, then stuck her head back out. "Oh — there's a fresh towel on the shelf for you. And the face wash is there, use mine."

"Got it."

She nodded, satisfied, and shut it. The latch didn't catch. She either didn't push hard enough or didn't notice. The door stood ajar two fingers wide, enough for light and sound.

I should have gone and closed it.

I didn't.

I got up and went for my case, which was by the bed, which meant walking past the door. Perfectly reasonable route. I walked it with my eyes front, chanting *didn't look, didn't look,* and squatted at the case.

My ears are better than radar.

The water started, a hard rush, then settled to a hiss. Through the gap came humming, something slow and shapeless, muffled by steam, a feather against my ear.

I squatted there holding a shirt and didn't move.

The water stopped. The curtain rings rattled. A bottle thumped onto a shelf. A towel worked against skin.

And through that gap, at that angle, there was a patch of mirror. I only *happened* to glance.

Steam on the glass and her shape in it. She turned to reach the shelf, and her breasts hung, lifted once by her other hand and let go. Water ran down the inside of her thigh, down the curve of her calf. Her hair was soaked and pulled over one shoulder, and the line of her neck and the shallow groove of her spine were bare.

I looked away like I'd been burned.

My heart was hitting my ribs. I crouched there with the shirt in my fist, and the picture wouldn't go: the weight of her, the water, the pale wet shine of her whole body. *That's my mother.* Something in me wasn't listening. Something in my jeans was up and pressing, and it hurt.

Thank god the door opened. She came out in a towel, hair down and dripping, cheeks pink. She stopped when she saw me still crouched by the case.

"What are you doing down there?"

"Looking for something."

"For what?"

"Uh. Charger."

"Isn't the charger by the bed?"

"...Yeah."

I stood, avoided her eyes, went around the bed, picked up the charger, and held it up. "Found it."

She said "Oh" and let it go. I could feel her looking at the back of me. She went around to the closet and dug for pajamas, and I slid into the bathroom, shut the door, and locked it.

The steam was still up. Her shower gel in the air — sweet almond, a little musk — warm and thick. The mirror was fogged; I wiped a stripe and looked at my red face.

I turned the water on. Hot. It hit my back and didn't cool anything. The wet warm air with her smell in it lay on my skin like a film.

I shut my eyes and tried to blank.

The pictures came clearer with them shut. The gap in the door. Her bent over. Water running down. Her shape in the mirror, her back to me.

I felt it come all the way up, slow and total, iron-hard, the vein standing from the base to the ridge. I looked down at it. Every time, it seemed absurd. The head was dark and swollen, a bead of clear at the slit running down.

I took a breath and willed it down. It jumped and got harder.

I took hold of it.

The first touch sent current up my tailbone and a white flash behind my eyes. My hand went from careful to fast, fingers together, base to head, thumb dragging the ridge, hitting the spot. My knees bent, one hand on the tile, the other speeding up.

Hold.

The valve shut and the rest came anyway. Her in the towel. The towel only to her thighs. Water on her collarbone, sliding down and vanishing into the towel edge. If it had been an inch lower, all of her — round, full, moving with her breath. The dark of her nipples through the fabric of that swimsuit in the sun. I'd pretended to be looking at the water and had actually been measuring.

And lower. The place I never look at and always wonder about. Standing, her thighs together. Apart?

My rhythm went to hell. Semen was coming.

"Mm—" I got it behind my teeth. Water over my head, into the hair, down the shaft.

Right at the edge, a *thump* from outside the door.

I froze mid-stroke.

What was that?

I listened, hand still on myself, not moving. Then her voice, almost a whisper: "Oh... it fell."

Something had dropped. She muttered something else I couldn't catch, then slippers. I let the breath out and bit my lip in frustration. I'd nearly died.

I looked down. Still throbbing, more clear at the tip, wet and sticky. I shut my eyes, bit the back of my other hand, and finished. My back bowed, my lower back lit up, and it came in thick hot ropes across the tile, the first and then the second right

behind it. My balls pulled and squeezed like they were trying to empty me out. It ran down the wall in strings and the smell filled the room.

I leaned on the tile and panted. After a while it was still half up and pulsing. I ran the tap, rinsed the wall and the floor, and soaped three times before the smell was mostly gone.

I came out with my heart going like I'd done something wrong.

She was on the edge of the bed in the pale gray silk nightgown, back to me, head tipped, patting product into her cheeks. The straps were loose on her shoulders. No bra. Her breasts moved under the silk with the small motions of her hands, two clear weights.

She turned and glanced up. "Done?"

"Mm."

"Hair dryer's in the drawer."

"Okay."

I found it and stood behind her and turned it on. It was loud and drowned everything. Two blurred figures in the mirror: one sitting, one standing, one head down, one looking off.

"Aren't you drying yours?" she said over the noise.

Mine was still dripping. I hadn't touched it. I shut the dryer off. "You do yours. Mine's short, it'll dry."

"It's late. You'll get a headache."

She turned, reached out, and beckoned with her fingers. "Come here."

"I can do it—"

"You always say that and then blow it around for ten seconds and quit. Come here."

I stood there holding the dryer like I'd been nailed down. She added, like it needed a reason, "Your hair's too wet. You'll soak the pillow."

"...Oh."

I went and sat on the edge of the bed. She took the dryer out of my hand. Warm air on the back of my head. Her fingers in my hair, tips against my scalp, small currents

running down from each touch. She wasn't close, but her knees were a fist away from my back and the heat of her came through the nightgown.

"Your hair's so black."

"Mm."

"Just like your dad's."

"Mm."

She stopped talking and worked. Warm air, fingers, the musk in my nose, all of it scrambled.

"Okay."

She shut it off and patted my head. "Dry."

Then the room went quiet and there was only the bed.

The mattress sat there with the two swans on it, necks wrapped, smug.

We stood on either side of it and neither of us got in. Finally she said, "Let's put the towels away."

"Okay."

I unfolded the swans. The creases stayed in the terry. I folded them into two squares and set them on the nightstand. Gathered the petals off the sheet and put them in the trash. The honeymoon in the room thinned out, and the wide empty bed somehow got fuller.

"Two quilts, four pillows," she said. "Put one in the middle, one on your side, one on mine, to make a divider."

"Okay."

She brought the pillows. One in the middle, one on hers. It looked like a border wall. I almost laughed. She took a thin blanket out of the closet and put it in the middle. "You use this one. I'll use that one. Separate."

"Mm."

"Then... sleep."

She got in first, careful, like the mattress might break. She took the outer half and pulled the blanket to her chest and turned away. The light made a shallow crease

down her back and waist. I stood at the foot of the bed and watched her a few seconds, then went around and sat down on the window side.

The mattress was soft and her side swayed when I sat. She went still.

"I move around a lot. If I bump you, don't mind."

"I move around too. Bear with me."

She said it into the pillow.

"I'll get the light."

"Okay."

Click. Dark. Moonlight came through the gap in the curtain and laid a thin silver line on the floor. I could see her shape, curled, wrapped up.

I lay flat and stared at the ceiling. Tired body, clear head, like cold water thrown on it. The bathroom was still playing. I could smell it. I turned my head her way. She was a small curl of shadow. Her breathing was too light to hear; I couldn't tell if she was out.

Ten minutes or so, and it evened out and went long. Asleep.

I breathed. My body didn't. The blanket was thin; it wasn't covering anything. Her smell was in the air with the salt and the sun from all day.

I turned to the window and tried the waves. One after another. Then a shift behind me, the mattress moving, a small breeze of air pushing the sound closer. I froze.

Then a soft sound from her. I held still and waited. She seemed to settle again. But her breath was closer now, warm at the back of my neck like a little heater, on my bare arm. She'd turned over. She was facing me.

I turned my head, slowly.

Moonlight through the gap found her face. Asleep, lips parted, lashes a thin shadow on her cheek. The strap of the nightgown had slid and left half a shoulder and a small patch of pale chest. Her breasts rose and fell with her breath and the silk showed the dark of her nipples, drawn up. No bra. Surrendered. The soft full shape of her lay there in the moonlight, within reach.

My breath stuck.

And the thing in my boxers woke up.

I rolled to the window and shut my eyes. *Up early. Boat in the morning. Swimsuit. Anything.* Nothing worked. It hurt, standing off the sheet. The waves went on. Her breath was behind me, small, like an animal curled in a den.

I reached under the blanket and pinched my thigh hard.

Pain. The heat stayed.

I sat up, took the water off the nightstand, and drank deep. The glass tapped down on the wood. I sat on the edge and looked at the silver-gray water until it eased. The ice was gone, only a cool aftertaste.

I lay back down. This time on the very edge, a couple of inches of air between me and the pillow wall.

Moonlight on the floor. Long, gentle waves.

I pulled the blanket over my head and wrapped myself in the dark.

My name is Claire Whitaker. I'm forty-five, married, and I have a twenty-two-year-old son. Right now I'm lying in a room with a sign on the door that says Honeymoon Villa, with that son asleep a pillow away from me. It's probably the least honest situation I've been in.

The waves came in under the slider, one after another, like someone tapping a big drum very gently. It was early. The curtain filled and dropped. I turned my head and through that innocent pillow I could see his face.

On his back, one arm over his forehead, blanket to his chest. His lashes are longer than I remembered. His nose is straight, like his father's. His lips are dry and a little cracked and his brows were drawn, dreaming. Looking at him brought up the old thing, the ache of sitting by his bed when he was small with a fever, watching him finally go under.

Then the ache got interrupted by another thought.

I'm in a honeymoon villa with this man next to me, same bed, same room, seven days. The thought goes around my head like a cat on a keyboard.

I sat up quietly and put my bare feet on the wood. It was cool and woke me up. I checked that he was still out, picked my shirt off the chair, and went into the bathroom on my toes.

*The woman in the mirror had slept-on hair and a line at the corner of each eye. Forty-five. The mirror doesn't flatter. But that was the only honest part — the

collarbones still show, the waist hasn't dropped, the skin of my chest is as white as it was at twenty-five. I turned sideways. In the nightgown: full where it should be, in where it should be.*

I looked at myself a few seconds and sighed.

Claire, isn't that nightgown a little thin?

When I packed I found the pink cotton one. I know I did. But at the last minute I put this gray silk slip in instead, and told myself the nights are hot here. Standing in front of the mirror in it, that wasn't the whole truth and I knew it.

I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and tied my hair up. When I opened the door he was sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes, hair standing up, squinting at me, voice wrecked. "Morning."

"Morning."

I tried to make it normal. He rubbed his eyes again. "What time's breakfast till?"

"I checked. Seven-thirty to ten."

"Got it." He stood, pulled a t-shirt off the chair and over his head, and showed a strip of pale waist. I turned around and dug for sunscreen.

Breakfast was on the terrace at the far end of the courtyard. Sun through the bamboo warmed the cloth, and the sea sat out past the rail. A server brought eggs, a fruit plate, toast, coffee. The girl in the linen shirt set it down with her smile. "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, enjoy."

My hand paused on the cup.

He looked like he might say something. I got there first. "Thank you."

He watched her go and gave me a look. I drank my coffee and ignored it. I've explained once, twice, three times. The staff have made up their minds. A few days. Let them.

I swallowed it with the coffee.

"The food's good here," I said.

"Eggs are eggs."

"Eat more than that."

I didn't explain why I'd stopped correcting people. I hadn't worked it out. But the sun was warm on my neck, the wind moved the cloth, and a clean-looking young man sat across from me peeling a boiled egg for me.

Like a very light dream that shouldn't be happening.

The morning's activity was the sail. Before we left I stood a while and then pulled the dark blue suit out of the case. High neck, wide straps, high-cut leg — conservative enough for a swim class. Then I got it on and looked in the mirror and decided *conservative* wasn't the word.

My chest came up over the fabric almost comically, moving when I moved. The waist pulled in hard and the cut of the leg lifted my hips into two round curves. I tugged the straps up and they snapped back, like the suit was making a point: this is what you've got, you can't hide it.

I put the sheer shirt on over it before I went out.

The beach in daylight is nothing like it at dusk. The sand burned through my soles. The water was glass-clear. He walked ahead in knee-length shorts, no shirt, thin shoulders, straight spine, so fair his whole back threw the light back at me.

"You put sunscreen on?"

"On my face."

"Your back's going to burn."

"It's fine."

I came up behind him, got the bottle out, and squeezed some into my palm. He felt me coming and took a half step forward. Quick, probably not on purpose. I saw it anyway.

"Don't dodge. Turn around."

He stopped and turned.

My palm landed on the skin below his neck. Warm, a little dry from the sun. My mind went blank for a second. It had been so long since I'd touched a young man's body. His back is thin, the bones standing up under the skin like unfinished stone. I spread it around and tried to look like any mother.

"Done."

I pulled my hand back, tossed him the bottle, and walked for the water. The wind pressed the shirt to me. I could feel that he didn't follow right away.

The sail was easier than I expected. The instructor was a brown young guy with a heavy local accent who got us into the shallows and showed us the tiller and the sheets. We were clumsy. Then we found it. He took the port side, I took the starboard, and between us we steered it out of the breakwater.

Water came over the bow in green sheets and burst white. He looked back at me, the wind shoving his hair off his forehead, young and good-looking.

"Mom, move right, you're pinning the rudder."

"I am right."

"Then why's it going left?"

"Maybe it wants to go left."

He shut up and pulled on the sheet. The way his hair moved, I laughed. He laughed too, and it was bright, like a peeled cane, sweet. It reminded me of being a girl who thought there'd be plenty of time to laugh like that.

At noon we went in. We stayed out of the heat. He sat in the deck shade with his phone and I lay on the floor inside with the fan turning. The AC hummed, bamboo shadows flickered on the screens. I dozed. When I woke there was a thin blanket over me.

He must have come in and gone back out. I pulled it to my chin and lay there and listened to the waves.

My phone lit. **Mark**: *Having fun?*

I looked at the two words a long time. He asks like he cares and he isn't here to check. I typed *it's fine, the scenery's beautiful.* Deleted it. Typed *haven't gone back, at the villa this afternoon.* Deleted it. Sent: *Good.*

I locked it, put it down, turned over, and shut my eyes. A while later the door slid open a crack. "Mom? You asleep?"

"No."

"Want to walk down to the beach? Sun's off."

"Okay." I sat up and tidied my hair. "Hang on, I'll change."

I stood in front of the mirror again. The suit from the morning hung on the bathroom rail. I looked at myself in the nightgown, ran my fingers from my collarbone down to my chest, and stopped. Then I took the blue suit down off the rail.

At the water I took the shirt off and laid it on the steps. The sun on my skin was almost hot enough to hurt. A silver fish went between my feet and made me jump.

"I'm going in," I called back.

He sat on the sand with his knees up, looking awkward, and nodded. I went out until the water was at my chest and bent into it.

It was cool and the sun was hot on my back. I could feel him looking. Maybe. Maybe I was making it up. Every inch of my skin was trying to work out where his eyes were.

"Take some for your dad," I called. "He can't come, but looking at them's the same as seeing it with him."

He got up and raised his phone. I had my back to him, facing the water and the low sun. I smoothed my hair and, for no reason at all, at forty-five, my heart was going like report-card day.

"Mom."

I turned. He was a few steps away with the phone up, and the light was in his eyes. I felt flustered and pleased at once. Then the shutter.

"Done?"

"Got it."

"Did you send it?"

"Sent."

I turned back to the water like I was looking at the sea. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, thumbing at his phone, face blank. After a while he said, half to himself, "Sending you one."

My phone buzzed. It was the same photo. Me in the water, gold behind me, skirt of hair across my cheek. It was beautiful. I looked at it a few seconds and thought, stupidly: will he keep it?

I locked the screen and stuffed it away.

Dinner was on the sand again. Candles under the canvas, another bottle. This time I didn't correct the "Mrs. Whitaker." I watched the flame on his face, listened to him talk about school things I didn't follow, and let cold wine go down over the tide in my chest.

When we got back to the villa the moon was high. He yawned. "You want the shower first or me?"

"You go."

I took my things in and shut the door, and the latch didn't catch. I looked at the gap, reached to close it, hesitated, and left it.

Hot water came down and the room filled with steam. I stood under it with my eyes shut and let my hair soak. It was quiet enough to hear my own heart. I looked down at myself — water over the collarbone, the breasts, the dip of the waist, gone between my legs. Forty-five. No marks from the birth. Well — there had been. The recovery was so good you couldn't see them.

I put my hand on my chest. It was going hard against my palm. I thought about his hands. White, knuckled. On the back of his neck he'd flinched like he'd been shocked. If he'd been a little less careful — if I'd pretended not to notice — would his hand have ended up somewhere else?

I pulled my hands away from myself. The water ran. I leaned on the tile, head down, and let it beat on the back of my head.

He's my son.

I said it in my head, and then out loud, clearly.

When I got to the bed he was already down, blanket to his chest, turned to the window with his back to me. I sat on the edge and adjusted my straps. The gray slip is nearly transparent under the lamp. No bra. My breasts are heavy for forty-five, two soft hills, heavier after the bath, moving as I bent.

He didn't look back.

I turned the light off. Dark came in fast. The mattress gave, and I lay down and felt his weight in the springs. The pillow between us was a small dam and the heat of him came over it anyway.

Waves and moonlight.

I don't know how long. He didn't move. Neither did I. But his breathing was uneven, like a thin shell over something restless. I turned slowly to face him. The moonlight edged his profile in silver. His lashes were down. Asleep, or pretending.

I reached out one fingertip and touched the back of his hand where it lay outside the blanket. His fingers were curled. Under my fingertip the warmth spread like ink on paper.

Just that. Then I pulled back, took the blanket to my chin, and shut my eyes. Up early tomorrow. I couldn't have him seeing my eyes puffy.

Chapter 4: Closeness

It was three in the afternoon, the whole resort gone gold and lazy, and I stood under the eaves outside the Plumeria Villa watching a bird tuck its head into its wing on the power line and envying it, because it didn't have a couples massage to get through.

She came out and shut the door in the resort's white waffle-weave robe, sash knotted, collar loose, a wedge of bright skin under her collarbone catching the light. Her hair was still damp on her shoulders and left two dark patches on the robe.

"Let's go." She pushed the sunscreen into the robe pocket and glanced up.

"Mm."

I followed and my eyes dropped to the back of her neck, where a wet strand lay in a little arc. She walked slowly, the flip-flops ticking the stone, the hem swinging, calf showing. Her washed skin shone like something polished.

A massage for two. When I'd agreed it was two beds side by side and somebody else's hands. Now, at the door of it, the risk didn't seem to be the pressure.

The spa sat deep in the bamboo, a low wooden cabin. A sign: **HIBISCUS ROOM**. The last of the hibiscus was out, a few pale blooms moving. The girl at the desk beamed. "Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker. The Hibiscus Room is ready."

She didn't even check. So practiced it hurt. I opened my mouth with *she's my mother* on my tongue and swallowed it. Mom just smiled. "Good afternoon."

It's a few days. Let them.

The girl led us down a white pebble path and opened a door in the hibiscus. Warm oil smell came out — citrus, jasmine. Dark wood floor, a wall of glass, the sea gray-blue out past it with silver breaking on it.

Two tables by the window, thick white towels, a low stand between them with an oil warmer and a bottle of clear oil. The light through the drop on the bottle threw a small halo on the wall.

The therapist was young, round-faced, ponytail, soft voice. She gestured me out of my shirt and down. I undressed trying to look like an adult with a history of spas. Mom was already untying her robe.

Her back to me. The robe fell off her shoulders and left the whole white expanse of her back. Sun through the glass lit it up. Her spine was a shallow groove, the shoulder blades standing like wings folding. The waist curved in, and below, the round edge of her backside under the robe.

I looked once and put my face in the cradle.

"You first, Mom."

"Okay."

She lay down and put her face in the cradle with her hands at her sides. The therapist oiled her back and laid her palms on it and started. On the first stroke Mom let out a long "Mmmm" from somewhere low, soft as honey in the sun. Next to her, my ears rang and my palms went wet.

"Ma'am's neck and shoulders are tight."

"Mm... I look down a lot. Housework."

"Let's loosen it here. It might be sore."

"Mm. Okay."

Another breath, slow out. I watched her shoulder blades open and close. The therapist's hands went from her neck to her back to her waist, the oil shining on her like gold dust.

The tables were an arm apart. I lay with my eyes shut and every hair up. Her breathing, the shift of skin on the sheet, the wet little sound of hands sliding on her.

"Sir, you can put oil on your wife too."

The therapist turned and smiled and held out a small brown bottle. A drop sat in the mouth of it. My first thought: this resort's service is aggressive. My second: where do I put my hands after.

I hesitated. She said, "It's better when couples do it together." She probably meant the massage. *Together* landed in me like a spark in dry grass.

"Come sit here." She patted the edge of the table.

I looked at Mom. She turned her head in the cradle and looked back through the hole. Lying down, her cheek was pushed a little flat, but her eyes were wet and clear as grapes out of water, and there was pink in her cheeks — oil, or not. She didn't say anything. She didn't say no.

I practically fell off my table. Sitting down, my knees nearly hit the edge. I breathed in, poured oil into my palm, warmed it, and put my hands on her back.

Contact, and everything went white.

Hot. She was so hot. Like sand that had baked all day and soft as a bucket of well water. The oil made her slick and my palms slid down her spine before I told them to. Her shoulder blades moved under me like something held carefully.

"Gentle." Muffled, nasal, a couple of notes lower than her voice.

"Oh."

I eased off. Down the outside of her spine, over the ribs, onto her waist. Her waist is narrow; even flat on her stomach there was a curve. My thumb traced it without asking.

She twitched. "It tickles."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Just — don't stay there. Up a little."

Up from the small of the back to the back. The soft, easy tone of that took my language processing with it. I put my hands between her shoulder blades and started again. The therapist watched and said, pleased, "Sir's technique is good."

Sure it is. I'm having a cardiac event.

But her skin was a temptation you couldn't say no to. Smooth, no spare anything, no roughness, only warm softness rising and falling with her breath. As I went from her neck to her waist the muscle either side of her spine let go under my hands. She sighed and settled, like she'd found the spot.

Then a small "mm" out of her nose, short, soft, unguarded. My fingertips went numb. *She probably sounds like that in the shower.*

"Sir, better from the waist." The therapist handed me more oil and nodded lower. That was nearly the edge of the towel. The corner was tucked under her lower back and a faint shadow showed.

I held the bottle with wet palms. Poured more. Put my hands back on her waist. Her body tightened. I went in circles along her waist, under the ribs, down to the edge of her hip. Her breathing changed.

I stopped. "Does it hurt?"

"No..." From inside the cradle, nasal. "That spot's ticklish."

"I'll be gentle."

"Mm."

She put her face back down, but her ears were bright red, two cherries. I eased off her waist and wiped my hands on a tissue. The heat of her stayed in my fingers. I made a fist and opened it.

The therapist brought a basin of hot stones. She looked at my finished oil work and then at Mom's ears and evidently decided *shy newlyweds*, smiled, and asked nothing.

"May I do your legs now, ma'am?"

"Okay." Muffled and unclear.

She lifted the corner of the towel and took one leg out, knee to hip. Her legs are white, close to flawless, pearly under the oil. The therapist's hands went up the calf, around the knee, down the back of the thigh. Mom made a small "mm" and buried her face deeper.

I played dead. My eyes should have been on the water. They kept sliding to that leg. The inside of the thigh was whiter still, almost see-through, and it moved with the therapist's hands. I looked at the ceiling and recited data structures.

She felt it, I think, and drew her legs tighter. The therapist said, "Relax, ma'am, or you'll be sore."

"Mm." Strained.

When the legs were done she was turned on her side for arms and neck, and her face was toward me. I was face-down, but from the corner of my eye I had her: eyes shut, lashes fluttering, lips parted like she was putting up with it or enjoying it. Lying on her side made a deep curve of her chest under the towel, rising and falling. A drop of oil ran down the skin below her collarbone and went under the towel.

I put my face deeper into the hole and pressed my forehead to the wood.

"All right, hot stone next. Can you both turn over?"

Turn over. Face each other.

I rolled slowly, back on the warm table. First thing, I checked myself — a shape in the shorts, not out of hand — and pulled the towel up over my waist before I dared look across.

She turned too. The towel covered her from collarbone to knees and concealed nothing. Her breasts made two high mounds in it, moving with her breath, the weave pulled open over two small points, like stones under water. Unseen, and impossible not to think about.

She caught me looking, tugged the towel up, and turned her face away. Her ears were already red. Same room, a table apart, neither of us talking. The waves came in and filled the gaps.

The therapist came back with the stones and laid one wrapped in cloth on my chest and one on my belly. Heavy heat. No help at all.

Mom shut her eyes, breathing slowing, the towel moving with it.

"It's a little hot," she said quietly.

"Bear with it. It'll feel good."

"Mm."

Silence, the waves, the oil warmer ticking. I shut my eyes. Her breath was right there, soft and long, a feather on my eardrum.

Some unknown time later: "All right. Time's up."

I opened my eyes. She opened hers like she'd been asleep, hazy, cheeks pink. She sat up and the towel slid off her and pooled at her waist, and as she bent to fix her robe the front opened on a deep wedge of her, and she tied the sash like nothing had happened.

I stood and turned my back.

"Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, this way. We've set out tea and fruit."

The rest area was by the hibiscus, a small room with a low table, two cups of rose and chamomile, sliced mango. We sat across from each other in our robes and the steam went up between us.

"That massage," she said, hoarse, "was nice."

"Mm."

"The oil feels hot. My skin's still stinging." She looked at the back of her hand and scratched it.

"Probably for circulation."

"Probably."

Quiet. A seabird outside. I put my cup down and it tapped the wood and she looked up and we caught each other and looked away.

"Your ears are so red," she said.

"It's hot."

"When I pressed it just now..." Her voice dropped and stopped, like a sentence with no end. She didn't finish. But my heart was in my throat, because I knew what she'd seen.

She looked down and her ears went pink again. Then, a few seconds later, "It's nothing. It's probably just hot."

"Yeah. It's hot." I said it back like that would make it go away.

She picked up her tea and drank, the rim hiding the lower half of her face, only her eyes down over it. Her fingers were white on the cup.

She sat a while longer. Then she put it down, let out a soft breath, and said, "That's enough. Let's go back. There's stuff tonight."

"Okay."

She stood. The robe sash had come loose somewhere and when she stood the shoulder dropped and showed half her shoulder, her collarbone, a white patch below. She didn't notice. I reached out and pulled the robe back up.

My fingertips touched her collarbone and she stopped.

So did I.

Hotter than I expected. Warm from the bath and the oil, so smooth I could hardly hold on. I stood with my fingers there and time stretched. The wind came in the window and moved the hibiscus. She looked down at my hand on her collarbone, then slowly drew the robe back over her shoulder and settled it.

"...It's nothing," she said, quietly, like it might disturb something.

She held her collar, took two steps to the door, and turned her head sideways. I couldn't see her face, only pink around the lobe. "Let's go back and change."

She pushed out first. Wind came through the door, flowers and salt, and wrapped me. I stood watching it swing. The heat of her collarbone stayed in my fingers a long time.

Chapter 5: Release

I spent the rest of that afternoon losing an argument with myself.

That massage. Something sat on my fingers that wouldn't wash off — warm, smooth, like silk out of a hot bath. And her ears, red as sunset. I pretended not to see. That's a lie. I'll see them for a while.

Back at the villa she showered first. I sat on the deck with my feet over the edge, watching the bamboo below, and the picture wouldn't leave. I tried: *it's just my mother's back.* Another voice: *does your mother's back do that to you?* ...No comment.

The water ran a long time. When she came out I looked up and nearly swallowed my tongue.

A pale apricot slip dress, two thin straps outside the collarbone, the whole of her shoulders bare. Hem above the knee, chiffon so light the wind pressed it to her and drew her waist, her belly, her thighs. She stood in the doorway with her hair still wet over her shoulders, half her face in the bathroom light.

"Does it fit weird?" She tugged the hem, awkward.

"No."

"Is the color too young?"

"No."

"How would you know, you haven't looked at me."

I had been staring at a palm tree. I turned my head and aimed at her face. "...It's pretty."

She nearly laughed, swallowed it, and turned to her case. "Here. Put this on." She held up the light blue shirt and waved it. I took it; our fingers touched; cool. We both flinched. She smiled first and went to the mirror.

Dinner came to the villa.

A white table on the deck, cloth to the floor, candles, silver, white calla lilies, two glasses of something pink bubbling. The horizon still had orange in it and the sky was going indigo.

The server laid the plates out. He'd seen too many honeymoon packages to count them. "Enjoy your dinner, you two."

Mr. and Mrs. again. I opened my mouth. Mom was watching the candle. Neither of us corrected him. He left, the door slid shut, the wind bent the flame. The whole world shrank to one lamp, one table, two people.

"Cheers?" she said.

"Cheers."

The glasses rang. Cold and sweet and sharp. She drank and squinted like a cat in a window.

"This is better than the wine last night."

"You like sweet things."

"I always have."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't ask."

Her eyes were curved, easier than she'd been in three days. The candle made the pink on her cheekbones soft. She bent to her lobster and the neckline fell away and the candle drew a deep line under her collarbone. I looked at my plate like it owed me money.

"Why aren't you eating?" She had a forkful of lobster halfway up.

"You're enjoying yours."

"Why are you watching me? Eat."

"Mm."

I forked a piece and chewed a long time and tasted nothing. She ate fast, shells piling on her side plate, the tail meat worked out clean. The wind put a strand on her cheek and she pushed it back and her fingers stayed at her ear a second. The candle made the skin of her neck nearly transparent.

Two drinks in and she talked more and softer. A little drunk, probably.

"You know," she said, holding her glass, looking at the sea, voice thin as a stretched thread, "I used to wonder what it'd be like if I hadn't gotten married. Would I be freer? Would anybody actually want to grow old with me?"

I put my fork down.

"Your father and I have been married twenty years and we've taken a handful of trips." She tipped her head and ran a fingertip around the rim of her glass. "He always says he's busy. I know he's busy. But you can't put everything off until he's not."

"Mom."

"It's nothing. I had too much to drink." She looked up and smiled. The candle moved in her eyes like a star in wind. A smile so faint it was practically hiding.

"Your dad texted me this afternoon. Asked how the trip was going," she said, low. "I said it was great. He said 'good.' And that was it."

I thought about the "good" I'd gotten for the photos and something stuck in my chest. She finished her drink and sat a moment, then said, softly, "I don't want anything big. Just somebody who looks up from their plate and asks how my day was. That's all."

She laughed at herself then, like she'd been talking to a kid. Wind came in and bent the flame flat. She shivered.

"Cold?"

"A little."

I went inside, got a thin blanket, and put it around her shoulders. My fingers touched her shoulder and she flinched and didn't pull away. She pulled the blanket to her chin and buried her mouth in it, only her eyes out, lit.

"Thanks."

"Mm."

I sat back down, closer than before. Her knees made shapes under the dress and there was a finger of air between us. Alcohol and flowers and soap off her.

"Have you thought," she said, "that for three days now we've been acting like a married couple?"

My heart jumped. She had her head down, fingers on the edge of the blanket.

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious." Soft. "For three days everyone's treated us like one. At meals, at the spa, the guy calling us Mr. and Mrs. It was weird at first. I guess I got used to it."

"You'd get used to it."

"But however close it is, it isn't real." She looked up and her eyes came onto my face like water in moonlight. "Don't you think?"

I didn't answer.

She looked at me, waited, and smiled. "See. You don't know either."

She turned her face away. The wind took the hair at her ear. I looked at her profile and her trembling lashes and something rose in me like the sea, over the reason, over the lines.

"I'll go look at the sea with you," I said. Hoarser than I expected.

She turned, caught off guard.

"If you want the sunset, I'll go with you tomorrow. If you want to eat, I'll eat with you. Anywhere you want to go, I'll go." I stopped and looked at the black water. "Not because you're my mom. Because I want to."

Nothing. The flame went between us like a nervous heart.

Then, softly, "Have you had too much to drink?"

"Maybe."

"Then I'll pretend you didn't say it."

"I don't take things back."

She put her head down. Her ears went red, red as the ring of candlelight. The wind came again and she held the blanket and said nothing. We sat. Then she leaned her head over.

Her hair touched my neck, cool from the damp. She held herself light, like she was afraid of hurting me. Her breath landed where my shoulder meets my neck, one after another, and something in my chest sank while something else rose.

"Just let me lean a minute, okay?"

"Mm."

I didn't move. She came to me on the breeze, sweet, like warm bread. The flame bent twice and gave up and went out with a small *pock.* Moonlight took the deck, all silver. She was on my shoulder, her profile like porcelain in it, warm, translucent, one touch from breaking.

And something in my shorts went out of control.

It came up slow and hard and pressed the fabric. I arched a little to hide it and it ached, a bow pulled past its limit. The dark and the blanket covered it. But her hand had found my knee, cool fingertips on my bare forearm.

"Your hands are hot," she said. Like a feather on water.

"Mm."

"Do you have a fever?"

"No."

She didn't ask more and she didn't move her hand. That small touch went off all over me, current from my fingertips to my lower back. I looked down. Her hand lay on the back of mine, nails short and bare, resting so lightly it could have been about to fall.

"We're doing the sunrise tomorrow," she said.

"Mm. A little after six."

"Then go to bed early."

"Okay."

Neither of us moved. Her head stayed on my shoulder and her breathing went long and even. Moonlight lay on the water like a road to nowhere. *Even if it isn't real, let's live like a married couple for a few days,* she'd said.

A couple.

I rolled the word and swallowed it. It should be off-limits. It tasted like a green plum in wine, sour and sweet enough to hurt.

After a long while she straightened, slowly, and breathed out. She turned, moonlight in her eyes. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For coming with me." She stopped, softer. "If I'd been alone this would have been hard. With you here, it doesn't..." A pause. "It doesn't seem so bad."

She stood, wrapped in the blanket, and went to the rail with her back to me and looked at the black water. The wind lifted the corner of the apricot dress and showed a white knee. I stood behind her and my eyes fell to the small hollow between her shoulder blades. She turned and we caught each other.

The wind, the moon, the lights far off — all of it went quiet.

Her lips moved. Then she only smiled. "I should sleep."

"Mm."

She turned for the door. Two steps, and the wine or the cool air took her and she paused and swayed. I reached out and caught her elbow.

She froze. So did I. She turned her head and her lashes went in the moonlight like a startled bird. My hand stayed on her elbow and her skin was warm under my fingers, soft, a run of light. She looked down and didn't pull away.

"...Thank you." Barely audible.

"Mm."

I let go. She drew her arm back slowly. Neither of us moved. Our shadows lay on the floor, close enough to overlap. She stood with her head down a moment, then reached out and caught my fingertips where they hung at my side.

Light. Like it might break something. Our fingers laced and our palms met. Her palm was faintly damp and the jade bracelet at her wrist was cool. She looked up. In the moonlight her eyes were two springs, brimming.

"The moon's beautiful tonight," she said.

"Mm."

"Wake me up tomorrow."

"Okay."

She didn't let go. Seconds. Then she released me, fingertips sliding off mine like a thread coming apart an inch at a time, and went in. The door clicked and took the wind and the moon with it. I stood looking at my hand, the warmth still in my palm. Real, and about as solid as a dream.

I made a fist and pressed it to my chest. Through my shirt and ribs my heart was going like it wanted out. The silver road on the water stayed. I stood there until the wind had cooled my fingers, then went in.

I woke up hot.

Hot from the inside, like somebody had slipped a baked potato into the bed and turned it over. The sky outside was only starting to lift, bamboo shadows on the screens, the waves slow and lazy.

Then I worked out the heat source.

Somebody was in my arms.

She'd rolled at some point and come into them like a cat looking for warmth. Her forehead under my chin, her nose at the hollow of my throat, her breath warm and damp on my chest. One leg out from under the blanket and lying between mine, knee bent, using me for a cushion. My hand was on her bare lower back, palm flat on skin, smooth as silk in warm water.

I stared at the ceiling with my eyes wide, the same four words going around like a broken radio: *it's over, it's over.*

Oh no. Oh no.

Last night she'd leaned on my shoulder and asked if we hadn't been acting like a married couple. I hadn't answered. I'd thought my silence was an answer.

My body had a much clearer one.

Morning hard-on. Aching, burning, a bowstring pulled all night, pressed flat against her lower belly. Through her panties and that barely-there silk, my cock was mashed with total confidence into the soft give below her navel. Her skin warm and giving.

Worse: the wet at the tip had soaked through and gone cool and sticky against her.

What am I doing? And the honest answer: *you've been at it all night.*

After we came in she'd lain down first. I'd stayed out on the deck until the wind got cold, and then felt my way in and set myself down with a pillow between us. Then nothing.

She probably turned. Or got cold and found something warm half asleep. Or I didn't argue, half asleep. The pillow went to the foot of the bed, the blankets went everywhere, her hand found my waist, mine found her back, and we slept like that all night, holding each other for heat, like people who do it all the time.

I could even remember the weight of her coming onto me. Light, careful, a little unsure. And I was too tired to move her and too much of a coward to want to.

Now it was morning and the problem was up.

I was trying to work out how the pillow got to the foot of the bed when she moved.

"Mmm."

A small noise in her throat, like a sleeping animal. She pushed her nose from my collarbone to the hollow of my shoulder, and my cock dragged across her belly.

Fireworks. Everything white.

She didn't come up at once. She was still under, warm and sun-smelling, and there was something hard and in the way. She licked her lips and twisted her hips to get off it.

That twist.

"Hss—" I got it through my teeth. Not loud. In that room it was a snapped string.

She was awake.

Her body stopped dead. Her hand on my waist tightened, nails in my t-shirt through the fabric — not pain, pins. Her breathing stopped for two seconds, then came back fast and shallow, with a shake on each one.

I held still.

She didn't move.

A long, long pause — seconds, but it went on — and then she lifted her head.

Our eyes met.

Her face was still sleep-flushed, eyes wet, nose pink, lips apart like she wanted a word and couldn't find it. Her hair was a mess on both cheeks with strands stuck to the corner of her mouth. Younger, and much more undone.

"... " Nothing came.

I opened my mouth. Nothing came either.

Two statues in a honeymoon villa with the waves and the bamboo.

"...You're awake?" she managed, hoarse.

"Mm."

"You — you know you..." Her eyes dropped and came back. "...you've got..."

"I know."

"Then why don't you move it?"

"Mom, you're the one on top of me."

She looked down and found her legs between mine and her knee against my hip, and the uncooperative thing being pushed harder by it. Her ears went from pink to deep red, two clouds at sunset.

"You — put your legs down first."

"Can't you move?"

"You're pinning me, I can't."

She tried to get her leg off and had to push her knee into me for leverage, and her belly ground along my cock again. Through the thin layers I could feel the head make a dent in her, like a key lined up with the wrong lock.

"Mm—" out of her throat.

"Don't move, don't move—"

"Then let go of me!" Erratic, nasal, half embarrassed, half annoyed. "Your hands are still on my waist!"

"...Oh."

My left hand was still flat on her back, and it was hot as a stove. I let go like I'd been burned, which shifted me sideways, which tipped my cock sideways, which dragged it over her belly.

She curled up like a shrimp with her face in the pillow. "...Make it stop poking me."

"It doesn't listen to me."

"Aren't you its owner?"

"It used to listen. Now it's in charge."

She lifted half her face off the pillow. Two wet eyes, a look I can't name — shame and irritation in it — and then her eyes went down and snapped away, her ears and neck red.

I followed her look.

In the morning light it stood up under my shorts, the fabric tented. A little of the dark head had gotten out over the waistband of my boxers, wet and shining.

I yanked the blanket over my hips and pulled her leg with it. We both hissed and both shut up and neither of us looked at the other.

The waves came in and counted for us.

"...Why did you grab me last night?" she said, muffled.

"You came at me first."

"I was asleep. Unconscious."

"So was I."

"You put your hand inside somebody's clothes while unconscious?"

"...It wasn't inside."

"Where was it a second ago?"

I shut up.

She realized how that sounded and put her face back in the pillow and made a small strangled noise. Soft, short, and it went down my spine like a feather.

I took a breath and tried reason.

"Mom. Can we put this aside, I need the bathroom—"

"No, wait, let me get down first."

"Just step over me."

"How do I step over it when it's sticking up like that?"

"Look at the ceiling, you'll be fine."

"Are you insane?"

She braced herself and tried to roll across my legs, and her knee slid along the inside of my thigh and took her hem with it, up over a stretch of white inner thigh. My eyes followed before I could stop them.

And I saw it.

Almost translucent, faintly pink from the friction. A little higher, darker, in shadow. I didn't dare look again, but my head was already filling the shadow in.

"Ah—!"

Her weight came down on my calf and she must have felt the state of things, because she panicked and pitched forward. I caught her — one hand on her waist, one flat on her inner thigh.

The air stopped.

She looked at my hand on her thigh. I looked at her leg across my hip. We caught each other and broke apart like two dogs that had burned their tongues.

"Sorry!"

"Don't touch me!"

At the same time. Then silence. She rolled off me, grabbed the blanket, and wrapped herself up to the eyes. I turned to my side with my back to her and pulled my knees up and put a pillow over the tent.

The waves went on, unhurried, like they were laughing.

A long silence. Then, from under the blanket, muffled: "...Go to the bathroom."

"...Sleep a while. I won't look."

"You're looking now."

"My back's to you."

"How do I know when you'll turn around?"

"I promise I won't turn around."

"...Go, then."

I rolled off the foot of the bed stiff as a newborn giraffe, scrabbled for the flip-flops, and nearly went over the luggage. Under the blanket, a tuft of hair was all of her showing, and she was shaking — laughing or furious, no way to tell.

I got to the bathroom and locked it and leaned on the sink. In the mirror: tomato-red face, glassy eyes. I let out a long breath.

Then I stared at myself like a stranger.

The guy in the glass had been slapped twice. Hair up in a tuft, eyes hazy with sleep and something like panic, lips dry, a ghost of plum wine still at the corner. I touched my lips and got one image only: her head on my shoulder, the moon on half her face, *the moon's beautiful tonight,* and her breath on my collarbone, warm and small.

I shook my head and opened the tap full. Cold hit my face and ran into my collar and I shivered.

The heat didn't go. Down below it was softening but still swollen and unsatisfied, a damp spot going cool on my skin. Before I came in here it had been iron, jammed into her belly, and through two thin layers I'd felt the warmth of her. Close enough to smell the wine on my breath. Close enough to count her blinks.

I leaned on the sink and looked at myself. *What are you doing?*

Nobody answered.

Wind came through the slider with the morning damp in it, salt and crushed green. I shut the tap, dried my face, and pushed my hair down with a wet hand.

"You done?" Through the door, soft, hoarse, testing. "What time's breakfast again?"

"Seven-thirty to ten."

"...Don't rush. I'll get dressed."

"Okay."

Slippers on the wood, the closet, hangers. I stood with my hand on the lock and didn't turn it. Her nightgown lay by the toilet, crumpled next to the basket. I looked at it two seconds and looked away and opened the door.

She'd put on a light blue cotton dress and stood with her back to me, bent for something on the nightstand. Morning through the slider made a soft gold of her. The hem had ridden up with the bend and showed white behind her knees. She straightened with her phone and turned and we caught each other. Both of us paused.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning."

"I — I set an alarm. Didn't you hear it?"

"Didn't hear it."

"Then... let's go."

She looked down, shoved the phone in her bag, and went for the door. Passing me she turned her shoulder in a little, like she might touch me, and didn't. There was still pink behind her ear, like a scald that hadn't faded.

I breathed in and followed.

Breakfast on the terrace. White cloth moving, bamboo shadows on it, eggs and fruit and toast. The girl in linen, sweet as ever: "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, enjoy."

Last night I could have ignored it. Today it went in like a needle.

I put my head down and pushed the egg around and studied the plate.

She sat across from me, drank her coffee, didn't look up. There was a thin invisible thing in the air. She felt it too, because when she set the cup down her fingers stayed on the rim.

"Um..." Half an octave low. "Was I... drunk last night?"

"Mm." I bit toast. "Three glasses."

"Did I say anything weird?"

I stopped chewing. She was watching the tablecloth, very casual. She remembered. She had to, or she wouldn't be asking like that.

"No." I swallowed. "You looked at the sea and said the moon was nice."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Her ears went visibly red. She stirred her eggs and after a while said, "Good."

I didn't say more. The thin thing stayed — in the steam, in the bamboo shadow, in the glances we kept taking and dropping.

After breakfast the activity coordinator brought a card. The afternoon's activity: **Pottery for Two**, in the studio on the east side. On the back: *Make a romantic memory with your own hands.* I read it and decided the product manager had aimed it directly at the gap between us.

"Ever done pottery?" She leaned over the card.

"No."

"Me neither. Let's try."

She didn't say no. Neither did I.

The studio was a half-open shed with a bamboo fence and warm bulbs under the roof. The door opened on wet clay and sawdust. The teacher was young, hair up, indigo apron, crinkly eyes. A wheel, and lumps of gray clay beside it.

"Welcome, welcome! Lots of couples today! Come in, sit, I'll show you the basics."

"Uh..." I opened my mouth and swallowed it.

"What?"

"...Nothing."

She glanced at me and sat on the bench at the wheel. The bench was narrow. Two on it were shoulder to shoulder. I sat. Her shoulder came against my arm through the cotton, warm as a sun-warmed stone.

"First, wet your hands, then your hands go around the clay like this." The teacher showed us from the other side. "Not too hard, not too loose. Like holding a baby bird, got it?"

"Got it."

I copied her, wet palms on cool clay. The wheel turned and the clay rounded under my hands like a tamed thing. Then it leaned, like a mop that hadn't woken up.

"No, no, sir, loosen your hand." The teacher leaned over and pressed the back of my hand. "Ma'am, help him — stack your hands with his so it's steady."

"Me?"

"Yes. If you put your hand in his, the two of you together will hold it upright."

She glanced at me, hesitated, and gave up. She put her palm on the back of my hand.

I stopped.

Her hand was cool, still damp, lying on mine like a leaf out of a spring. Her fingers rested between mine with no pressure and pinned me anyway. The wheel turned and the clay softened under both of us. My attention was elsewhere.

She was too close. To follow me she'd leaned in, shoulder to shoulder. Her hair fell and the ends brushed the back of my hand. Shampoo and wet clay in my nose, and something pulling in my chest.

"Yes, like that! Your wife's got a feel for it!" The teacher clapped. "Sir, don't be so tense, loosen up and let her have it."

"Oh."

I let my fingers go soft. Her palm sank down and covered me, no air left between our fingers, cool going warm like ice melting. I didn't look at her but I could feel her breath, light and held, a hand's width from my ear.

The wheel turned and the clay went round. The teacher handed over a scraper. "Okay, now we can pull it up. Who's leading?"

"Him," Mom said.

"Okay, sir, you do it, ma'am, you support from the side. Don't let go of his hands."

She slid her hands off mine and took my wrists instead, one on each side, and leaned in further, her chest almost against my back. Through two layers I could feel the warmth of her, and the weight of her moved with the wheel and touched my shoulder blades. I went stiff as a plank and nearly snapped the clay.

"Sir, relax, it'll collapse."

"...Yeah."

I breathed and looked at the wheel. The clay came up into a short, crooked little bowl. She watched and laughed. "Why does it look like a dumpling?"

"It's a shape. First try."

"Then decorate it. Draw a fish." She let go with one hand and took a bamboo skewer off the shelf and handed it over.

I took it and hovered. Before I could start, her hand came down on mine and steered my wrist in an arc on the clay. "There. A tail."

Her hand over my wrist, fingers on my pulse. Light, and it locked me in place. My heart was going hard enough that she had to feel it. She probably did, because she didn't move, just held my wrist in the middle of that arc.

"Mom," I said, quiet, "you're holding on too tight."

"...Oh."

She let go, color climbing her cheek and her ears. She turned her head and pretended to sort tools, fingers shaking. The teacher, oblivious, kept chirping. "Yes! That's a good tail! Add a wavy line and you're done!"

I put my head down and drew the line. The bowl didn't fall over. The fish came out crooked, like a drunk fish. I looked at it and was satisfied. It wasn't smooth and round like the other couples'. It was clumsy, and it had both our heart rates in it.

Sun through the fence laid coins on the floor. The room got quiet except for the wheel. She held the bowl and turned it, eyes bright.

"Can it be fired?"

"Sure, pick it up tomorrow. It'll be cute."

"Okay, we'll get it tomorrow."

She set it back on the shelf carefully and looked at it once more. There was a girl's happiness in that look that I hadn't seen in years. The weight in my chest came up a little.

The rest of the afternoon she wanted to walk, so we took the path behind the studio. Bamboo rustled overhead and the sun came down through it in gold dust on her shoulders. She walked half a step ahead in the pale blue, the skirt moving, brushing my leg now and then. She never turned around, but her hands were behind her back, fingers lacing and unlacing.

"That bowl," she said.

"Mm?"

"When we pick it up tomorrow, put the date on it."

"Okay."

"Just write... *the plumerias, some year, some month.*"

"Mm."

She tucked her hair back. The sun on her profile and the corner of her mouth up, like a secret she'd let slip. Bamboo shadow moved on her shoulders. Her fingers finally came apart and hung at her sides and swung as she walked.

At the steps of the villa she stopped and turned.

I nearly stumbled.

She stood a step up, half a head taller than me, the sun behind her, gold all over.

"That bowl." A pause while she picked words. "...Let's keep it a secret, okay?"

"Secret from what?"

"Just — don't tell your dad."

Soft. Her ears red again, fingers on her hem, and her eyes on me and not moving. I stood there looking at her in the gold, at the red ears, at her fists in the fabric, and something came up in me like a tide.

"Okay," I said. "I won't tell him."

She smiled, turned, and took the last step. She pushed the door, paused on the sill, looked back, and waved. "Come in. It's hot out."

Her shadow ran long and thin down the floor. I stood at the bottom of the steps a while before I followed.

The slider wasn't all the way shut. The wind puffed the curtain out round as a pufferfish and let it drop. I squatted at the entry straightening my shoes, clay dust still on my fingers.

Damp, cool, like rain in dirt. And under it, her. It had followed me home from the studio like a warm little steamer. What was in the steamer, I didn't want to look.

"Why are you squatting down?"

She came up behind me with a glass of water and leaned a shoulder on the frame. Still in the blue dress. There was a gray-brown smear of clay on the hem she hadn't noticed, like a small stamp pressed into the corner of the afternoon.

"Wondering if the bowl gets more crooked when it's fired."

"Definitely." Firm. "That's why it's called *Little Crooked.*"

She'd named it at the studio, eyes shining like she'd found treasure. I thought she was joking. She said it again like it was serious.

"And if it cracks, is it *Little Crooked the First?*"

"If it cracks, we make *Little Crooked the Second.*"

"You want a next time?"

She came over with the water and sat next to me. The mattress gave and I tipped toward her and straightened. She put the glass down, laced her hands behind her back, and looked at the ceiling.

Sun through the slider laid gold on her collarbone. Leaning back pulled the neckline tight, and with each breath it sank, heavy, soft, barely held by the cotton.

"Why shouldn't there be a next time?" She turned. "Next time we'll do a bowl and a cup and a vase."

"Who gets the vase?"

"I'll put dried flowers in your room."

"I kill cacti. Dried flowers don't stand a chance."

"Then put them next to the cactus so it can keep an eye on them."

I laughed out loud at that. She laughed too, shoulders shaking, hair sliding onto her collarbone in the sun. She stopped, turned her head, eyes curved. "You laugh like an idiot."

"You laughed first."

"You said something funny."

"What you said was funny by itself."

"Then why didn't you say it before?"

"Because we've never stayed in a honeymoon villa before."

The room froze. Even the curtain forgot to move. Her ears went red and the color came down into them like a brush. She picked up the water and drank too fast and coughed twice and said, airy, "What honeymoon villa. This is a family trip."

"Yeah, yeah, a family trip, and we're in a honeymoon villa."

"Would you stop saying that word?"

"Which word?"

"...That one."

"Honeymoon?"

"You're talking back to me now?"

She raised a hand and I leaned back and my shoulder hit the slider frame and the door banged open and wind came in and took her hair. She grabbed it and glared with no threat in it at all.

"You can sleep outside tonight. Let the trade winds keep you company on your honeymoon."

"Mom, the trade winds are a lady, I can't let you down."

She laughed harder, leaning back, shoulders on the mattress, her breasts shaking with it under the dress like two rabbits in a cloth. The hem slid and showed white calf. She came down slowly and turned her head and looked at me with washed-bright eyes.

"Who taught you to talk like that?"

"My teacher. She said keep your heart sweet when you throw and your hands stay steady."

"She was talking about pottery."

"Was she?"

She paused, looked out at the water, and didn't answer. Her mouth was curved and she was holding something back.

"That bowl," she said, softly. "Let's take it home."

"Okay. I already scheduled the pickup."

"Then tell me — after it's fired, will it remember us?"

"Why would a bowl remember us?"

"We were in this room. Our fingerprints are in the clay. They don't fire out."

She looked at her fingertips. Clean, but gray-brown still in the creases. I looked at mine. Clay in the lines of my palm, shining faintly.

"It still has our prints," she said. "Like... a few grains of dirt. A secret we took out on purpose."

Quiet words, and they went into me like a warm drop, and the ring of them wouldn't flatten. I pressed my palm and it spread.

"You always like this?" she said. "Witty?"

"I didn't dare before."

"And now?"

"There's only us."

She looked down and ran a fingertip around the glass rim, like she was going to say something and swallowed it. Wind moved her skirt on my arm, a warm feather, a small buzz left behind. I didn't move. She didn't either.

"Don't you feel," she said, quieter, "that the last few days have been a dream?"

"What kind?"

"That kind where you wake up and the sun's out and there's sea out the window and you turn your head and there's somebody asleep next to you." Then, "I mean, like a vacation dream."

Somebody asleep next to you. I didn't call it.

"This morning—" Lower still. "Was that... what the books call a morning erection?"

I nearly died on the air in my throat.

"...Mom."

"I'm asking. I looked it up. It's normal." Head down, ears burning, finishing it anyway. "Nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm not an outsider."

"You looked it up?"

"I looked up whether it's normal for men to have that in the morning. The answer's yes."

"Then why ask?"

"To see if you knew."

"I know."

"Good."

She picked up her water and drank like nothing had happened, lashes fluttering, stuck there, afraid to move.

"So... do you have a girlfriend?" Casual.

"No."

"Why not? You're not a disaster."

"Busy."

"With what?"

"Taking my mom on her honeymoon."

"...You're doing it again!"

She put the glass down and shoved me. I went over backward onto the mattress and bounced. She came with the momentum, hands on my chest, knees beside my waist, looking down.

The fan turned. Her hair fell and brushed my nose — shampoo, wind, earth. The air stopped. She looked down and I looked up.

Her breasts, through two thin layers, came onto my ribs. Warm and heavy, pressing with each quick breath. I could feel them shift with her heartbeat, straining at the cotton.

"...Sorry." She tried to sit up and the mattress fought her and she fell back down onto me.

I made a noise.

"Ugh, why didn't you catch me!"

"How do I catch you, you're on top of me!"

"Your hands are free!"

"You've got them pinned!"

She got her balance and rolled off and sat there red as a cooked shrimp. I sat up with the weight and warmth of her still on my chest and my heart in my throat.

I looked down. The shorts weren't tight, thank god. It had started up but it hadn't tented. I put a pillow in my lap and pretended to fix my hair.

She fixed her skirt. Two kids in trouble at opposite ends of a mattress, both staring at their knees.

After a while she laughed, hoarse. "...You were like this when you were little. You'd fall and just sit there until I picked you up."

"Then why didn't you pick me up?"

"Can't you get up yourself?"

"You were on top of me. I couldn't."

"You're doing it again!"

"You jumped on me first."

"I pushed you."

"Pushing and jumping are the same physics."

"Don't do physics at me."

She looked up. We caught each other and flinched. Then she turned back, decided something, and looked at me straight. Her eyes were a little red and nothing fell out of them. She sat there and slowly her mouth curved.

"Don't say that kind of thing anymore, okay?"

"Which kind?"

"Like — 'honeymoon,' 'on my honeymoon with my mom.'" Her voice trailed. "If somebody hears, they'll get the wrong idea."

"There's nobody here."

"That doesn't work either."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. Then, from a long way off: "...Just doesn't."

Quiet, like she was afraid of hearing it. I sat with her downcast eyes and the wind in her hair and her fingers twisting her skirt, and felt something sink and something burn. A flame under a rock, curling up out of the crack.

"Got it," I said.

"Mm." She nodded without looking up.

A bird called outside. I took a breath, moved the pillow off my lap, and put it back. She looked up and gave me a small smile like nothing had happened. This one stays open. She thought so. I thought so.

"So what's for dinner?" I said.

She paused, then laughed — a real one, eyes crinkling like water at sunset. She stood, brushed her skirt off, went to the window, and pushed the slider wide. Wind came in and took her hair and her hem. She turned in it and winked. "There's sparkling water in the fridge. Which flavor?"

"Whatever you hand me."

"You're easy." She went to the little fridge and bent to reach in and the hem slid up her calves and showed thigh. She straightened with two bottles in the crook of her arm and waved them. "Lime or peach?"

"Peach."

She tossed it. I caught it; cold in my palm, like her body when she came down on me. She opened hers and drank and squinted. "Good."

I opened mine and drank. Sweet peach, bubbles, down the throat. I looked at her back at the window and thought: this is what a honeymoon tastes like. I drank again and it didn't help.

"It's good," I said.

She turned, held her bottle up, and tapped it against my hand. Then she tipped her head back and drank deep and turned to the water going dark and said nothing, and the wind took the curtain up and let it down, again and again.

The next morning I woke to something warm crawling up my chest.

Sun not up yet, a thin gold band on the floor through the slider. Bamboo shadows on it, moving. Waves, damp and easy.

I tried to turn and something heavy and warm had me down.

I looked and saw the top of her head.

Claire, face in my chest, forehead on my collarbone, breathing shallow and long and warm. On her side, one leg thrown over my hip, knee in my waist. Her nightgown had rolled up to the top of her thigh and left a strip of white. Her hand was on my belly, fingers curled in the skin below my navel through the t-shirt.

I can't explain why I was so clear-headed, but one part of me was way ahead of the rest.

Morning erection.

Hard, jammed into the soft below her navel. Through the silk, her skin, warm and fine, a touch I'd known my whole life and never once like this.

Last night came back in a wave. The deck, the moon on half her face. "The moon's beautiful tonight." Her hand in mine. Then the room. Then nothing.

My whole body was a frozen board and the thing below was out of the oven.

I moved my hips back half an inch to get off her.

She woke.

"Mmm."

A soft sticky noise, like a cat being woken. Her nose rubbed my collarbone. Her eyes came half open, groggy, and she lifted her head and we were looking at each other.

She blinked twice. Looked down at where we met. Looked up.

"You..."

"Morning, Mom."

"You — it's poking me."

Hoarse and soft and sleep-limp. My ears burned. "I have morning— it's normal, you said—"

"I know it's normal."

She didn't move. Her leg stayed over me. Neither did I. We looked at each other in the pale light like two people who'd forgotten how stairs worked.

I thought she'd throw the covers off like yesterday. She didn't. She just looked, eyes going from mine to my nose to my mouth and down to where she was pressed against me.

"Is it like that every day?"

"Mm... I'll go in a minute."

"It looks painful."

"I'm used to it. It goes down."

She looked down, lashes a shadow. Then her fingers moved, down my belly, and stopped at my waistband. Through two layers she touched the edge of it. I nearly came off the bed.

"Mom!"

"Shh."

She looked up. Her face had a softness I'd never seen on it.

"When you were little and something hurt, Mom rubbed it and it stopped." Very soft. "This hurts. Let Mom rub it, okay?"

I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

She didn't wait. She hooked a finger in my shorts and pulled them down.

The light came through the gap and lay on my belly. The boxers stood up in a tent with a dark wet spot at the tip. She looked and her ears went red. She didn't look away. She pulled the boxers down too.

It came out of the fabric like it had been waiting, hard, the head dark, the shaft veined and shining.

She looked at it and her breath caught.

"...How did you get so big?"

I don't think she meant me to hear. She reached out, fingertips trembling, hesitated, and closed her hand around me.

Warm. My lower back lit up. Her fingers didn't meet. It jumped in her grip.

"Mom—"

"Don't talk."

She looked down, lips pressed, focused. She rubbed her thumb up the underside, testing. Current up my spine to the back of my head, white behind my eyes.

"Does that hurt?"

"...No."

"Does it feel good?"

"...Mm."

Permission. Her hand got sure. Her fingers tightened and pulled up from the base, her thumb circling the ridge. Careful. The way she used to sit under the lamp sewing a button on my school uniform.

My head was exploding and empty. She knelt beside me, strap down, one shoulder bare, neckline falling, her breasts nearly out of the top and moving with her hand.

I shut my eyes. Worse. Everything magnified. The lines in her palm, the heat of her thumb, the fine sweat on her finger.

"Is this how you do it?"

"About. Close."

"And here?"

She pressed the spot under the head and rubbed twice. My back arched and my tailbone hit the mattress. She jumped and didn't let go.

"What?"

"That's... that's the spot."

"Which spot?"

"Mom, come on."

She laughed, husky, and something in me pulled taut.

"Can Mom go faster? If you leave it hard all that blood pools and it's worse."

"Mm..."

She gripped harder and set a rhythm. I bit my lip. The wet sounds got out anyway — skin on skin, her fingers on the head.

"Almost?"

"Mm..."

"Then let it out. Mom can catch it."

She cupped her other hand under the head and the string snapped. It came in thick hot pulses into her fingers, onto her wrist, a few drops on the chest of the nightgown. She didn't flinch. She closed her hand and held it while it pulsed down.

"So much..." she breathed.

I lay there heaving. Sun was in the room now, all gold. White on her wrist and her gown. She looked down at herself, ears burning, and got two tissues and did me first, then her, slow and careful.

"Mom." Hoarse.

"Mm?"

"Why did you..."

She didn't let me finish. She looked at me with tired warm eyes, bent, and put a very light kiss on my forehead.

"Get up. I'm washing my hands."

She got off the bed and went to the bathroom. At the door she paused and glanced back. The light came in behind her and made her a silhouette. She smiled and pushed the door.

Water ran.

What happened that morning sat on the table between us like an unfinished dessert we'd each set down carefully.

I came out of the bathroom and she'd dressed. Pale blue cotton, sleeves to the elbow, hair in a low tail. She was at the window with water and the sun on her profile. She didn't turn. "Done?"

"Mm."

"Let's eat."

"Okay."

Neither of us said *hand.* Neither of us said *that.* But twenty minutes earlier that hand had been bringing me off while I came apart on her wrist and her nightgown. We both had the coin in our mouths and neither of us wanted to open up and get burned.

Breakfast at the usual terrace. "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, enjoy." Not even a flicker now. Habit is terrifying.

She sat across and drank her coffee in small sips. Looking down, her lashes put a shadow on her cheek. I chewed toast and let my eyes go past her ear, where the pink hadn't gone.

"We're doing the hot tub this afternoon," she said.

"Yeah. It's on the card. Moonrise soak, private for two."

"Private... is that one of those little pools where two people get in together?"

"Probably."

"Doesn't that mean... both of us in it naked?" Soft, unsure. Then, "The description says you can wear a suit."

I paused mid-chew. "So you want to wear a suit?"

She didn't answer. Her fork stopped. "We'll see when we get there."

We'll see when we get there. A leaf on the water, going round.

The afternoon sun was pale on the bamboo. We followed the stone path, turned past a low wall of gardenia, and came to a small wooden bathhouse with a sign — **MOONRISE SOA**K — and a string of chimes at the corner ringing in the wind.

The attendant handed over two baskets with robes, white towels, waterproof phone pouches. "The tub's filled. Sake and fruit by the water, help yourselves." A pause. "It's very private. Nobody will bother you."

He left. The chimes rang.

I changed and put the phone in the pouch. In the mirror the robe collar was loose and showed collarbone and chest. I'd gotten some color. *Nobody will bother you* went round my head. Of course nobody would. It was built for couples.

I pushed the door onto a half-open bath. Small, dark cypress, bamboo fence, a square of sky. The sun came straight down and lit the steam. A wooden tray floated with orange slices and a small bottle of sake. A folded towel and robe at the edge.

She was already in.

The water was still under the steam. She leaned on the far wall with her back to me, arms out along the rim, shoulders rounded in the mist. Her hair was up and wet at the nape, strands stuck to her ears. The water came to below her shoulder blades and her back showed through it, pink from the heat, like warm jade in amber.

I stood with my hands in the robe and didn't know whether to say *I'm here* or evaporate.

"Come in. It's so good." She said it first.

"I — I've got trunks on."

She turned her head. The steam took half her face; her eyes were two washed grapes. "Trunks? In a hot spring? Who are you dressing for?"

"I thought you'd be embarrassed."

"I'd be embarrassed if you got in," she said, and turned back, lower. "I'd be embarrassed if you stood there watching me soak alone."

The water moved. I'd already dropped the robe on the rack. In black trunks I went down the steps.

Heat came up my ankles, knees, thighs, waist. Like a hand closing all around me. I sat and let it to my shoulders and breathed out long.

So good it made you want to hum.

Ripples went out and broke on her back. I sat an arm away, side by side on the wall. The sky was a blue you couldn't believe, a jet drawing one thin white line. A chime rang inside.

"Good?" she asked.

"Good."

"I knew it."

She slid lower, water to her chin, tipped her head back, and showed her throat pink from the steam. Then she leaned forward, picked up the sake off the tray, poured two little cups, and handed me one.

"Hot spring and sake. This is the life."

We touched cups. She drank hers off and shut her eyes. I held mine. Over the rim my eyes went to her.

The water was at her chest. Each breath moved the surface. Her breasts floated half under, two hills softened by the heat. Water beaded on her collarbone and ran down and disappeared. I thought about that morning. Her hand. Her kneeling over me, looking down at it with panic and curiosity. Later, cleaning up, careful, like she was polishing something she'd made.

It moved in my trunks.

The water was too clear. I slid down until it was at my chest and pressed the shape under. She opened her eyes and looked. "What?"

"Nothing. Water's hot."

"Then sit up and let it cool."

"No, I'm used to it."

She said "Oh" and let it go, but her mouth curved like she'd seen straight through me. I drank. The sake was sweet and warm and burned down. Sun on the water, shivering, making me dizzy.

Then quiet. Then the chimes. She picked her phone up out of the tray, screen lit inside the pouch, glanced at it, and put it down.

"Your dad texted," she said.

"What's he say?"

"Asking what we're doing."

"What are you going to say?"

She didn't answer. After a few seconds she turned and looked at me, eyes bright in the steam, with something in them. "What do you think we should say?"

It sounded like a joke and also not. I looked at her and smiled. "Tell him the truth. We're in the hot tub, having a great time."

"In the hot tub... it's wonderful." She tasted it. Then she picked up the phone, tapped in the pouch, typed, stopped, glanced at me sideways. "'We're in the hot tub, having a great time.' That?"

"Mm."

"Okay. Sending that."

She sent it. The screen lit and went dark. She set it down. After a while she reached for her cup and drank and said, "He replied."

"What'd he say?"

"'Good. A few more days, relax.'" A pause, low. "That's it."

"He's not usually like that."

"Mm." She held the cup and ran a fingertip around it. "I used to complain he never talked. Now I'm used to it." Another sip, then a soft laugh. "But today, sitting here with you, telling him we're having a great time — I'm actually happy."

"Because we don't need him here?"

"Because we're doing fine without him." She turned. Her eyes had a warm film over them that made my chest go soft. "Do you think he'd still say 'good' if he knew we've slept in the same bed every night?"

I opened my mouth and had nothing. She didn't wait. She took an orange slice and bit it and juice ran at the corner of her mouth and she licked it. "This orange is so sweet."

Her cheeks were pink with the heat, her lips wet, a drop of juice at her chin, going down her throat, down the white of her chest, into the water. I could feel it come all the way up under the trunks, hard against the fabric, in the hot water. Nothing to see. Everything to feel.

Think about something else. Code. The assignment. The bowl. Anything.

She tipped her head back, eyes shut, fingers on the rim, pruned at the tips. Pink on her neck and shoulders. Water down the collarbone in a broken string, into the water along the soft line of her.

"You're not going to come closer?" Eyes still shut, light, a little slurred. "The tub's big and you're sitting way over there like you're soaking alone."

"...Didn't want to crowd you."

"You won't crowd me." One eye opened, sideways, lazy. "Come here."

I swallowed and pushed off the wall and moved half a step. Ripples broke the sun into pieces. She shut her eyes and felt them come. Then her shoulder leaned into mine. Warm, smooth, skin on skin.

"There. Now you're not crowding me."

She leaned in light, a leaf on water, and settled. Shampoo and sulfur and sake. Her hair brushed my neck, tickled, and I didn't want to move.

"Mom." Hoarse.

"Mm?"

"...Nothing."

She opened her eyes and looked. Close enough to count the water on her lashes. She looked a while and turned back and put her head on my shoulder. After a while: "Your dad texted again."

"What's he say?"

"He says 'just have fun.'"

She picked the phone up. It wasn't locked; she held it so I could see. His message sat alone in the window with no exclamation point, like a very short letter. She looked at it a few seconds, locked it, put it back in the pouch, and leaned back.

"You see? That's your dad."

"Mm."

"He'll never know we were sitting like this." Softer. "He won't ask. He'll just say have fun."

I didn't answer. Her hand came off the rim and touched the back of mine and went away, a dragonfly. Then she smiled. "Don't overthink it. I just mean — sitting in a hot spring with you is nice."

"I think it's nice too."

"Should we come back tomorrow?"

"Okay."

She smiled, easier, like she'd set something down. She took another orange slice and held it to my mouth. "Open."

"I can get it."

"Open."

I opened and she fed me. Her fingertip brushed my lip. The orange burst cold between my teeth, strange against the heat. She watched me eat it, eyes crinkled, then took one for herself.

"Sweet?"

"Sweet."

"Sweeter than any orange in twenty years?"

"...How'd you know?"

"Because you ate it like a kid with his first candy." She laughed out loud, the sound going round the bamboo and the cypress.

She turned and leaned on the wall, arms out along it, looking up at the square of sky. Sun on her face and the smile on her mouth. I sat next to her with an inch between my knee and her calf and the water moving in it.

The chimes rang. A bird called, short and clear.

"I'm getting dizzy," she said, standing. Water ran off her shoulders and splashed back. Her back to me, sun on it, warm white, from the shoulder blades to the waist and under the water. She went to the edge, took a towel, wrapped it around herself, and turned. "Want to stay in? I'm going to lie down."

"Mm."

She went into the changing room and the bamboo curtain fell.

I sat in the water watching the rings go out and the place she'd sat shining. I looked down. Still hard against the wet black fabric, obvious as a landmark.

I sighed and slid down until the water was at my chin and blew a string of bubbles. *Mom, is this okay?* Into the water. The water made rings and said nothing.

The curtain moved. She was in her robe in the doorway, face flushed, bent to her sash, a strand at her ear. She beckoned. "Get out when you've had enough. There's a candlelight dinner tonight."

"Okay."

I didn't get up until she'd gone round the corner. Then I stood, water running off me, and patted it. "You can calm down now."

It ignored me. I knew it would. I took the towel and went in, wet footprints behind me. The chimes rang overhead like somebody trying not to laugh.

By the end of dinner the moon was over the bamboo.

I leaned on the deck rail with the wind on me, digesting it. When the server brought the last course and said, "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, enjoy your honeymoon," I got out a casual "Thank you." And when he said *honeymoon,* my eyes stayed on her face. By the third day it had stopped being a thorn and turned into a thin warm shell around the both of us.

She came out with two cups of tea in a pale lilac housedress, hair loose, strands on her cheeks. Moonlight made porcelain of her collarbone.

"Tea? Might sober you up."

"Mm."

She handed me one. Her fingers brushed mine. Floral tea, honey. She drank hers and leaned on the rail next to me and looked at the black water.

"The moon's not as full as last night," she said.

"It'll be worse tomorrow."

"Then we should come on a full moon."

"Okay. The fifteenth of August."

She laughed and said nothing. The wind lifted her skirt to her calves. I looked at the petals in my cup going round. The cup emptied. She set hers on the rail. "Getting cold. Come in."

"Mm."

I followed her in. The slider closed and the curtain swung in the gap and cut the wind. One lamp, honey-colored. Moonlight through the curtain in thin silver streaks. She stood by the bed with her back to me, took her earring out, and set it down. Bending, her hair slid and showed the white of her neck, and my heart skipped.

She straightened and turned, eyes bright. "What are you standing there for? Come sit."

I went and sat on my side. The mattress moved and hers moved with it. Neither of us spoke. The bamboo and the slow water. "Did you have a good day?" she asked first.

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Really. The tub, the pottery, dinner. All of it." I stopped. "Especially the tub. You leaning on my shoulder, the chimes, the sky that blue. I was thinking I wished a day like that could just keep going."

She looked down and didn't answer right away. Then, softly, "Your father's said things like that."

"...What did he say?"

"That he'd take me to see the ocean when the busy stretch was over. That when he retired he'd find a little town by the water and we'd walk every day and eat seafood and feel the breeze." Faint. "I believed him. Then nothing."

I was quiet. "I saw what he sent today."

"Yeah. You see? It's always 'have fun.'" A soft laugh. "He won't ask what the water was like, or what we ate, or whether it was too hot. Just 'have fun.'"

My throat moved and nothing came. She sat with her fingers rolling and unrolling her hem. Then, very softly, "I know he doesn't *not* care. He's just spent all these years so far inside his work he's forgotten how to keep anybody. I used to wait for him to look at me and ask about my day. Then I stopped waiting." Her eyes came from the window to my face, too bright. "But these few days, you've been here, and we've eaten together and soaked together and made a bowl and watched the moon. I feel looked after again."

"Mom—"

"Don't talk." She cut in, and her voice shook. "Let me finish." A breath, and her eyes went red. "I know it's wrong. I know you're my son. But these days, sometimes I can't help thinking, what if the person I married had been—"

She didn't finish. She looked burned by her own sentence and put her head down and gripped her hem. The room went quiet. The waves came up to the window and waited.

I reached out and put my hand over her fist. Her fingers were cold and shaking. I worked them open one at a time and laid her palm against mine. She didn't pull away.

"I've thought about it," I said. "I don't regret anything we've done."

She looked up with her eyes full. She looked a long time, then let something go and put her head on my shoulder. Her breath was damp on my neck. Her shoulders shook.

"Your dad texted while we were eating." Muffled, nasal, into my shoulder. "He said the project wraps next week and he can take a few days and he'll bring us back here."

I didn't say anything. She went on. "Tell me why he's like this. Always right when I've given up, he throws out some empty promise."

She looked up, red-eyed, with a wet smile. She reached into my pocket and got her phone and lit it and looked at the message a long time. Then she looked at me and said, softly, "I'll tell him we're having a great time."

She typed and sent. The light gilded her lashes. She put the phone face down and didn't look at it again. Then she reached up and touched my face, fingertips from my cheekbone to the corner of my mouth, light and warm. Her thumb rested on my lower lip and pressed.

"Your lips are dry," she said.

"It's the wind."

She leaned in and pressed her mouth to mine.

Lightning, head to foot. Her lips were warm and soft and tasted of tea and wine. She held it a second and drew back.

"What about the rest?" Her voice shook.

"Seems like there's some left."

She didn't ask again. She came back in harder, lips parting, catching my lower lip and sucking. Something snapped tight in my head. I got an arm around her waist and pulled and she came soft into my lap, knees either side of me, her breasts against my

chest through two thin layers, her heat coming through the cloth, the weight of them moving with her breathing.

I tipped my head back and kissed her deeper. She shook and didn't pull away. She pressed closer and hooked her arms behind my neck, fingers in my hair. Her kiss was clumsy, teeth on my lip, and the wet warm of her breath pulled my sense out of me like a current.

When she finally came off my mouth her forehead was on mine and she was breathing hard. "Am I going crazy?"

"Then I am too."

"What are we doing? You're not even grown up." Then she laughed, wet at the edges. "No. You are. You've been grown up a while."

She looked down, past my chin, at my lap. There was a shape there.

"Did your father ever tell you," low, "that when I was young I was good at looking after people?"

"He didn't say it."

"He probably doesn't remember." Soft. "He's hardly let me look after him in years. He says he doesn't need it. But everybody needs it sometimes."

My heart was going hard. She put her fingertips on my waistband and paused and drew it down. Her fingers were warm and damp. She pulled and it sprang out, hard and burning, bouncing in front of her, the tip already wet and shining in the lamp.

She looked at it, throat moving, ears red. And bent.

Her breath was warm on my belly. She put out her tongue and touched the head, barely. I nearly came off the mattress.

"...It's salty," she said.

Then she took it in her mouth.

I grabbed the sheet. Her mouth was hot and wet, her tongue soft and quick, a warm fish on the shaft. She didn't go deep, still working it out, only lips and tongue on the head, taking and letting go, testing. Her teeth caught once and she fixed the angle and covered it with her lips and sucked. Her tongue pressed the spot under the slit and ground. My back pulled and a low sound came out of me. She took it deeper, fingers at the base, working up and down with each swallow.

Her lashes were down, long and thick, trembling. She pulled off and licked from base to tip and took the head again and sucked. Current up my tailbone to the top of my head. My fists creaked.

"Mom..." Hoarse, and not a voice I knew.

She stopped and looked up. Her lips were wet and full, saliva at the corner, and her eyes had a dreaminess on them that had no business on my mother's face. "Do you like it like this?"

"Mm. I like it so much it's stupid."

"Want Mom to make it worse?"

She went down and took it all. Deeper than before, and her throat made a small "mm" around it and she didn't pull off. She held the base and swallowed and released, careful. Her tongue moved. The wet sounds were loud in the room. Her other hand stroked the inside of my thigh, circling, itch and numb.

"Mm—" around it, indistinct, like her mouth was full and she was putting up with it and didn't want to stop. Deeper. Her throat moved. The head reached somewhere narrow and hot that gripped it. Everything in me pulled tight.

"Mom — Mom, I'm close—"

She looked up with a wet smile and didn't pull off. She sucked hard and ground her tongue on the spot. White light. It came out of me and she shuddered and choked a little and still didn't pull off.

She held it in her mouth and lifted her eyes, lashes wet. Her throat worked and she swallowed. I flopped back, chest heaving, brain a dead machine. She came up and put her chin on my collarbone, cheeks flushed, lips shining, voice wrecked. "See. Still feels good, doesn't it."

"Mm. I'm dying."

I put a hand on her back, her shoulder blades warm and soft, and she settled into me like a bird out of the rain.

She smiled against my chin. "If you ever want anything after this... Mom can help."

I held her, heart still going. The *we had a great time* in her hand, the sparkle in her eye when she sent it. "Mom... did you mean what you told Dad?"

A pause. Then, softly, "'We had a great time,' right?" Her finger traced a circle on my chest. "We. You and me."

The waves went on. She lifted her head and kissed the corner of my mouth and rolled over and put her face in my chest and curled up. I got an arm around her waist and my chin on her head. Her breathing evened out. I kissed her hair.

"I'll keep an eye on you too," I said.

She stirred. "...Mm? What?"

"Nothing. Sleep."

I patted her back the way she used to put me down, one and then another. She settled. Moonlight came through the curtain and laid two shadows that overlapped on the floor. The waves held the whole night.

A minute later I pulled her in and kissed the top of her head.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"Are we going in the tub again tomorrow?"

A muffled laugh in my arms. "Sure. You can do my sunscreen."

"Okay."

Her fingers scratched my chest and slid down over my belly and closed around it again. I hissed and looked down. She didn't look up. "Anyway... I can't sleep."

I rolled and put her under me. Moonlight in the gap of the curtain on her flushed cheeks. She looked up, lashes moving, a wet smile on her mouth. I bent and kissed her, and she didn't say anything else.

The waves came up as high as they went and went back out, and left the sand wet and shining in the moonlight.

Chapter 6: First Love

The morning light came in and my arm itched.

I looked down. She was drawing circles on my forearm with the end of her hair. Lying next to me, chin on the pillow, eyes already open and bright like a cat that had been waiting for me to wake up.

"Morning."

She smiled, voice rough. "Morning. Did you sleep?"

"I dreamed about you."

"You see me all day and you dream about me?"

"It's different. In the dream you stole the blanket, and when I woke up you were still stealing it."

She laughed and kicked me under the covers, not hard. Sun through the curtain on her cheek made the skin look see-through. I looked at her and something strange came up in me.

Like we'd been doing this for years.

"How about we do the next few days like a real couple?" Softer than usual. "Before we go home, forget all the rules. Treat the trip like our honeymoon."

I didn't answer. I reached out, pulled her in, and kissed her. She paused and went soft, hands on my chest, fingertips finding their way inside my collar.

"Okay," I said against her mouth. "Happy honeymoon, Mrs. Whitaker."

She bit her lip. Her ears went red. Her eyes went to crescents.

The days after that were the simplest of my life. Get up, eat, walk the bamboo, wade the private beach. The sand got hot and she drew a crooked heart in the wet sand with her toe and scrubbed it out fast with her foot, like somebody might see.

There was nobody else.

Breakfast on the terrace. "Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, enjoy." I drank my coffee without arguing. She sat across from me, cool as anything, and slid her fried egg onto my plate.

"You're eating more," she said.

"Mm."

"Is the food good here?"

"Doesn't matter if it's good." I put the egg in my mouth. "It tastes better with somebody eating it with you."

She paused and looked down like the line had burned her. After a while, softly, "You're a smooth talker. Who taught you that on this trip?"

"You."

"I didn't teach you that."

"You talk to me all day. Every word's a lesson."

She went quiet and her ears went red. I laughed and finished my coffee. Wind came off the bamboo and moved a strand onto her cheek and she pushed it back and her fingers stayed at her ear a second, at the little pearl like a small moon.

After breakfast she walked down to the private beach. The water was bluer in the day, the sky like washed glass, the wind breaking the surface into silver. She went barefoot in the sand, skirt moving, calves round under it.

"Come do my sunscreen. I can't reach my back."

She got the bottle out of her bag and handed it to me, then turned and swept her hair over one shoulder. The zip of her dress slid down under her fingers, from her nape to her waist, and opened a long white panel of her back.

I unscrewed the cap, put some in my palm, rubbed it warm, and put my hands on her.

Her skin, warm and smooth from the sun, was like a white seashell washed a thousand times by the sea. The second my palm touched her, her shoulder blade twitched, but she didn't pull away. I spread the sunscreen up her spine from the bottom, laying a thin wet film. Her skin shone in the light like it had been dipped in honey.

"Your hands are so hot," she said softly.

"Of course they're hot, I just rubbed them together."

"It's not that hot." She said it and then stopped talking and stood still, letting me finish the last patch I'd missed.

I zipped her dress, my fingertips brushing the back of her neck, and she shrank her neck in.

"All right."

"Mm."

She turned. Her face was flushed from the sun. She glanced up at me, her lips twitching like she wanted to say something, then swallowed it. The wind came up off the water and threw her hair across half her face. She pushed it back fast and couldn't help laughing.

"Why are you always so quiet?"

"You didn't say anything the whole time I was putting sunscreen on you."

"That's because your hands were too hot. I was so burned I forgot how to talk."

She said it, seemed to hear how blunt it came out, paused, and turned and walked for the water. I stood there watching her skirt snap in the wind and her long white legs, and I thought: that's probably what the word *honeymoon* means.

By the time the sun got high we went back in. The bamboo blinds moved in the draft, and the wood floor still held the morning's warmth. She went into the bathroom to rinse her feet, and when she came out she'd changed into a thinner housedress, her hair tied back loose, a few drops of water still on the nape of her neck.

I was by the window with my phone. She came over with two glasses of ice water and set one beside me. She didn't sit. She stood in front of me looking down, like she was studying something she'd been thinking about for a while.

"What?" I asked.

"No." Then, "It's just — the way you sit there, it's like you were born to live in this room."

And then, like she'd mustered something, she knelt down in front of me and put her hand on my knee.

Light. It landed like a flame. My breath stuck in my throat and I looked down at her. Her eyes were bright with a wetness I couldn't name.

"You've been so good to me these past few days. I want to make you comfortable too."

Her hand slid up my knee and her fingertips hooked the waistband. My Adam's apple moved. I didn't stop her. She took that for a yes, lowered her head, got the button, pulled the zipper, dragged my shorts and boxers down a little.

It sprang out, hard, already leaking at the tip, shining in the afternoon light.

She took it in her hand and my back bowed forward on its own.

"Every time I see it, it looks... more alive than before."

"It only does that because it saw you."

"Glib."

She lowered her head and ran her fingertips from the tip down to the base and back, slowly, like she was learning the shape of something. Slow and testing and completely earnest, like she was practicing a lesson. I leaned on the sill, fingers on the wood frame. When her fingertip crossed the spot under the head I let out a low, hoarse sound.

That did it. She bent and took it in her mouth.

Her mouth was hot and wet and her tongue went along the shaft, gentle. She didn't go deep, she was careful, the tip of her tongue pressing the slit, circling the ridge. I reached out and rested a hand on the back of her head without pushing. She looked up at me — tears standing in her lashes, eyes red — and my blood went up like something lit.

She held it a while, then let it out and did something new: she cupped her breasts in both hands and pressed the wet, throbbing length between them. They were soft and warm, like two balls of cotton left out in the sun. She looked down at it moving between the white of her, ears burning, and didn't stop — just rocked slowly up and down and let herself close around me like warm surf.

"Is that... good?" Soft.

"That's too good."

Her lips curved. She went faster. The head brushed her lowered lips and left clear sticky fluid on her breasts. I gripped her shoulders, tingling all the way down my back. When she took the head into her mouth again I couldn't hold it, and I came with a muffled groan. She choked a little and didn't flinch — held it, throat working as she swallowed. The rest ran down her chin and dripped on her collarbone.

She let go, straightened slowly, wiped her lips with a fingertip, and squeezed the still-pulsing thing once more. Then, low: "You came so much..."

I reached down and pulled her up. Before she was even standing I had her on the mattress. She went down and her hair spread over the pale sheet like seaweed gone soft in the sun. I lowered my head and kissed her, and tasted myself mixed with the sweetness still on her tongue.

My hand slid down her waist, along the hem of the dress, between her legs. She pressed her knees together, then let them open, hesitating, or inviting.

Soaked. Of course.

I pressed against her through the thin fabric and she bit her lip and made a short, thin sound through her nose. I pulled the wet panties down her legs. She brought her knees together on reflex; I caught her calves and opened them slowly.

"Don't look there..."

She said it in pieces, but her body slid down the bed like it couldn't help it. I looked. A soft, plump patch of her, glistening. Thick and full, like a flower soaked through, parted slightly, the small hard point showing, red as a burn.

I flicked her waist with a fingertip. She jumped, and I pressed her back down.

"Ah — you mustn't touch there—"

"Then tell me where you want me to touch."

Nothing. She put the back of her hand over her eyes. Ears and neck bright red. I got her legs up on my shoulders, lowered my head, and put my mouth on it.

She shuddered.

I licked her from the bottom up, took both thick lips into my mouth and sucked them gently, then found the hard little point with the tip of my tongue and pressed circles into it. Her breathing came apart. Her hips lifted with every pass, her fingers dug into my hair, pushed, then pulled tighter.

"Mm — ah — when did you learn that?"

I didn't answer. I pushed my tongue into the tight hot little hole and moved it the way something else would. Her wet ran down my chin and left a small dark spot on the sheet. Her voice got louder, carrying a sweetness she couldn't keep in.

"Stop — stop — I can't—"

I didn't stop.

I closed my teeth on the point, gently, tongue fluttering. Her toes straightened, her whole inside clenched hard, and a gush of warm came out and made a mess of my hands and the sheet. She lay still, boneless, chest heaving, a tear still standing in the corner of her eye.

I climbed up and kissed her forehead.

She opened her eyes and looked at me with them wet for a long time, then reached up, hooked my neck, pulled me down, and whispered at my ear: "You... you haven't been inside yet."

Something in my head snapped.

I pressed against that impossibly wet opening, dropped my hips, and slid in slowly.

She shut her eyes, gripped my back, and took a deep breath. She was hot and tight inside, layer after layer of soft wet closing on me from every side, pulling me in whole. I stopped with my forehead in the crook of her neck, breathing ragged, unable to talk.

"Mom... you're so tight inside..."

"You — be gentle..." Her voice shook, but she got her legs around me and crossed her ankles at my waist. "You're so big... slower..."

I pulled back a little and pressed in again. She bit her lip, frowned, then let it go, her fingertips dragging a red line down my back. A few strokes and she was used to it, her hips beginning to move with mine.

"Mm... like that... that's right..."

She stopped hiding. Her hand came off the pillow and found my arm braced beside her, her fingertips tracing it. Every deep stroke pulled a short soft sound out of her throat, like a well-fed cat.

"You... you can go faster, it's fine..." she whispered. "Anyway... this is a honeymoon villa anyway..."

I was annoyed and amused at once. I put my mouth on hers to shut her up and went faster. Her moans got eaten by the kiss and came out as broken, shapeless little sobs. The mattress rocked. The wind chimes by the bed rang hard, tangled up with the surf.

She got tighter and tighter, the soft flesh closing on me again and again. She tensed, her nails going into my skin, and dragged a long thin sob out of her throat. That grip went up the back of my scalp and I couldn't hold it — I drove in as far as I could and came into that hot, tight, throbbing little hole that was biting down on me.

She shook all over with her legs locked around my waist and didn't let go for a long time.

After a while she loosened. Her fingers traced the scratches on my back like she was sketching something unfinished. When I pulled out, cloudy semen ran from her down her thigh and left a thin wet trail on the sheet. She glanced down, flushed again, and reached for a tissue on the nightstand.

"I'll do it." I took it and cleaned her a little at a time. She lay still and took it, flinching when the tissue found somewhere sensitive, not pulling away.

My phone lit up. **Dad**: *Having fun?*

She peeked at the screen, said nothing, reached out and shut it off, and turned the phone face down on the table like those two words didn't exist. Then she turned

back, curled into my arms, and put her face in the crook of my neck. "What's for dinner?" Muffled.

"The housekeeper said there's one more dessert left in the honeymoon package."

"Then we should eat properly."

"Okay, Mrs. Whitaker."

She laughed into my neck. The surf went on outside, unhurried, and the sun came through the gaps in the sheer curtain and drew gold squares on the floor. I pulled her in. She settled on my shoulder like a cat that had finally found its spot.

"Let's sleep a while," she said. "When we wake up, we'll go back to being a real couple."

"Okay."

She closed her eyes and her breathing went long and even. I kissed her forehead and pulled the blanket up over both of us. She brought one hand out from under it and closed it on my fingers, like she was afraid I'd leave. I tightened mine and pulled her closer, holding a whole warm patch of afternoon.

She sighed — not a sad one — as if she'd waited a long time for somewhere she could shut her eyes. Outside, the surf, the bamboo leaves, the moving shadows on the floor. Her last move before sleep was to bury her face deeper into my chest, like a bird finding the nest, and hand herself over entirely.

Dinner came to the deck.

When the server pushed the cart in, the sun had just gone under and left a burning orange along the edge of the sky. She'd changed into a pale lilac chiffon dress, the hem of it stuck to her legs in the wind and drawing her calves. Her hair was up loose, a few strands at her cheek brushing the pearl in her ear. The candle danced in her eyes like two small stars.

Two glasses, as usual. Someone poured, as usual. Tonight it was a sweet white wine, sweeter than the sparkling, easier to drink too much of without noticing.

"Come on, Mrs. Whitaker. Have another."

She lifted her glass, rang it against mine, tipped her head back, and drank it off without a flinch. "When you call me Mrs. Whitaker," she said, setting it down and tracing the rim with a fingertip, "it's like we really are on a honeymoon."

"It was their honeymoon."

"What day is it?"

"Day five."

"Two left." She sighed, then smiled. "Then I'll make the most of tonight."

Her eyes were shining in the candlelight, but her tone — before I could even take her glass, she'd poured herself another. She drank faster than the past few nights, one after another, her cheeks going a lovely flush, the corners of her eyes going wet.

"Slow down."

"It's fine, I've got nothing tomorrow." She took another sip, put it down, leaned on the table edge to stand, and said, "I think... I'm a little dizzy."

I stood and got an arm around her. She leaned into me with her forehead on my shoulder, her warm breath carrying the sweet wine across my neck. Soft, unresisting, bending into me like a willow in wind.

"Let's go inside," she said.

One hand on her waist, the other getting her phone and the key off the table. The deck was a few steps from the door and she took them slowly, like she was walking on soft sand and didn't want to get to the end of it. The slider shut behind me and cut off the wind and the bamboo. One floor lamp on in the room, warm yellow, wrapping the whole bed.

She stood by the bed with her back to me and bent to take her earring out. The pearl tapped onto the nightstand. Then she turned, eyes bright in the low light, like she had something to say or like she didn't need to say anything at all.

"Could you get my zipper?"

I went behind her, pinched the pull, and drew it down. The teeth parted and opened a strip of skin from her nape to her waist, like fruit being peeled. The lilac slid off her shoulders. She turned a little to the side and let the whole dress fall down her body and pile in a pale ring at her feet.

Moonlight came through the gap in the gauze and landed on her.

She stood in thin, skin-colored panties and a light bra still fastened. The light turned her warm gold. Her shoulders and neck were round and soft and moving with her breath. She reached behind her back and unhooked it and the straps slid off her arms.

When it fell, her breasts swayed — two clouds let go — and settled. The nipples, pale brown, drawn up by the wine and the night air, standing like two small fruits.

"Why are you staring again..." Her ears went red, but she didn't turn her face away.

I didn't answer. I got an arm around her waist and pulled her in and kissed her. Her mouth still had the sweet wine in it, warm and wet. She made a soft sound, climbed the back of my neck, went on her toes, and pressed closer.

The kiss went deeper. My hand slid down her waist, past the edge of her panties, and covered her. Already warm, already wet — I could feel the slick of it through the fabric.

She pulled a soft breath and her knees went and she held on to me.

"Mom, you're already wet."

"...You, stop talking."

"Why can't I say it? It's so wet."

She buried her face in my shoulder, red, nails in my shoulder blade through the t-shirt. I laid her down on the mattress. She went on her back, her hair spread dark on the pale sheet. Her breathing was light, her breasts rising and falling, shining softly in the light.

I lowered my head and took a nipple in my mouth and worked the hard bud with the tip of my tongue. Her body arched and a short, thin sound came out of her throat.

"Ah... mm..."

I sucked at it while my hand worked the other one. Soft, giving, my fingertips sinking in like into sun-warmed cotton. Her breathing got heavier, her hips moving under me, slow, like a fish in lukewarm water.

"You..." Her voice shook. "Don't just stay there... there's... down there too..."

"What happened down there?"

"I want you down there too..." Then, like it was too much, she put the back of her hand over her eyes. "It's the wine... the wine's got into me..."

"Perfect. So's mine."

I took the last thin layer off her. It was soaked through. Her lips were parted, wet, pink, shining. Between them the small point showed, swollen, red as a ripe berry.

I lowered my head and licked her from the bottom up. She jerked like she'd been shocked, hips bucking, legs trembling.

"Ah — no — there — mm..."

I ignored her, took the point into my mouth, and flicked it fast. Her moans broke to pieces, sobbing at the edges, sweet and unstoppable. She grabbed my hair, pushed, then pulled me tighter.

"Ah — I'm going to — I can't — I—"

Her toes straightened, her legs spasmed, and warm came out of her and soaked a patch of the sheet. She collapsed, panting, chest heaving, tears standing in her eyes.

I got the t-shirt and shorts off. The thing that had been hard for so long sprang out, the tip dark and wet in the light.

She looked at it with hazy eyes, her voice hoarse and soft: "You... how are you bigger again..."

"Because it drank too much too."

She laughed and then bit her lip. I opened her legs, took myself in hand, pressed against the wet, slippery opening, and pushed slowly forward.

She frowned at first, then let it go. I sank in, feeling the hot wet close on me from all sides, tight, pulling me down. Her fingers gripped the sheet.

"Mm... so deep..."

"You're so hot and tight inside..."

"Stop talking... just move..."

I held her waist and began to work slowly and heavily. Every stroke ground along the sensitive wall and her moans changed pitch, from soft nose-sounds to broken sobs.

"Ah — ah — there, there—"

"Is that the place?"

"Mm — a little harder — right there..."

I went faster. Her voice got louder, loosened by the wine, carrying a wildness she never shows. She got a leg up, toes pointed, and hooked it over my waist, working herself down onto me. Every impact rocked the mattress, and the chimes by the bed rang softly.

"You — slow down — I'm going to—"

"Together."

I bent, took a nipple in my mouth, and put the whole length in deep. She shook hard, her inside clenching, and a gush of hot flooded over the head. I held her waist hard and let go — semen shooting out, pumping into the deepest part of her.

She was shaking all over, legs clamped around my waist, like she wanted to keep all of it.

After a long while her breathing eased. When I pulled out, the cloudy white ran down her thigh and left a stain on the pale sheet. She glanced down, put the back of her hand over her eyes, ears going bright red.

"...it went everywhere..."

"It's because Mrs. Whitaker's so good at catching."

She reached out and hit me, weak, like a complaining cat.

The light was still on. I went to the bathroom, wrung out a hot towel, and dried her carefully. She lay still and took it, flinching when it found somewhere sensitive, not pulling away. When I finished she pushed the towel aside, hooked my neck, and pulled me down.

"I want more," she said, still wine-warm.

"You just said you couldn't."

"That was just now." She looked at me with wet eyes. "The wine's still in me."

Annoyed and amused, and then she pushed me onto my back and got over my waist. Moonlight came through the gauze behind her and turned her silver. She looked down, biting her lip, hands on my chest, and lowered herself.

We both gasped. She sat there a moment and then began to move her hips. Head down, eyes down, lashes throwing small shadows on her cheeks. Her breasts bounced with each movement, two white doves in the moonlight.

"You... lie still, don't move... let me do it this time..."

"Okay. Not moving."

Her movements were clumsy and earnest, like she was learning something she'd never learned. Every lift and drop dragged the hard length back over her most sensitive spot. She found a rhythm, her breathing racing, small sobs coming out of her throat.

I got my hands on her waist and helped her up and down. That seemed to hit her — her body tensed, her inside gripped and spasmed, and a lot of fluid ran down her thighs and wet my belly.

I was at my limit too. I held her waist, pushed her back down onto the bed, and rolled over on top. She hadn't even come down from it when I was back inside her and she cried out, sticky and startled.

"Ah — you, why again—"

"Mrs. Whitaker, this isn't over."

I held her waist and worked again. She lay face down, cheek on the pillow, voice muffled. I changed the angle and went deeper from behind. She grabbed the sheet.

"No more — I really don't want any more — I'm going to break—"

"It won't break. Mrs. Whitaker's got excellent elasticity."

She buried her face in the pillow, red, and let out a string of sticky nose-sounds. I felt the hot wet tighten again and couldn't hold it. I bent, put my face against her sweaty back, and whispered at her ear, "Mom, can I come inside?"

She paused, then gave a very soft "mm."

I kissed her shoulder blades and came deep inside her again. She lay limp, boneless, legs still trembling.

The surf outside seemed to have gone far away. The room went quiet except for our breathing and the occasional thin ring of the chimes. I turned her over and pulled her in. Her eyes were half-closed, softened all the way through by wine and by the rest of it, her face on my chest, her fingers tracing slow circles on my collarbone.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. Late."

"Do we keep going?"

"...You want more?"

"It's not that I want it to end." She buried her face in my chest, muffled. "It's just... I don't want this night to end."

I kissed the top of her head. "Then it doesn't end. We've got nothing tomorrow. We can sleep till noon."

She smiled in the dark, her fingers sliding down my collarbone and landing on the thing that had gone soft and was already stirring again.

"Why is it doing that again..."

"You said you didn't want it to end."

"But you can't be this energetic..."

Then she laughed. It went around the quiet room like a piece of candy left in moonlight, dissolving.

I rolled her under me again. She opened her arms and took my back, like she was letting the tide in. Moonlight fell into her eyes, and there was no resistance left in them, only silver on water.

We did it again.

And then again.

I don't remember how many after that. I remember the sheet ended up in a knot, and the pillow had shallow teeth marks in it from her holding it. She laughed sometimes, cried sometimes, and mostly tipped her head back and let out sweet noises she didn't know she was making.

By the last time I was finished and she couldn't move a finger. She lay on her side and I held her from behind, our legs stacked like two spoons. She turned her head a little and I kissed the corner of her mouth. She smiled, shut her eyes, pulled my hand off her waist and up to her chest, held it in hers, and pressed it slowly against her heart.

She turned over in my arms like a cat that had found a warm stove, put her face in my chest, and smacked her lips in her sleep.

The room still smelled of sweet wine, and sweat, and something closer than either. Moonlight came through the gaps in the gauze and laid thin silver on the floor.

I lay on my back, chest still moving. My back was sore, and it was the good kind — the kind after a long run, finished, dying, satisfied with it. There was a rustle beside me and then something warm and soft pushed into my arms, buried its face in my neck, and took a deep breath.

"You smell bad," she said, sulky.

"Like what?"

"I can't put my finger on it. Anyway... it's a smell that makes you want to sleep."

"That's sweat."

"Sweat's not so bad either."

Her hand came out from under the covers and traced circles on my chest, light as a feather. I looked down at the top of her head — a few strands stuck to her forehead with sweat, half her cheek flushed. She felt me looking. She didn't look up, but her lips curved.

"What are you looking at?"

"Mrs. Whitaker."

"Glib."

"Who was it whispered in my ear, 'harder'?"

She reached up and covered my mouth, ears going red. "You — how do you still remember that?"

"Of course I remember. It's the first time in my life I've been praised like that. I'll remember it the rest of my life."

She glared at me, shame and anger and no real threat in it, let go of my mouth, turned her face away, and muttered, "...That was your fault."

"When did I force you? I only asked, 'Is that good?'"

"You — you — stop talking!"

She pinched my waist, not hard, but in exactly the spot that tickles. I flinched and rolled and she lost her balance and came with me, and we ended up stacked and clumsy on the mattress. She lay on my chest with her face in my neck and only lifted her head after a while, cheeks still flushed, eyes a little wet.

"Do you think Mom... is shameless?" Quieter, less sure.

I reached out and cupped her face, my thumb at the corner of her eye. Her lashes fluttered, her gaze drifted, then came back.

"No," I said. "I think you're the bravest person I've ever met."

She paused. "Brave?"

"Even scared, you still came and stayed in a honeymoon villa with me. Even though you could have pretended everything was fine the next morning, you still looked right at me and asked if I was in pain. All week, everyone's treated us like a married couple. You didn't run and you didn't hide." I stopped. "If it were me, I don't know if I could."

She looked at me and didn't speak. Moonlight in her eyes. After a long while she put her head back down on my chest and her voice came from a long way off: "That's because... because it's you."

Her fingers curled tight on my chest, like she was holding something she was afraid of losing. The room went quiet. Outside, the surf went on, one after another, like somebody counting our pulses.

"You were a terrible sleeper when you were little," she began, and her voice was ordinary and soft again. "You always put your legs on people and kicked the covers off. I'd get up three or four times a night to put them back."

"I still sleep with my legs crossed."

"I know. You were on me the whole time."

"Isn't that because you were pinning me?"

"When did I ever pin you?"

"Just now. You were completely on top of me. I couldn't even turn over."

"Nonsense, I was not on top of you!"

"You were on top of me and you wouldn't move, and you said, 'Let me lie here a little longer.'"

She had nothing. She opened her mouth to argue, remembered, closed it, and buried her face deeper in my chest. Her shoulders were shaking — laughing or furious, no telling.

"Your mouth," she said, muffled, "is getting worse and worse."

"Learned it from Mrs. Whitaker. She never says anything straight and somehow she lands right on the middle of me."

"I don't."

"You do. You say 'no, no,' and then when I stop you come closer."

"That's because... because..."

She stammered and couldn't finish. I looked down at her red ear and something in me went soft as warm water. I tucked the hair off her shoulder. She turned her head a little and showed a small stretch of pale neck, and there was a faint mark there — a bite she'd made herself, in the middle of it. I touched it. Her body twitched like the skin remembered.

"Mom, do you remember what you said when the clinic first called me about donating?"

She looked up. "What did I say?"

"You said, 'Good thing my son is healthy.'" I looked at her. "I was mortified. How does a mother talk to her son about that? But now I think you were telling me it wasn't anything to be ashamed of."

She was quiet, then laughed softly. "...I didn't know what to say. Your dad was on a business trip and nobody at school taught you any of it. I was afraid you'd overthink it and make yourself sick."

"What if I told you I've been overthinking things this week?"

She gave me a look with some reproach in it and no real anger. "Overthinking what?"

"You."

"...Haven't I been right in front of you the whole time?"

"It's different," I said. "When you're cooking, I sit in the living room and listen to you hum and I lose the thread. When you bend over to hang laundry, I think, how is Mom that beautiful. When you fall asleep on the couch with the TV on, I steal a few more looks at you while you're out."

Her breath caught. She didn't speak. Her fingers dug into the skin of my chest.

"Back then I told myself it was a son looking at his mother, that it was normal," I went on. "But this week, in that villa, everyone calling us Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, and you saying 'let's live like a real couple' — I couldn't lie to myself anymore. The way I look at you..."

Still nothing. But her lashes moved against my neck, a butterfly settling, wings going.

"Sorry," I said. "Did I scare you?"

She shook her head, her voice hoarse. "...It wasn't from being scared."

"Then what?"

Long silence. So long I thought she wouldn't. Then, barely: "Relief."

"Relief?"

"Yeah. Because I've been lying to myself too. Telling myself it's a vacation, it's temporary, we go back to normal when we get home." Her fingers traced slow circles. "But just now, when you were holding me, I thought — what if we can't go back? What if I don't want to?"

She laughed at herself. "See. Am I selfish?"

"How is that selfish?"

"Knowing full well it's wrong and still wanting more."

"Then I'm selfish too," I said. "Mom, I want more too."

She looked up. The moonlight broke into small silver bits in her eyes, like a whole sea in there. She looked at me a long time, and then her mouth curved.

"Then... let's stay a little longer," she said. "A little longer here."

She put her face back in my chest and curled up like a kitten at a fire. I couldn't speak, stunned by it. My chest swelled like something was about to spill. The surf outside was gentle and steady, and a cool draft came through the gap in the curtain. I pulled the blanket over our shoulders.

"Mom," I said, looking down.

"Mm?"

"Aren't you going to get cold?"

"You can hold me. It won't hurt."

Then, like she'd remembered something, she looked up with her eyes crinkled. "When you called me Mrs. Whitaker just now, I was actually happy."

"So do I call you that at home too?"

"You dare!" She poked my chest, fierce, laughing. "Your dad would get suspicious if you called me that at home."

"Then when nobody's around."

"...Mm."

Very soft, like she was afraid of being overheard. She put her face back in my chest, and after a while mumbled, "Your thing is pressing on me."

"What?"

"Don't you know?"

I felt around. It was true. It had come up again somewhere in there, pressing proudly into her lower belly like a rude little megaphone announcing itself. She was lying on top of me and could feel the heat and hardness and didn't move off.

"Why again..." she whispered, helpless.

"It probably doesn't want to sleep either."

"You... you make it quiet."

"It doesn't listen to me."

"Why don't you talk to it properly?"

"I can't reason with it."

She snorted through her nose, registering her opinion. But her hand slid down my belly anyway, her fingertips finding the edge of the hot thing. She paused, then took it, gently, testing. I gasped. That small patch of warm skin settled on me like a stamp, light and steady, and my heart burned.

"Didn't we say make it quiet?" I asked.

"It's so energetic, there's nothing to be done about it being quiet." Low and soft. "I'll help you settle it down and then it'll behave."

"Mom, aren't your arms tired?"

"A little sore."

"Then why—"

"But it keeps pressing on me and I can't sleep."

Her fingers started moving. Clumsy, and deeply earnest. She lowered her head and put her cheek on my chest, lashes down, concentrating on something she isn't good at and badly wants to do well. Her palm was warm, warmer than before. A thin layer of roughness on her fingertips dragged over the most sensitive skin and sent current up my spine. I shut my eyes and a sound got out of me that I hadn't planned.

She heard it, paused, held tighter, and slowed down. She pressed her thumb against the top and circled, like she was confirming something.

"When you did it this morning," she said softly, "was it the same as when you do it yourself?"

"Similar... not the same."

"What's different?"

"When I do it myself, nobody's talking in my ear."

She paused, ears going deep red. "Then... would it be better if Mom talked to you now?"

"Yeah. Like this."

She pressed her lips together and said nothing, but her hand got more deliberate. Her eyes were down, her lashes fluttering only when her thumb crossed the tip, like a butterfly she'd kept hidden a long time, opening carefully. I put my hand over the back of hers, her warm fingertips closing on me like a melting candy. She didn't pull away — she curled her fingers and held tighter.

Heat rose from my belly. I was close. She must have felt my heart change; instead of pulling off she got more careful, more focused, like she wanted to keep this night in her palm forever.

"Mom, I—" Hoarse.

She didn't speak. She looked up at me and pressed closer. The last thread went and I came, burning her fingertips, running between her fingers. She took a soft breath and kept holding until it had all died down, then let go slowly. She looked at her palm, ears burning, and only said, "I'm going to wash my hands."

She started to get up and I caught her wrist.

"Wait."

"Mm?"

I got a tissue off the nightstand and cleaned her fingers one at a time. She flinched when it touched her and then held still. I did it slowly, like something ordinary and important. She watched me do it and asked quietly, "Will you... do this for somebody else someday?"

"Like what?"

"Like — this gentle."

I looked up. Moonlight was on her face and lit the faint line at the corner of her eye, a mark left from smiling. I touched it. "Only you."

She didn't answer. But her mouth curved, slow as moonlight landing on water. She curled back into my arms and put her face on my chest and listened to my heart still going. The surf came in and out like it would never stop. I pulled the blanket up over her shoulder.

"Mom," I said again, soft.

"Mm?"

"Do you remember, the day we made the bowl, you said it would keep our fingerprints?"

"Remember."

"I was thinking," I said, and paused, "this week in this room has been like an earthenware bowl. Fired and soaked and crooked and worn, but the fingerprints are already in it."

She was quiet a long time. Long enough that I thought I'd said something wrong. Then she lifted her head, eyes shining, and smiled a little. "Is it done firing?"

"Maybe not," I said. "It's still in the kiln."

"Then how much longer does it burn?"

"I don't know. Maybe while it cooks it turns into a bowl nobody's ever seen." I put my forehead on hers. "But it'll still be our bowl."

She looked at me, lashes moving. Her lips parted like she wanted to say something, and she didn't, and she put her face in my chest instead, like she was hiding something precious and breakable. I tightened my arms around the warm curve of her lower back. The moonlight lay on us like a thin white glaze.

After a long silence she muttered, "Is that really the mouth of somebody who studies computer science?"

"People who study computer science can use rhetoric."

"If your dad heard that he'd think you were possessed."

"And you? Do you think I'm possessed?"

She was quiet, then soft: "I don't want to think that way. I think that's how you should be."

She hooked a foot around my calf, a small animal at a warm stove, refusing to let go. My chest went soft and warm, something melting and dripping into my veins.

"And after we get back?" I asked.

She paused. She'd known it was coming. She lay still a moment, then said, "We'll think about it when we get back." She looked up, gentle. "But right now you're still here with me, and I'm still here with you. Let's just have this night. Okay?"

The *okay* was soft, almost asking. I nodded and pulled her in. She shut her eyes in my arms. Moonlight, surf. Her breathing lengthened and went deep, seeping into me slowly.

"Mom," I said one more time, quiet.

"Hmm..." Half asleep already.

"Actually, I've never told anybody this," I whispered at her ear. "Being your son is the luckiest thing that's ever happened to me."

Her eyes were closed, but her mouth curved.

"Me too," she said, from the edge of sleep.

I kissed the top of her head, her lashes brushing my skin like light rain. The moonlight made her profile soft and blurry, like something seen through mist. She pressed her face closer and one hand closed unconsciously on my shirt, making a small warm crease.

The surf went on, each one softer than the last, hushing the night down. I pulled her in, put the blanket over her shoulder, and shut my eyes, her breath next to my heartbeat, each one a song only the two of us could hear.

Chapter 7: Overheating

I was holding her from behind when the phone rang.

To be exact, she was face down on the mattress and I was behind her on my knees with my hands on her waist, sliding the hard, hot length slowly into her. She had the pillow in her teeth and a short thin whimper was coming out of her nose, muffled, reaching me fine in the quiet room.

"Mom, you're squeezing me so tight..."

Nothing. She buried her face deeper in the pillow. I held her waist, drew back, and pushed in hard.

Just then the phone on the nightstand lit up.

Mark. The name flashed on the screen — the same one she'd saved months ago and never changed, the same one I'd never wanted to change. Two syllables sitting in the light, carrying the whole outside world with them, entirely unaware of what was happening in here.

She turned her head, squinted at the screen, and froze.

"Your dad's calling. Video..."

Her voice was hoarse and low.

"Want me to stop?"

She didn't answer. She pushed herself up, pushed the sweaty hair off her face, and did something I hadn't expected: she reached for the phone, turned over, leaned back against the headboard, faced the screen — and sat down on my lap.

I gasped.

The moment she came down, it went into her at a completely new angle. She sank a little and a half-finished "uh" got out of her throat, and she bit her lip and swallowed it. The screen lit her face. She looked down, put herself together in about a second, and answered.

"Hello?"

Calm. So calm it was eerie. Her other hand rested on my thigh, her fingertips pressing little code into my skin, steadying herself.

The video connected. Dad's face. He'd probably just come out of a meeting — a button open at his collar, a glass wall behind him. He saw her and a rare smile showed up. "How's the weather out there? The forecast said Maui's getting rain the next few days."

"It's fine, the sun's brutal today," she said, easy. "Your son and I just got back from the beach. Look, my hair's still wet." She lifted a hand and pushed the damp ends off her shoulder. It looked completely natural and completely lovely. Only I could see that her other hand was a fist, nails in her own palm.

Her whole weight was on the place we were joined.

I was buried in her, all the way, from underneath. I could feel her inside contracting in little waves, like a small breathing mouth, and with every word she said that soft flesh sucked gently at me. I didn't move. But I was throbbing inside her, on some restless rhythm of its own.

She felt it. Her back went tight for a second, then let go.

"Have you eaten yet?" Dad's voice came through, clipped, work-call direct.

"Not yet. We'll go down later."

"Good. I hear the seafood's good there. Tell the kid to order plenty, don't worry about the money."

"Okay." She smiled a little, like she was trying to laugh and holding something back at the same time. "And you shouldn't work so late. Get some sleep."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, perfunctory. His eyes moved across the frame and landed on me — on my shoulder, at the edge of the lens, draped along her side. He looked mildly surprised and smiled. "Oh, the kid's there too?"

Her body went rigid.

My hand was on her waist. I lowered my head into the frame and smiled at that familiar, distant face. "Dad."

"Good, you got some color?" he said, reaching for fatherly small talk.

"Got a little burned."

"Good. Young guys look better with color." Then back to her. "Why do I get the feeling your mom's been a lot happier these past few days? It's so much better when she's out with you. She's happier with you than she is with me."

Her fingers tightened on the phone. I felt the soft flesh clench, a silent surge.

"Of course," I said, keeping it easy. "Mom and I get along great."

"Yeah, well, a mother and son are connected at the heart." He laughed, and there was something a little lost in it — excluded, and not too bothered. "Guess sending you two out there was the right call. What are you doing tomorrow?"

Her breath caught. At *connected at the heart* her pupils jumped in the screen light, and a gentle smile came onto her face, like a porcelain vase playing the part of *mother.*

"Tomorrow... we're doing the soaking tub tomorrow," she said.

"Good, relax." He nodded, his eyes drifting to something off camera. "All right, it's late, you two get some rest. Don't schedule too much tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Kid. Take care of your mother."

"Don't worry, Dad."

The call ended.

The second the screen went dark she went limp like a string had been cut, falling back into my arms with a low, held breath: "Oh my god... how did you... how did you dare... he was right there..."

I got an arm around her waist and said at her ear, "You looked so beautiful sitting there."

"Don't."

"It's like we really are a couple. Just finished dinner, resting in the room, and you're on my lap being cute." I paused. "You couldn't even tell you had me inside you."

She curled into my arms, face crimson. She put the phone back on the nightstand like it was a live grenade and turned to look at me with something complicated. Then she pinched my thigh, embarrassed and annoyed. "How are you that bold... what if he saw?"

"He couldn't see. The camera only had your face and my shoulder."

"Well..." She bit her lip. "...what if?"

"There's no what-if." I stroked her waist. "Besides, you didn't want to hang up either, did you?"

Her lashes moved like something had hit. She didn't argue. She looked down, was quiet, and then, braced on my thighs, began to move.

"He told us to go to bed early," she said softly, hoarse. "But it's still early... I want to stay up a while. Not like he said."

She started to rock her hips. The thing still buried in her moved with her, grinding slow against the wet, warm mouth of her. Her breathing sped up; the tension from the call had drained out of her completely. She tipped her head back, all that thick hair down her back, her breasts moving with each shift, two soft fruits in the moonlight.

"Mom... it's so hot inside... during the call you were squeezing me on purpose, weren't you?"

Nothing. She bit her lower lip, dropped her waist harder, swallowed the whole hot length, and let out a long thin moan.

"No, I wasn't..."

"You were. I felt it."

"That's... because I was nervous..."

"Still nervous?"

She lowered her head, the loose strands swaying. She didn't answer, but her movements slowed to a deep, slow grind, that wet opening biting at the base of me like it wanted to swallow my body heat.

"It's not nerves anymore," she finally said, almost inaudible. "It's... wanting more."

Moonlight came through the gauze onto the tangled sheet. She sat on my lap with her head back, a long stretch of white from her neck to her chest. She moved with her own rise and fall, and I watched a small shine of wet slide down her inner thigh onto the sheet and leave a dark spot.

I got an arm around her waist and turned her to face me.

Every inch of skin pressed. Her soft breasts against my chest, moving with her breath. Her eyes still had the phone light in them, sparkling, like they held a sliver of undissolved moon.

"Should we call him again tomorrow?" I asked, low.

Her lashes moved. She didn't answer. She put her forehead on my shoulder, muffled: "I don't know... we'll see if he calls."

"If he calls tomorrow, will you answer?"

Not right away. Then, softly, "That depends whether you're nearby."

It went into me like warm water, bones melting. I got my arms around her waist and held her tighter and drove deeper. A soft moan got out of her, broken between us by the moonlight.

She stopped talking. She just sat there quietly on my lap with her face in my neck, her damp breath on my collarbone, a bird building itself a nest.

She sat a long time. If it hadn't been for me still buried in her, I'd have thought she'd just finished a call with her husband and was now being sweet on her son's lap.

"He hung up," she said, hoarse, squeezed out of the back of her throat.

"Mm."

"Just now... while he was still looking, you... you..."

"What about me?"

"You kept jumping inside me." Her voice shook on the last word, and at *jumping* the walls clamped hard, like they wanted to keep it forever. "I almost... almost cried out..."

"You didn't. You held it together."

"That's... because I was biting my tongue..."

"Then you can make noise now."

I got her waist and thrust up. She jerked hard and a short broken cry came out of her before she bit her lip, like she was afraid the neighbors would hear.

"The soundproofing's excellent here," I whispered. "Even my dad couldn't hear."

She looked down at me, eyes red — from holding it in or from what I'd said, no telling. She opened her mouth and didn't say anything. She just held my chest, lifted her waist slowly, and sank back down.

The sound was loud.

The wet length moved in and out of her and drew rings of clear fluid. Moonlight leaked through the gauze onto her moving breasts, two white mounds swaying, two doves startled by the moon.

"Your dad said..." Her voice broke. "That it was the right call, us coming... he said we have a good relationship..."

"Mm."

"If he knew... his wife was sitting on his son's cock... would he still think... we had a good relationship?"

She laughed as she said it. The laugh had tears in it, shining like a shattered sea. She worked her hips faster, taking it deeper, each one like it would break her.

"Mom..."

"Don't call me Mom... you were calling me Mrs. Whitaker." She bit her lip. "During the call, you were inside me and you called me Mom... I almost... almost came right there..." She couldn't finish and buried her face in my neck with a muffled sob. "You bad thing..."

I thrust again and bounced her up. She cried out, then bit my shoulder hard and let a string of sticky nose-sounds out.

"You're squeezing so tight," I whispered. "Are you worked up thinking about that call?"

Nothing. But the rhythm of her contractions answered. Her waist, soft as a fish in warm water, moved on top of me, searching for the best angle. Every time the head found a certain spot her fingers tightened on my back, nails leaving shallow crescents.

"Mom, are you close?"

"Mm, mm... you, harder... fuck me harder... I'm almost..." She went red saying it and couldn't go on.

I rolled her under me.

Her hair spread on the pale sheet like crushed black silk. Moonlight slid from her collarbone to her belly, lighting the white curve that rose and fell with her breath. I bent, took a nipple in my mouth, worked it with the tip of my tongue, and at the same time lined up and pushed in slow and steady.

She sucked a breath in, grabbed the sheet, and curled her toes.

"Ah... so deep..."

I worked slowly, almost all the way out each time and then all the way back, so she could feel the shape and the heat and every vein of it. Her moans broke up, sobbing at the edges and sweet anyway. She opened her eyes hazily, looked at my shadow on her in the moonlight, and laughed suddenly.

"You crying?" I wiped the corner of her eye with my thumb.

"I'm not crying." She turned her face. "The light's too bright."

I bent and kissed the last wet off the corner of her eye, then got her waist and turned her over. She went obediently onto her knees, backside up, waist down,

cheek on the pillow. She turned her head to look at me, eyes wet and soft, a spring stirred by moonlight.

"You want to... from behind again..."

"Didn't you say during the call that this goes deep?"

"...Mm."

"Then move back a little."

She hesitated, bit her lip, and shuffled her knees back. The warm wet mouth pressed against the head. I didn't wait — got her hips and drove in all the way to the deepest point.

She let out a long shaking sob, hands on the edge of the pillow. "Ah... too deep..."

"Should I pull out a little?"

"...No." A pause, almost inaudible. "Just leave it... don't come out."

I got her waist and went hard. All the way out, all the way back, slapping against her with a wet crack each time. Her moans lost their rhythm and turned into broken breaths, crying and laughing mixed. The room got hot and close with her.

A *ding* came from the nightstand.

She turned her head and squinted at it. A message lit up in the dark. She reached for the phone and didn't hang anything up — she turned the screen to me so I could read it: *Have fun, that's what matters. If Mom's happy, Dad's happy.*

She looked at it and laughed softly. There was something in the smile I hadn't seen before — alluring, and a little dangerous.

"Your dad says... if Mom's happy, he's happy." She said it softly, pressed the lock button, put the phone back, and turned to look at me, her voice soft enough to melt. "So tell me. Am I happy right now?"

"Figure it out."

"Then try a little harder," she said, "and make him happier."

Something in my chest snapped. I got her waist and drove into her a few dozen hard strokes. She stopped holding the sobs back; a cry got out of her throat and broke into urgent, ragged moans that were very clear in the quiet room.

"Ah — ah — too fast—"

"You just told me to use force."

"Harder... I didn't say that much force... ah... my pussy's going to break..."

"It won't break. Mrs. Whitaker's got great elasticity."

"You — you're still talking — mm — your dad's still waiting on our news — don't wreck his wife..."

That was fire, from my tailbone to the top of my head. I could feel the head pressing the soft place deep in her, hotter and tighter than anywhere, like something hidden there waiting to be broken open. Her whole body started to shake, her walls convulsing in waves.

"I'm — I'm coming — you fucked it out of me — ah—" Her voice choked, her whole body a bowstring at full draw. "You — come inside too — inside—"

I pulled back a little, meaning to finish on her back, but she clamped her leg against my hip so I couldn't.

"Don't go... don't do it outside..." She turned her head, eyes red, voice soft and sticky. "Inside... put all of it in Mommy's tummy..."

That finished me. I got her waist and drove back into that hot wet hole to the deepest point and came. She shook all over, her walls like a thirsty mouth, sucking and pulling, trying to wring out every drop. It went on a long time. Every pulse made her twitch and pulled a satisfied little sigh out of her throat.

After a while I pulled out. Thick semen mixed with her fluid ran from her swollen opening and down her thighs in a white line that shone in the moonlight. She turned slowly onto her back, chest heaving.

She glanced down at her belly. There was a faint swell, like something really was in there. She pressed her fingertips against it and looked up, tears still in her eyes, and gave me a scolding look with no scolding in it. "Why so much... do you want Mommy actually pregnant with your baby?"

Then she laughed before I could answer. She took my hand and put it on the swell and let me press. The warmth came through my skin like a bowl fresh out of the kiln.

The night air crept in, warm and wet, filling the room. She took the hand on her belly, curled into my arms like a cat that had found its home, and put her face in my chest. Her lashes moved, damp, then went still.

"Then take it home," she said softly, and paused, and smiled, like it was something she'd just dropped in a suitcase. She didn't say anything else — she pulled my arm off her waist and wrapped it around herself, her fingers lacing through mine.

Moonlight through the gauze lit the slight swell of her belly like a thin frost. Her grip loosened, her breathing evened out, and she slept, content, on that night.

The afternoon sun came through the bamboo in a shower of gold. The wind moved the leaves and they rattled like they were passing something only they understood.

I was sitting on the edge of the deck staring at the private beach when I heard her come out. Her flip-flops on the wood, unhurried, a cat taking a stroll in the shade.

"I'm going in the tub," she said, still languid from a good sleep. "Come with me?"

I turned. She was at the slider in the resort robe, sash loose, a stretch of pale neck showing. Her hair was pinned up loose, a few strands at her ears moving in the wind. She didn't look at me; she looked at the steaming water in the corner of the courtyard, casual.

"Won't you get dizzy if you stay in too long?"

"Then come and watch me."

She laughed at her own line and went without waiting for an answer. Her flip-flops clicked the stone like a tune nobody had heard before.

I sat a while and then got up. Not because I was worried she'd faint — mostly because that tub was my favorite place at the resort. The temperature was right, the air had cypress and sulfur in it, and you could look up at a square of sky inside a bamboo fence with nobody able to see in. As quiet as another world.

I got there and she was already in. The robe was folded on the stone table with her clip on top of it. She had her back to me, arms out along the rim. The steam had turned her pale shoulders pink. The water was at her chest, and through the swirl the shape of her, full, rose and fell with her breathing.

Water ran down the back of her neck, into the shallow groove of her spine, and disappeared into the water.

"The water's good. Come down." She turned her head and smiled, eyes bright from the steam.

I got my shirt and trunks off, folded them beside her robe. The robe lying there was a quiet invitation. I went down the steps, the heat climbing my ankles, my waist, my chest, like a big warm hand closing on me. I sat beside her and the water rose and rings went out and broke on the wall.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Like sitting in soup."

"It was soup to begin with."

"So do I turn into a dumpling?"

She laughed, shoulders shaking. The water moved and her breasts moved with it. She noticed, and her laugh stopped for a second; she turned her face away and reached for the sake on the floating tray. Two little cups beside it, beaded with water.

"Want some?"

"Sure."

She poured two and handed me one. The cups rang. I tipped mine back. Sweet and cool down the throat, a small spark in all that heat. She sipped hers, sighed, and slid down until only her flushed face and closed eyes were above the surface.

"...This is the life."

"You said that yesterday."

"Yesterday's yesterday. Today's today. Every day in a hot tub's worth living twice."

I didn't answer. The water went still. Steam rose around us. She went quiet like she'd fallen asleep. I finished the cup and my eyes went to her without asking.

Her body under the water was vague through the shimmer and clearer than usual anyway. From her collarbone down, the two full mounds rose and fell, slow. Where the water moved, two small dark points showed at the tips, swaying in the current.

I swallowed. I was already hard enough to hurt. Underwater the shape of it was perfectly visible. She felt it — her lashes moved and her eyes came open a crack, found my face, then went down as if she could see it through the ripples.

"How are you this energetic in a hot tub?" Soft, lazy, teasing, and she didn't look away.

"Water temperature matters."

"Then settle down and let's have a conversation."

"It can't be suppressed. It's got its own opinions."

"What opinions?"

"It wants to go over there."

By rights she should have glared and said *you're impossible.* She didn't. She lowered her lashes, and after a long while, softly, "Do you want to come over?"

The water splashed. I moved and rings ran ahead of me. She sat up with her hands on my knees, her fingertips cool and wet and still warm from the pool. I took her hand. She squeezed back, like she was confirming something.

"You were up late last night," she said. "Do you want to keep going today?"

"Who's asking?"

"I'm asking you."

"It's up too."

I glanced down at the dark shape under the water and back at her. She followed the look, ears going red, and didn't pull her hand away. She lowered it under the water instead, fingertips down my chest, over my belly, and closed on it.

The heat of the water made her hand smoother than usual, like a dream running. For that second I was inside a slow-turning oven and my bones were melting inch by inch.

"Why is it so hot here?" she muttered. "Hotter than the tub."

"So what do you suggest?"

She didn't answer. She moved her hand a little, traced the shape twice, then let go, turned around, back to me, and leaned in. Her back against my chest, her head tipped back onto my shoulder. The water was exactly at her chest. I looked down at her, two soft white breasts gone softer with steam, the nipples drawn up like two dark fruits.

"Hold me from behind," she said, soft.

I slid my hands under her waist and pulled her in. Her skin was smoother than I'd imagined; the water was part of it, like fresh tofu, like it would break at any pressure. My hands stopped over her belly, not going up yet. She breathed and pressed her back into my chest and leaned a little more, drawing herself in.

Then my hands moved. Up from her waist, cupping the heavy, slippery weight, fingertips sinking in. She let out a very small gasp, like she'd been scalded or tickled. Softer than I'd imagined. With the water on my palms it was like a handful of something just melted.

"Mm..." She pushed her fingertip into mine, the sound leaking from her nose. "You — gentle..."

"I haven't even used strength yet."

"You're already heavy..."

She didn't really mind. She turned her hand over and laid it on the inside of my thigh, fingertips running down to the knee and back, like measuring a road she didn't know. The hard length pressed into her tailbone and rubbed with every sway of the water. She felt it and slid her backside gently, letting it settle in the cleft.

I gasped and my hands went from her breasts to her hips. She tensed and slowly let go.

"When you... when you come in, will it feel wet and slippery...?" Her voice trailed off, her face red as if the water had burned it. I put my chin on her shoulder, breathing in sulfur and shower gel and her, and said at her ear, "Why don't you find out?"

A pause, then a small nod, like she'd decided.

I let go of her hand. She held the wall and turned slowly to face me, straddling my lap. The water splashed and rang. She got her arms around my neck, forehead on mine, nose to nose.

"Hold me," she said.

I got an arm around her waist. She lowered her head, lifted her hips a little, reached between us, took the stiff length, and aimed it at her entrance. That place was already as slippery as fresh honey, and the water made it hotter. She lowered her waist and the head, soaked in warm water, went in even more easily than usual, disappearing into the soft wet opening.

"Mm..." A soft sigh, like she'd been filled and emptied at once. Rings went out from her waist again and again and she sank to the bottom and sat there with all of it inside her.

Her walls were like layers of wet silk, slippery and warm and tight, stickier for the water. She sat panting, face flushed, eyes wet. She didn't dare move. Neither did I. We stayed frozen in the warm water like two wet clay figures.

"You... it's so tight in there." Through my teeth.

"Don't say it... it's the water... wait a minute..."

I held her waist and pushed up slowly. She locked her arms around my neck and let a held whimper out. The water splashed and settled. Warm water moved between us like a hand doing the work for us.

"Mm... you, try moving a little..."

I pushed again. This time she lifted her head, feeling the ache of some angle being opened, and her breathing went fast. She started to sway her hips, and every rise and fall was so slick that it nearly slipped out and still ground hard over the most sensitive place.

"Ah... so slippery... I'm going to slide off..."

"You won't. I've got you."

She put her face in my neck and began to rock slowly. The water sounds got more frequent with her, like someone tossing pebbles into a pool. Her breath came faster, seeping into my ear, sticky and warm.

"You're so big inside..." Her lips against my ear, wet, half melted. "So big... I've got no strength left..."

"Then lean on me."

I got her backside and used her weight to push up into her, again and again. The water churned between us in rings, splash and surf mixed. Her hands tightened on my neck, in my hair, closing and opening like she didn't know what to do with them.

"Mom... sitting there like that, you're really putting it away."

"You — shut up—" She glared at me, breathless, eyes wet like a small soaked animal. "One more word and I... I won't let you."

"Then why are you still sitting on me and not getting up?"

Her face went red and she bit my shoulder as hard as a kitten. But her backside didn't stop; she sat down harder, taking it deeper. Then, apparently ashamed of herself, she buried her face in my shoulder and muttered something indistinct that sounded like *you bastard.*

The steam got thicker. White rings spread across the pool. Her movements got bigger, her soaked body rising and falling, drops rolling off her shoulders and catching light.

"Ah... mm... there... no, don't touch there..."

"Is that the place?"

"You — you're still asking—" Her voice had sobs in it now, low and sticky, squeezed out from deep. "You know exactly... it's there..."

I pushed harder on purpose and she tensed all over, thighs shaking. She gasped, head down, lips apart, a drop of water hanging from her chin. She glanced down at where we met under the water, the dark shape appearing and disappearing in the ripples, and looked away, ears burning.

"We've muddied the water..." she muttered.

"It was murky to begin with."

"Stop punning at the tub."

I smiled and didn't argue. I got both hands on her waist, lifted her a little, and brought her down hard. A soft "ah" came out of her, her hands gripping my shoulders like a drowning person on a plank. At that angle she was almost suspended on me, her weight pressing the gap between us over and over.

"Too — too deep... you awful thing..." Her voice shook, soft, and she didn't actually ask me to stop.

"Is the water too deep?"

"Yes, it's because you went too far..."

My nerves pulled tight and I nearly lost it. Right then she lifted herself a little, looked down at where we joined, and said, sly, "Look... it's jumping inside... is it about to come?"

"It's early." Through my teeth, and a lie.

"Hm. You're lying." Her mouth curved. She lowered her head and kissed me, muffled against my lips, "You can come inside... anyway, anyway, I'll catch all of it..."

That put me on the edge. I got her waist, pulled her close, and pushed up hard. She cried out, then bit her thumb and swallowed it, leaving only muffled whimpering from her nose.

The water started to slap the walls. She was a rider on a runaway horse, her waist going up and down with me, her breasts swinging back and forth, the tips leaving two thin white lines on the surface.

"Almost — I'm — I'm going—" Her forehead on my shoulder, her voice like soft candy. "You — go faster — together..."

I got her hips and drove a few last heavy strokes and couldn't hold it, coming deep inside her. She lay on my shoulder, boneless, squeezing her legs together to keep me deep. The rings died down and the steam gathered again and wrapped the two of us in white.

She lay limp in the water and only lifted her head after a long while, eyes wet, cheeks flushed. She looked down at her belly and up at me, laughing hoarse. "...Do you think the fish in this tub have been fed by you too?"

"What fish? It's a tub."

"If you shoot that much, they'd have been fed long ago if there were any."

I laughed. She laughed, and while laughing pecked me on the lips, then stood. Water ran off her in a short rain. She bent for the robe on the stone table, put it on, and glanced back.

"I'm going out to dry off. Staying in?"

She handed me the sash. "Tie it."

I took it and tied the robe from behind, my fingers looping her waist. She stood and let me, then turned her head and kissed my cheek.

"Thank you," she said, sweet and satisfied, like she'd done something that made them both happy. She shuffled back toward the house. At the door she looked back, her eyes resting on me a moment like she was checking something, then smiled faintly and was gone.

I stood there with the water still warm, the steam still rising, the bamboo moving. I thought: this must be what a honeymoon looks like.

Chapter 8: Sinking

The private beach was unnaturally quiet that afternoon.

The sun came straight down and turned the whole crescent bay into warm blue-green jelly. A light wind broke the surface into bits of silver. Now and then a wave came in over the sand and pulled back in little bubbles. With reef on both sides and one wooden door at the end of the bamboo fence, the whole world had been cleared out and only we were left in it.

I sat on the dry sand with the sunscreen in my hand and watched her come down the steps.

She was in a white bikini today. White with small blue dots. Triangle top, thin straps from the collarbone around the neck and tied in a bow at the back of her head.

Matching patterned bottoms with the side ties hanging loose at her hips, like a single pull would do it.

She stepped into the sand, her toes sank, and she flinched as if burned, then steadied and came toward me. Her hair, just rinsed, was wrung up over one shoulder, water running down her collarbone and pooling above her breasts where the white cloth barely covered, a small shining puddle.

I looked down fast and pretended to fight the cap.

Something's wrong with this lid. It's stuck today.

"Not going in?" She stopped in front of me and her shadow fell over me.

"I just put sunscreen on. Have to wait."

"I'm going now."

She went for the water, stepping like she was walking on clouds. I looked up and my eyes went to her back. That bikini covered almost nothing. From behind her waist was narrow and her hips pulled the small piece of fabric tight, moving with each step like two ripe peaches in thin white skin. The edge of the bottoms dug into her and left a shallow line.

I took a breath and fixed on the horizon. Something's wrong with the wind today. Why is it this hot.

She stepped in and hissed at the cold, then bent, scooped water, and splashed her calves. Bent, the two mounds above the white cloth made a deep line, drops sliding down it, bright in the sun. She straightened, turned back, and called, "The water's so nice! Aren't you coming?"

"In a minute!"

"Then I'll swim by myself!"

She went two more steps and pushed off into a few strokes. The water closed over her shoulders, her body shining like a pale fish under the clear surface, the blue dots of the suit shivering in the water.

I sat on the sand and something in my trunks went out of control.

Not my fault. Any man would. I'm a physiologically normal twenty-two-year-old male. This is normal. Perfectly normal.

"Coming down?"

She stood waist-deep and turned to look at me. Water dripped from her hair onto her bare shoulders. Her arms were a little out, like she was waiting. The sun gilded the edge of her. The wind put a few wet strands on her face and she didn't push them away, just squinted at me.

I got up, tossed the sunscreen on the towel, and went.

The water was warm to the ankles and cold by the calves. She stood off a ways and watched me make a face and laughed. "Is it really that cold?"

"You've been in a while. Of course it's not cold to you."

"You get used to it."

I came up to her. The water was above her waist, moving at her belly. She's more than half a head shorter than me, and from where I stood I got the white below her collarbone and the two soft mounds floating under the water, swaying with the ripples, held in that thin white cloth.

"What?" She looked up.

"Nothing." I looked away. "Saw a fish by your feet."

"Where?"

"It swam off."

She looked at me suspiciously and let it go. She bent and picked a small shell off the bottom, smooth from the water, and held it up to her eye. Sun on the shell gave it a pearl sheen. She smiled and closed it in her palm like a treasure.

"Look at this. Doesn't it look like that bowl we made?"

"No. The bowl's crooked."

I meant the color.

"That's not it either."

"How are you this bad at romance?"

She pushed the shell into my hand. "Here. For you."

"What for?"

"I'll keep it as a souvenir." She turned and took two steps into deeper water, then looked back with something sly in her eyes. "If you don't take it, I'll throw it back."

I closed my hand on the shell. Slightly warm. She turned and went further in. The water was at her waist, and she bent, like something had pulled a nerve, and turned back — her eyes went to my trunks. I followed the look and looked down. Sure enough. There was an obvious outline in the fabric, not too clear in the water, thank God.

"You..." she whispered, sly. "Wanting to do that even in the sea?"

"It stood up on its own. Nothing to do with me."

"You're a grown man, why are you still blaming it?"

"It won't listen to me."

She bit her lip to hold the laugh in. Then she came two steps closer, reached underwater, and put her fingertips on my belly. "So, do you want me to...?"

She didn't finish. I knew. My heart hit my ribs and my throat closed. Her ears were going pink, but she didn't pull her hand back. The wind came from behind and blew hair across her face; she lifted a hand to push it away, her eyes evasive and warm.

"Here?" Hoarse.

"There's nobody here..." Almost lost in the surf. "As long as nobody sees us, everywhere's ours."

I took the hand on my belly and held it. Her fingers were cool, seawater and fine sand on them. She looked down, her lashes beaded with water like sugar melting in the sun.

I took her hand and we backed slowly to the shore. She followed without asking where. The towel was spread on the sand with her hat and my phone near it. I sat and she sat, knees together, a mermaid just come ashore.

"Why so quiet?" Soft.

I turned. She sat at the edge of the towel, hands behind her, face tipped back, sunlight dappled on the wet ends of her hair. The white fabric was soaked through, nearly transparent, clinging to the soft shape of her, the dark of her nipples faintly visible. She probably didn't know what she looked like. Or she knew and had decided not to hide anymore.

"You like this..." I said, "and I can't take it."

She paused, and lowered her lashes.

I bent and kissed her. She made a soft "mm," unprepared, then let go, arms around my neck, falling in. Her lips, salt and sun-warm, soft as a warmed marshmallow. Her tongue came over, brushed my lip, and withdrew, waiting.

I hooked it and went deeper. Her hands went through my hair, nails scratching lightly at my scalp like a cat playing. The towel balled up under us and sand got between skin and fabric and tickled, and neither of us stopped for it.

I kissed from her lips to her ear and down her neck. Her breathing went fast, her chest heaving, the soft weight almost spilling out of the top. She tipped her head back and let out light, panting breaths like a bird gone soft in warm water.

"You... untie the back..." slurred. "I can't reach."

I touched the back of her neck, found the bow, and pulled. The white cloth came off her shoulders and let her breasts out, warm from the sun, hanging full and round, the nipples pale brown and standing in the wind.

I took one in my palm and worked the tip with my fingertips. Her waist arched like a shock had gone through her, but she pressed her chest closer to my hand.

"You — gentle..." whispered.

"Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt... it's just too..."

"Which?"

"You know..." She turned her face away, breaking into a whisper. "It just... itches..."

I lowered my head, took the hard nipple in my mouth, and worked it with the tip of my tongue. She grabbed my shoulders and let out a held gasp and went soft onto the towel. I followed, kneeling over her. Her hair spread on the towel with a few grains of sand in it like crushed seaweed.

Her eyes were brimming, looking up at me, chest rising and falling, the soft weight trembling with every breath. Her voice shook. "Can I see yours too?"

I didn't answer. I got the straps of my trunks down. It sprang out, standing in the sunlight, the head full and shining, a drop already at the tip and running down. She looked, throat moving, and pursed her lips without meaning to.

"Why is it bigger every time I see it?" she whispered. "What did you eat growing up like that?"

"You fed it."

She paused and went red. She reached out and slapped my chest. "Nonsense."

"Really." I took her hand and put it on it. "You're holding it. It grew because of you."

Her palm landed warm and soft and a little wet with seawater. She closed her fingers and drew slowly up from the base, her fingertips circling the ridge. My breathing got heavy without asking. She found something funny in it and pinched the swollen groove, then lowered her head and licked the tip with the tip of her tongue.

I nearly gave out entirely.

She licked her lips, like tasting. "...Salty."

"It's been in the ocean."

"Then later... let's try the part that hasn't been in the ocean."

She laughed first. The laugh had something sweet and sly in it. Then she let go, untied the sides of the bottoms, and let the scrap fall away. Her legs curled, knees together, like a shell that didn't want to open yet.

"Come here," soft.

I knelt in front of her, opened her legs, and looked at the white triangle still on her. It was soaked through, clinging, drawing a full, slightly swollen curve. I hooked the side tie and pulled. The wet fabric slid aside obediently.

Incredibly wet.

A thin sheen of moisture covered her from the bottom of the opening all the way up, shining clear in the sun. The lips were parted, like a deep pink flower opened by rain. The small point was already out, red as ripe fruit, trembling with her breath.

I touched it with a fingertip.

"Ah—" She gasped, her back arching hard like a shock, and I pressed her down. She bit her lip, eyes wet. "You — you mustn't — don't—"

"Then what should we do?"

"You know..." Her eyes slid away, barely audible. "You... you can just come in..."

I smiled and kissed the inside of her thigh. "So tell me yourself. What do you want?"

She glared, wet and shy. A few seconds, gathering herself, and then low and urgent: "...I want your cock inside me."

I took myself in hand, aimed at the wet, slippery entrance, and pushed slowly.

Her opening was hot and tight, opening and closing on the head, still unsure about letting it in. I pressed a hand on her belly, paused, then pushed. Her body opened a little at a time and her breathing broke as I went, thin nose-sounds coming out of her.

"Mm... it feels so full... you're too big..."

"You're squeezing too tight."

"Then... then move in a minute..."

I stopped at the deepest point and looked down at the dark length held tight by her. The white top was still caught on her arms, her breasts rising and falling with her breath, the nipples trembling. Sunlight fell between us like warm honey, gluing us.

"Ready?" I asked.

"...Okay."

I drew back slowly and pressed back in. Her body rose and fell with me, the sticky wet sounds mixing with the surf. She bit her lip to hold it in and it got out anyway, caught in her throat like a seabird's wing in wind.

"Mm... just like that... it feels so good..."

"You want me to hurry?"

"It's too fast, I'll come apart..."

"Fast or slow?"

She lowered her eyes, quiet, then very soft, "I like slow... but... I also want you to hurry up..."

I kissed her collarbone. "Then we go fast a while and slow a while."

That seemed to take the last shell off her. She laughed, got her arms around my neck, and pulled me down to whisper at my ear, "Then when you go fast... you have to use a lot of force."

I got her waist. A soft "ah" out of her, turning to a sweet gasp. I went hard, every stroke grinding over the most sensitive place. Her moans got loose, thin and broken, stretched to silver threads by the wind in the empty bay.

"Ah — ah — that's it — harder — mm..."

"You like it?"

"I love it... I love it so much... there... once more..."

I changed the angle and the next one landed right on it. She made a soft "uh," almost crying, toes pointed, walls clenching in waves. I gritted my teeth and held back, waiting for it to pass.

"All right?"

"Mm... it's just... it aches from what you did..." Slurred, still in the afterglow. "You haven't yet, have you?"

"Not yet."

"Then... change positions... I want to look at you."

I turned her gently, holding her, onto her back. She lay on the towel, breasts swaying from the movement, shining with sweat and fine sand. Her legs were open, the reddened place still wet, a flower just washed by rain.

I opened her legs again, lined up, and slid in. She moaned softly and sighed, content. "Mm... like this... so deep..."

I worked slowly, each stroke aimed at that place. She stopped holding it in and moaned with my rhythm, a satisfied cat in the sun. The light had turned her a pale honey, the dark nipples standing, trembling with her body.

"Please come inside, okay?" She opened her eyes, soft and wet as if soaked in seawater. "Inside... I want to feel it again... you're so full in me..."

That was the last of it. I drove in with everything and came into her. She locked her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist and shook, her belly swelling faintly. I felt like I'd melted into her, bones gone soft with the warmth.

After a long while she loosened her legs and sighed. As I pulled out the thick white ran from her and left a wet arc down her thigh onto the towel. She looked, took a handful of sand from the edge, and sprinkled it over the stain, like burying a small secret on the beach.

"Look," she said, and laughed, hoarse and sweet. "Even the sand's helping us keep it a secret."

A wind came from far out and turned the shell over on the sand. She saw it, picked it up, rubbed it in her palm, and put it back in mine. "Keep it safe. It's a gift."

I closed my hand on it. She leaned in and put her forehead on my shoulder, still salty and warm from the two of us, pressing into my side like a quiet tide. Then, muffled in my shoulder, "Let's go in and shower. We're covered in sand."

"Okay."

I stood and pulled her up. She shook out the towel and wrapped it around herself. The straps of the white bikini were tied crooked and careless, a mess with its own kind of beauty. She walked barefoot with the hat in her hand, took two steps for the stairs, and turned back.

"Don't lose that shell."

"I won't."

She smiled and went up. The wind moved her wet hair and a strip of sandy leg showed under the towel. She walked slowly, like she knew I'd be watching.

I stood there with the shell in my palm, warmed by my hand, its pearl color shining. The tide came up and washed over the sand where we'd just been and took every trace. I looked at the shell, then took a step and followed her up and pushed the wooden door open.

On the last morning the light came earlier and brighter than it had any right to.

The gauze moved in the wind like a half-open wing, and the sun came through the gaps and drew gold stripes on the floor. I lay there not quite awake, and there was an itch on my arm — she was drawing circles with the end of her hair again.

"Awake?" she asked.

"Mm."

"It's the last day."

The last syllable was almost eaten by the surf. I turned my head. She lay on her side beside me, chin on the pillow, eyes bright with something deeper than usual.

"Why are you up this early?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said, then paused. "And if today's the last day, sleeping feels like a waste."

Something in my chest twisted gently. Before I could say anything she smiled and patted my chest. "Don't think about it. Get up and eat. The housekeeper said they've made us a special farewell breakfast."

"Farewell breakfast?"

"They said it's the last stop on the honeymoon package. *Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker, wishing you a pleasant trip.*"

She'd learned to say it as a joke. Today it had a bitter edge, like biting an unripe plum.

"Then get up, Mrs. Whitaker."

I threw the covers back and sat up. She got out the other side. The morning light came from behind her and made the thin gray nightgown nearly transparent, drawing her waist and hips. She noticed me looking and didn't turn her head. "What are you looking at? Go wash your face."

"You."

"Glib."

She opened the closet and bent to dig for clothes, the hem of the nightgown pulling tight over her backside. I looked away and went into the bathroom and ran the tap, and only when the cold hit my face did I wake up properly.

Leaving today. Last day.

I don't want this day to go too fast.

Breakfast was on the terrace at the end of the bamboo again. The server brought oatmeal, eggs, fruit, and a plate of mango slices laid out in a heart. She looked at it and smiled. "Last day and they're still doing hearts."

"Probably because they've watched us be disgusting all week."

"Who's been disgusting with you?"

"Mrs. Whitaker, that's not what you said last night."

She glared, ears going red, and pinched my thigh under the table. I smiled and didn't flinch. Then she bent and put a heart-shaped slice of mango in my bowl. "Eat yours."

"Thanks, Mom."

The *Mom* landed and she pulled herself back together fast. These past days the names had turned into a flexible tongue — sometimes Mrs. Whitaker, sometimes Mom, sometimes son. Two masks, changed at will, or two threads so wound it was hard to say which was more real.

After breakfast we walked back slow along the bamboo. The sun came through in fine broken pieces on her shoulders and the hem of her dress, like a flock of gold butterflies that wouldn't settle.

"What time's your flight this afternoon?" she asked.

"Four-thirty."

"And then..." She glanced at her phone. "...four or five hours."

"Mm."

"Then..." She looked up, her gaze amber in the light. "What do you want to do with the rest of it?"

I looked at her and my heart jumped. She didn't look away. She stood in the middle of the path like she was waiting for an answer she already knew.

"Let's go back to the room," I said.

She lowered her eyes, her mouth curving. "Then let's go back."

The slider shut and we reached for each other at the same time. Her arm went around my neck and she pressed in, her lips carrying the sweet of the morning tea. One arm around her waist, the other behind her head, fingers in her hair, pulling her closer.

This kiss wasn't like the others. It had reluctance in it, a hard urgent wanting to press the other person into the body. Her tongue came in, hooked mine, salt and mango in it. We were like two drowning people holding on to the same plank.

"Today..." she breathed against my lips, hoarse and soft, "don't be gentle today, okay?"

"How ungentle?"

"The less gentle the better." She looked up, the corners of her eyes red as if the sun had scorched them. "It's the last day. I want you to wreck me."

I lowered my head and kissed her earlobe. She trembled in my arms and pressed closer. I got the zipper down her back and the fabric slid off her shoulders and left a stretch of pale skin, warm from the sun. No bra. Her breasts came out of the cloth and hung heavy in the light, the nipples already standing from her breathing, two dark fruits.

"You're so sensitive," I whispered.

"Your fault..." Before she finished I had a nipple in my mouth. A long thin whimper came out of her nose and she went soft against me, fingers in my hair, pushing and pulling and unable to decide. I sucked hard, tongue circling the hard point, my other hand working her other breast, fingertips at the tip. She tipped her head back and showed the white line of her throat and her breathing went ragged.

"Ah... mm... you, gentle..." Her voice was tearful and she pressed her chest closer to my lips anyway. "No... don't be gentle... be firm..."

I let the nipple go and kissed down her collarbone to her neck. Her skin is thin and soft; I sucked at it and left a light red mark. She felt it. "You — you left a mark?"

"Mm."

"Are you crazy... people have to see me tomorrow..."

"I haven't gone home today yet."

She had nothing. I bent and pulled her skirt and panties down to her ankles. She held my shoulders, lifted a foot obediently, and stood naked in the morning light. Completely wet, her inner thighs shining. Her lips parted, a flower soaked by rain, a small piece of pink showing.

I crouched and put my mouth on it. Her legs shook hard and she took half a step back; I pulled her in by the waist.

"No, don't lick there... ah..." Her protest thick with nose. "It's already... already so sensitive..."

I ignored her, licking from the bottom up, sweet and salt. Her voice fell apart note by note. Her fingers dug into my hair, clenched, unclenched, not knowing how to let go.

"No... ah... get up... I — I can't stand up..."

Her whole body went limp, knees shaking. I stood, and before she could catch her breath I got her by the waist and put her on the mattress. She sank into it, hair everywhere, like a fish melting in the sun.

I came down over her, my knees opening her legs. The hard, swollen length was already at the wet entrance, one push from going in. She felt it; she got her legs up around my waist and crossed her ankles, urging me, or holding me.

"Come in," she said, hoarser than before. "I... I want you... just come in..."

I didn't wait. One push and I was all the way in. She let out a long sound, sob or sigh, her walls tightening layer by layer like they wanted to swallow me whole. I stopped a

moment and looked down at where we met, her two wet lips holding the base, reluctant to let go.

"You're so hot inside," I said.

"You — don't say it... hurry up and move..."

I drew back and pushed in hard. The impact was deep and she arched up with a held cry. I went faster, every stroke to the hilt, the sound of it clear in the quiet room. Her moans ran together into a broken, tearful song.

"Ah — ah — like that — mm — so good..." Her head went back, eyes red, tears blurring. "Harder... fuck me... it's the last day anyway..."

Last day cracked like a whip on my tailbone. I lowered my head, got her legs onto my shoulders, changed the angle, and pressed the place inside her. Her toes straightened, her walls clenched hard, and a gush of warm came out and soaked me. She shook all over, legs spasming, and kept murmuring, "Don't stop... don't stop... again..."

I held back, pulled out, and rolled her over. She went obediently onto her knees, backside up, face in the pillow. I got her hips from behind, aimed, and drove all the way in. A muffled tearful whimper came out of her, her fingers knotted in the sheet.

"Ah... so deep... too deep..." she mumbled. "It's all the way at the end..."

"You like it?"

"I like it... I like it..." Half sobbing. "You got it all the way in... mm... you, go faster..."

I got her waist and went hard. The slap of it was loud, the soft white flesh trembling with each one. Her inside was like a greedy mouth, clinging on the way out and opening wide on the way in. I looked down at the swollen length moving in and out of the wet red opening, drawing rings of clear fluid, and chills went down my back.

"You're so big today..." She turned her head, tears standing, voice choked. "So big and hard... you're going to break Mommy..."

"Mom." I bent, pressed against her back, and said it at her ear while I pushed.

She shuddered and her walls clamped. "You — you're calling me Mom now..."

"Clamp on it when I do."

She buried her face in the pillow, embarrassed, and let out a string of soft sticky sobs. I straightened and took her at a different angle. Her hips were too high, her waist too

low, a bow at full draw. I got her wrists and pulled them back, arching her up to meet each stroke.

"Ah — ah — there, there —" she cried. "I'm going again... I'm going to be... fucked to orgasm..."

"Together," I said. "Wait."

Her body was convulsing in waves like it wanted to drain me and I couldn't hold on. A few last hard strokes into the deepest place and scalding semen erupted, filling her. She shook from the heat, her walls sucking and swallowing like they wanted all of it. I lay on her back catching my breath before pulling out.

The cloudy white ran back out of her and left a wet trail down her thigh on the sheet. She lay a while and then turned slowly over, chest heaving. She looked down at her belly and up at me, hoarse and low: "You... came all inside..."

"Mm."

"...So much." She pressed her belly, fingertips on the slight swell. "Can you feel it... it's full..."

I put my hand over hers and felt the warmth. She smiled, lazy and satisfied, like a fed cat. Then her eyes dimmed again, pulled back to something.

"When we get back..." Soft, her fingers curling in my palm. "Let's go back to being a normal mother and son."

I was quiet.

"Okay."

She looked at me like she was trying to read something off my face. I lowered my head and kissed her lips. "After we get back, you'll be my mother and I'll be your son. Nothing happened."

She didn't answer at once. She lowered her eyes. Then a soft hum, like she was convincing herself. "Okay. Then that's settled."

"Settled."

We smiled at each other. Morning light came through the crack in the slider and fell on her chest, sweat-damp and shining. We looked at each other and the thin layer of *agreement* in the air was a butterfly that hadn't landed yet, wings going, one touch from breaking.

"You..." she began, "that thing's started again."

It disagreed.

She paused and laughed, the laugh a bubble bursting in the light, wet and bright. She patted my chest. "Then let it disagree by itself. Don't push me."

"It won't listen to me."

"Aren't you afraid it'll break the agreement?"

"Then it's probably breaking."

She glared, annoyed and amused, and didn't get out of the way. I was hard again and pressing into her hip; she felt it and didn't push it off. She lowered her eyes, low and soft: "...Are we really going to do everything we've ever done in our lives on this one last day?"

"A whole life's long. How do you fit that in a day?"

She paused, then opened her legs a little.

"Then... let's do as much as we can."

That afternoon we did it three more times. Once on the mattress with her over my waist, moving herself, crying while she did it, saying she couldn't stand to leave; once in the tub with her back to me on my lap, letting the water and the rest of it run out of her; the last one with me over her, finishing until her belly was faintly swollen. She looked down at the soft bulge and sighed. "Why so much... do you really want me pregnant with your baby?"

I put an arm around her and didn't answer. She smiled to herself and let it go.

After that, time seemed to get quietly sped up. We packed, changed, and sat on the step by the entry waiting for the car. She was in a light cotton dress, hair neat again, small pearl earrings in. She looked like any mother on any trip. But sitting next to me, her fingers had hold of my sleeve, like if she let go something would come apart.

The car came. The driver loaded the bags.

She stood at the door and looked back at the wooden door of the Plumeria Villa one last time. Bamboo shadow moved on the porch and the chimes rang in the wind. She looked a long time, then bent and got in.

The car pulled out. Palms went past, one after another. She sat next to me, her shoulder nearly touching mine. Neither of us spoke and neither of us held hands. But her fingers came to rest quietly on the back of mine, the tips slightly curled, like a sentence with no period.

The airport was loud. Flight announcements over and over. She stood at security digging in her bag for her license, putting it back, taking it out again. I stood behind her and watched the small panic and said nothing.

"Mom." Only once she had the license in her hand.

She turned.

"Nothing missing out of your bag?"

"No. Nothing's missing."

"Let's go, then."

She nodded and turned for the checkpoint. I followed, watching the back of her neck and shoulders, tight as a strung wire. *After we get back we'll be a normal mother and son* — and the finger she'd laid on the back of my hand, trembling when she said it.

I put my head down and followed her through. At the gate she sat beside me and put her straw hat in her lap. The setting sun out the window turned the tarmac to gold, and a plane taxied slowly like a big bird about to leave the nest. She looked out a long, long time and sighed.

"What we said..." Low. "Still stands, doesn't it?"

"It stands."

"Good." She turned and smiled. The smile had a thin gold edge from the sun, gentle and far off, like the last wave before a tide goes out in a dream. Then she stood, picked up her hat, and put it on, pulling the brim down over her eyes.

"Let's go. It's boarding."

I got my backpack and followed her to the gate. At the last step she stopped, turned her head under the brim, and glanced at me. Her eyes in the pale amber had a shine in them that hadn't been taken yet.

She reached out and hooked my little finger with hers. Briefly, then let go, like a feather falling on water.

Then she turned and went into the jet bridge.

By the time the cab stopped outside the iron gate of the complex it was fully dark.

The same old gate, and the guy in the booth didn't even look up from his phone, just buzzed us through. The car went up the drive past the oaks and stopped in front of the building. I paid and got the two suitcases out of the trunk. The silver-gray wheel banged and made a *clunk* like it was complaining the trip had ended too soon.

I looked up at our window. The kitchen light was off. The living room was on, the warm yellow coming through the gap in the curtains like an eye that had been waiting.

"Go on up." She stood beside me with the straw hat in her hand, quieter than she'd been on the plane.

I put the key in the lock and had one thought: the second this door opens we aren't Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker anymore. I'm the son, she's my mother. All the absurdity, the heat, the nights in the honeymoon villa get shut out here, or shut in a suitcase and never taken out again.

The door opened.

Dad was on the arm of the couch with his phone. He heard us, looked up, put the phone on the coffee table, stood, and came over. "You're back. Traffic bad?"

Same as ever. Dark gray shirt, sleeves rolled to the forearms, the gray at his temples a little longer than before we left. He took the suitcase out of my hand and glanced at her hat. "You get some color?"

She smiled. "Do I? I don't think so."

"You wore sunscreen the whole time, you weren't going to burn." He took the hat out of her hand and hung it on the hook by the door, a motion so easy it looked like he'd done it a thousand times. "Hungry? I ordered in. Pot roast, roasted cauliflower, that soup you like. It's in the kitchen, I'll heat it."

He turned and went for the kitchen.

I stood and watched his back. Broad, familiar, shoulders a little forward, his left foot landing heavier than his right. Twenty-two years of that back, from childhood up. This time I only glanced at it before looking down.

Guilt burned like a hot bowl in my chest. Seven nights in a honeymoon villa holding his wife on the same mattress, coming inside her again and again, watching her under me, hearing her call him *husband* and *Mark* and never his name out loud. And now here he was in the kitchen heating our food.

She passed me and her fingertips touched the back of my hand, like *stay calm.*

I took a breath and followed her in.

The meal was calmer than I expected.

Dad sat across from me and put pot roast in his bowl. "How was the seafood out there? The lobster in the pictures looked huge."

"Pretty fresh," I said, head down, shoveling rice. "Mom peeled shrimp for me."

He stopped. Then laughed. "Your mother still peels shrimp for you? How old are you?"

She laughed too, perfectly natural. "I'm used to it. He's never been able to peel one, the shells always crumble." Her chopsticks hovered over the plate, dropped, and picked up a piece of cauliflower for her bowl. "The grilled shrimp at that place was good. He peeled a few for me too."

Dad, oblivious, shook his head. "You two, peeling shrimp for each other after a week away. That's nice."

I stirred my rice. Her hand came quietly under the table, pinched my knee, and withdrew. I glanced at her; she was drinking her soup like nothing had happened. My ears burned and I put my face in the bowl.

After dinner Dad volunteered for the dishes.

He stood at the sink and ran the tap, and the water came through the half-closed door. I sat on the couch flipping channels without watching. She finished clearing and came over with two glasses of water, set one in front of me and one at the other end of the couch, and sat an arm's length away, not leaning in, but with her eyes on my face like she was checking something.

"All right?" Only loud enough for us.

"Fine."

"You don't look fine."

"...What do you want me to do?"

Nothing. She held her glass, looked down, and drank. The rim touched her lips — lips that had been against my collarbone that morning leaving a row of small tooth marks, and were now red and wet like nothing had happened.

The water shut off in the kitchen. She put the glass down, stood, and went to help. I watched her back; the light cotton hung smooth in the lamplight and swayed with her steps, and her body moved faintly under it. I remembered every curve. I remembered how her waist arched when she lifted her hips on the bed.

I shut my eyes and pushed it back.

At ten Dad said he was beat and went to bed.

He went into the master and shut the door. The walls are thin; I heard the lock click, then the water running in the bathroom. I sat at my desk with the computer on and a half-finished line of code on the screen, the cursor blinking at me.

Five minutes and not a word.

The pictures kept playing: her over my lap in the tub, steam, her head back, sounds coming out of her throat; on a towel on the private beach, eyes closed, lashes gold with sun, saying *come inside*; that morning, in the entry, turning to look at me with a thin film of water in her eyes.

A knock on the door.

Very light. Two.

Not the way Dad knocks.

I got up, put my fingers on the knob, paused a second, and turned it. Hall light came through the gap. She stood there in the light gray nightgown, hair loose, lips pressed together, like she'd been getting ready to come here for a while.

"Mom?"

"You're still up?" Low, looking past me at the desk.

"I can't sleep."

"I can't either." Then she stood a moment and stepped in and shut the door. The lock made a very soft, almost gentle click.

I looked at her. She stood in my room under the dim lamp like a shadow cut out of moonlight. She looked up, we held it a second, and she said, soft, "I tried to hold out. But I lay down and shut my eyes and all I could think about was you."

"...Me too."

"I said I'd go back and be normal." Her voice shook. "I tried just now. But lying in that bed, thinking about that room, thinking about you... I can't pretend nothing happened."

I reached out and took her hand. Her fingertips were cold and trembling and curled obediently into mine, holding on to a thread about to snap. Light, and it steadied me completely.

Then she went on her toes and kissed me.

Mint toothpaste. The thin warm touch of her lips. She didn't open up like she had on the trip; she just pressed them there, waiting. I lowered my head, took her lower lip in my mouth, and sucked. She switched on and went limp, leaning in, arms around my neck.

I kissed her and reached back for the edge of the bed and took her down with me. The mattress creaked like it was complaining about a secret waking up. She went on her back and the hem of the nightgown slid above her knees and showed the soft white of her inner thighs, where the marks had just faded.

I said at her ear, "Dad's right next door. Not scared?"

She paused. "Scared." Then, "But come in anyway."

I pushed the nightgown up to her waist. No underwear, like she'd been waiting there all along. Already wet, lips parted, a flower opening quietly in the dark. Our bodies remembered. I was hard and burning and leaking.

She reached out and took it, her fingertips tracing the shaft slowly, like she was confirming something lost and found.

"Still the same size," she said.

"Because it's thinking about you too."

Her ears went red and she smiled. She held it, guided it to her entrance. That soft wet touch was a toothless mouth taking the head and sucking. I pushed slowly and every inch pulled a faint held breath out of her nose.

Wet and hot, and every layer of her recognized me, closing from all sides, fitting itself to the shape of it. Like fired clay meeting fired clay — they'd both been through the heat and couldn't come apart now.

I put my mouth at her ear. "You still remember my shape in you."

She bit her lip, eyes reddening. "You're no better. You came in and went straight for that place..."

I moved gently. She put a hand over her mouth and pushed the moans back into muffled groans. The room was quiet; the creak of the mattress, the sticky wet, her held breathing, all of it layered in the dark like a song only we knew the rhythm to.

"Mm..." through her fingers, eyes shut. "You... slower... don't make the bed so loud..."

I got her waist and turned her to kneel at the edge of the bed and came in from behind, slowly. Closer this way; she braced on the blanket, fingers crumpling the sheet, face in the pillow, sounds going to soft damp huffs. I looked down at the hollow of her waist moving with each stroke, at her backside reddening where I hit, and something came up out of my chest, guilt and pleasure in the same mouthful, close to maddening. She was lying on the bed I'd slept in since I was a kid, in her usual nightgown, shower gel still on her arms. I got her waist and worked slow and repeated, like I was trying to pour the whole week into her.

She turned her head, eyes wet, and said softly, "Your dad... asked me why you've been looking at me so much. He said our mother-son relationship is really good..."

I stopped. Her walls clamped, like the words had burned her too. Then she smiled and reached back and touched my cheek. "Tell me — if he saw us like this tomorrow, would he still think it's good?"

She was working me with his name. Same as on the trip, using his being here to feed it. I didn't answer, just lowered my head, pressed on her back, and pushed all the way in again.

She bit the pillow hard and let out a very low whimper, almost a kitten's.

"Mm... ah... hurry... almost..." she mumbled. "...I think I heard him turn over..."

I stopped and she held her breath. A soft cough came from the master, then nothing. She lay with her face in the pillow, body strung like a bow, and her walls clamped down at the same time. Her temperature came up, a heat rising from deep in her, waiting for me to fill it.

I moved again. This time she didn't even have the strength to cover her mouth, just buried her face and let her shoulder blades shake with each one. I was at the end too and leaned to her ear. "Mom, I'm close..."

She turned her head, wet and soft, husky: "Inside... like in that room... inside..."

I held her tight and drove deep and it came, scalding, and she shook. Her walls throbbed and swallowed like a hungry mouth, drawing every drop. I lay on her back, feeling the pulse still going between us.

She was quiet a long time. We lay there and listened to each other's breathing come down. Crickets outside, the summer night coming through the gap in the curtains, damp with rain from somewhere.

She stirred and lifted her head from under the pillow. Her eyes were red and her voice was hoarse from it. "You... you can go now. I have to get back."

"Let me hold you a minute."

She didn't refuse. I turned her and pulled her in. Her head on my shoulder, fingers tracing my chest like she was counting. After a long while, "Am I being unfair to your dad?"

I was quiet and didn't answer. She went on. "But I don't want to stop. I can't. My body's been stretched into your shape and once you're in it, it won't close."

"Me too."

She laughed softly into my neck, a pebble dropped in deep water. "Are we growing a flower that's never going to get any sun?"

I didn't answer. The crickets went on, and from the master a shift of the bed now and then. Her fingers slid down my chest, found the soft thing, and touched it. "It's up again."

"You're still in my arms."

"Then I'll go."

She didn't. She smiled, sat up, and took the hardening length in her hand and stroked it slowly the way she does. I watched her face in the lamplight, her fingertips going inch by inch, careful. And I felt it clearly: her body had taken my shape and mine had taken hers. Two fired bowls, crooked and uneven, fitting exactly. I pulled the nightgown up and got her back over me. She bit her lip, sank down slowly, and let out a low, satisfied sigh.

The hall light was still on outside. Dad's breathing came faintly from the master like a thin warning line. Neither of us mentioned that door again.

The night was still long. We traded shapes quietly in the summer dark, two lovers who'd grown up in this house without anyone being able to see it. Only when the first gray came did she get up out of my arms, straighten the nightgown, and bend to smooth the wrinkled hem.

At the door she turned to look at me, then glanced nervously down the hall.

"Good night," she said.

Good night, Mom.

She smiled faintly, turned the knob, went out, and shut the door. The lock clicked, her footsteps went down the hall, the master door pushed and closed. Then nothing.

I lay in bed while the sky outside went slowly gray.

By the third day home I had turned into an extremely dutiful son.

Not the kind of dutiful where you help your mother chop vegetables. More concrete than that, more clumsy, like somebody remembering an old habit and forgetting how to do it. That morning, before Dad left, I got to the shoe bench first, took his boots out, lined them up, and brushed off dust nobody could see. He paused, and while he bent to put them on he asked, "What, a week in Maui and you're a whole new man?"

I stood in the entry with the brush still in my hand, smile a little stiff. "Just helping."

Mom leaned out of the kitchen with a fresh cup of coffee. "Leave him alone," she said. "Be good that the boy's looking after you." She handed him the cup and pressed her fingertip to the rim. "Drink it on the way. Aren't you meeting a client today?"

He glanced at the coffee — right temperature, his usual dark roast. He smiled, took it, and said to me, "All right, you two stay home. Might be late tonight, don't wait on me for dinner."

The door shut and the keyring on the bench jingled twice and faded.

I stood there and listened to his steps go down the stairs one at a time until they were gone. Then I let the breath out of my chest. When I turned, she was in the living room doorway with a rag in her hand, looking at me soft and heavy, like something soaked.

"Your dad's in a good mood today," she said.

"Mm."

She looked down, put the rag on the coffee table, straightened, and came two steps. Close, close enough for the detergent on her. She didn't touch me, just said quietly, "Did you sleep?"

"...Fine."

"I didn't." And then, without waiting, she turned and went to the balcony and started taking clothes off the rack one at a time. The sun came in behind her and edged her profile gold. The light gray loungewear was thin in it and you could see the shape of her shoulder blades.

I stood in the middle of the living room, watched her a while, and went into the kitchen.

Guilt is a tide that comes up every night.

In the daytime it's fine. There's sun, there's a table, there are the words *Dad* and *Mom* to hold me in place. But at night everything goes quiet and the water comes over my ankles, my knees, my chest. I lie there looking at the light from the window on the ceiling, pulled two ways — one voice saying *that's your dad, that's your mom, you're insane,* the other saying *but you're not going to forget how she looked under you.*

A faint cough from the master. He wasn't asleep. I pulled the covers over my head like I could smother myself in the night.

At midnight, a knock.

Three light taps, spaced wide, like a cat testing a claw. I sat up, heart already going. A sliver of light in the crack. She stood out there in the light gray cotton nightgown, hair down over her shoulders, eyes in the hall light like a deep well.

"Mom?"

"You're still up?"

"I can't sleep."

She glanced behind me, then away. "I can't either."

She stood a moment, stepped in, and shut the door. The click went through the quiet night like a knife through paper. She stood in front of me, very close, fresh from the shower, gel and hair.

"I..." Low. "Was I all right in front of Dad today?"

"You made him coffee and brushed his boots."

"And you? You poured his water three times and did the dishes..." She laughed softly. "I've never seen you that helpful."

"I thought it might make me feel better."

She lowered her eyes and was quiet. Moonlight came through the curtain and laid a thin silver line on the floor. She lifted her head and looked at me, voice like it had been dipped in it: "But my body still remembers, doesn't it? All day doing those things, and there's a voice going, *you're cheating him.* But at night, lying in that bed with my eyes shut, I don't think about him, I think about you. You were the one

who bent down and kissed me, you were the one who held me down on the bed, you were the one who — who pushed that thing into me hard."

"Mom—"

"Let me finish." Her voice shook. "I know it's wrong and I don't want to make nice excuses. But I figured something out today."

"What?"

"Your dad... he's long since poured everything he owed a wife into his work. He comes home and falls into bed too tired to look at me. I'm not blaming him, he's genuinely wrecked. But I'm a normal woman too. You're young and healthy, you can't keep going without it, it's bad for you. So let's do this... think of it as me helping you, and you filling the gap he left in me. Do you understand what I mean?"

I looked at her. Her cheeks were red and her eyes didn't flinch off my face. She put a hand on my forearm, fingertips cool, like she was afraid I'd push her away.

"Doesn't that make it less unfair to him?" Soft. "Let's pretend we're... helping each other cover what he can't."

My throat moved and my voice came out rough. "Can I even fool myself with that?"

"Whether it works or not, lie to me first." Her fingers slid from my forearm to my wrist. "It's better than doing nothing and being scared every night."

She went on her toes and kissed me.

This time I didn't hesitate; I got an arm around her waist and pulled her in. Her hands pressed my chest, feeling how hard my heart was going, as hard as hers. Her lips were soft and cool from water and her tongue, when it came in, was hot enough to send a shiver up my spine. Two snakes groping in the dark, confirming each other by heat.

One arm around her waist, the other inside the neckline of the nightgown. No bra. The soft weight settled heavy in my palm like a docile warm animal. She made a soft "mm" and didn't pull away — she pressed closer and went limp.

"Gentle..." near my lips. "Dad's next door, these walls aren't much..."

I took her earlobe in my mouth and whispered, "Then keep your voice down so he doesn't hear."

She bit her lip, her ears going almost transparent.

I put her down on the bed. The look she gave me from her back had something complicated in it — guilt, wanting, and relief at finally being where she belonged. Moonlight came through the curtain onto her rising chest. The neckline had slipped off her shoulder and her breasts were out, the nipples already up, two fruits woken by morning air. I bent and took one in my mouth, tongue circling.

She tensed, then let go, fingers in my hair, pressing.

"Mm..." Her other hand went over her mouth and left only a muffled sound. "Don't — don't suck so hard... it'll leave a mark..."

"Then I'll go somewhere else."

I kissed down her chest, over the soft belly, and pushed the nightgown up to her waist. Nothing underneath, and that familiar full wet openness out in the moonlight. Open, the entrance shining with clear fluid, the small point out, red as a cherry somebody had held in their mouth.

"Already this wet," I said.

She turned her face away, low and broken. "...It happens when you touch me. I can't help it."

"Then should we not touch it?"

"You dare!" she said, then kicked me lightly, angry and shy. "If you don't touch it, I'll never come in this room again."

I laughed, lowered my head, and licked from the bottom up to the swollen point and sucked it gently. Her voice broke into gasps, hands in the sheet, toes curling, like current had gone up her spine.

"Ah — you mustn't — mm — you said gentle..."

"Didn't you say don't touch it?"

"You — you hit it too hard..."

I took the point in my mouth again and sucked hard. Her waist bucked and she flopped like a fish on a line and came down heavy on the mattress. What came out of her wet my chin, ran down her leg, and left a dark spot on the sheet.

"Mom, you leaked so much." I straightened and licked my lip.

She panted with the back of her hand over her eyes, chest heaving. After a long while, muffled, "Then why don't you... come in..."

I leaned over her, the hard length at the wet entrance, not rushing. She felt the warmth and arched up a little, wanting closer, or wanting away. I got her hips, held her steady, and pushed slowly in, an inch at a time.

She froze, then let a long thin breath out from deep in her throat, like a drowning person getting air, or like something had gone all the way through her. Her walls tightened, wet and hot, like a worn sheath, every fold wrapping the shape of me. As if she remembered it, or as if I'd stretched her into it.

"Mm... that feeling again... so full..." Her fingers slid off the sheet and hooked my neck. "Move a little... gentle... don't make the bed loud..."

I worked slowly. Out to the entrance each time, then slow and close along the most sensitive place, back in. She bit her lip and pushed every sound into shallow breath, shoulders trembling with my rhythm. Moonlight slid from her collarbone to her waist and lit a film of sweat. Her breasts moved with her body, the nipples trembling in the air like two restless notes.

"Mom, it's so hot inside."

"Don't call me Mom..." Her eyes were wet, her voice shaking. "If you do... it makes me sad, it makes me... excited..."

"Then what should I call you?"

She turned her head away and bit her lower lip, and after a long while, softly, "...Mrs. Whitaker's fine."

I lowered my head and kissed her, swallowing it. Her pale legs came up around my waist and her ankles crossed, a careful lock, or a soft stubborn promise. I went faster and she moaned under me, crying and laughing at once, trying to hold it in and losing thin crushed breaths anyway.

"Ah — mm — you've got it all the way in — there..."

"You like it?"

"So — so good..." Barely audible, sobbing at the edge. "So good it's almost scary..."

"What are you scared of?"

"That I'll never forget this feeling. That every day I'll be a normal mom and wife in this house, and then at night I'll lie down and shut my eyes and all I'll see is you inside me..."

Tears came. I stopped, bent, and kissed the corner of her eye. Then, forehead on hers, "Then let's not forget. In the day we'll be a good son and a good wife, and at night... we cover the gap for each other, so neither of us owes the other anything."

She didn't answer, just locked her legs tighter and arched up like she wanted to swallow me. I went hard, deeper each time, on the place inside. She stopped holding it and let out a run of broken muffled moans through her fingers, like beads dropped on glass.

"Mm — ah — slower, slower — you're going to break me..."

"It won't break. It gets tighter in there every time."

"You — talk less..." She buried her face in my shoulder, nails in my back, muffled. "Hurry and come... if you come inside it won't be so hard..."

I got her waist and went faster. Her body started to shake, walls convulsing in waves like a small warm mouth sucking hard. I was at the end, and a few last strokes took me to the deepest point and it poured out of me into her.

She tensed, then slowly loosened, legs still around my waist, reluctant. Her fingers stroked my back, one pass at a time, like she was comforting me. After a long while, quietly, "...It's all inside."

"Mm."

"You came so much again..." Her cheeks were still red, her voice lazy. "That much every time, I don't know where you keep it."

"It's all for you."

She laughed softly, a feather off the moonlight, and patted my chest. "Smooth talker."

I lay on her with my chin on her shoulder and listened to her heart come down. Moonlight slanted across the floor like a thin sheet of silver water. She touched my hair and sighed. "Tomorrow... when your dad's back, let's be nicer to him. Okay?"

"...Okay."

"It's not entirely self-deception." Quieter. "I really do think he's had a rough time. So even with us like this, we should be kinder to him. That way I can feel a little less guilty."

"I know."

She was quiet, then, "Then come out... I have to get back. If I'm not back before dawn and he wakes up—"

I pulled out slowly. The mix ran from her and left a wet stain on the sheet. She glanced down, ears red again, and reached for two tissues and wiped herself, slow and careful, like she was handling something precious.

I took one and helped clean her. She lay and let me, then sat up and pulled the nightgown back into place and smoothed the wrinkles and the loose hair. She stood in the doorway a moment, turned, and looked at me, the complication in her eyes covered now by a thin layer of calm.

"Tomorrow morning I'll make your dad potstickers. His favorite," she said. "Could you wash the coffee things in the living room so he can have a cup when he gets up?"

"Okay."

"Well... good night."

Good night, Mom.

She opened the door, went down the dark hall, and went back behind that door.

I lay listening to the faint creak of the master mattress and then nothing. The moonlight was still on the floor, nearly bright enough to hurt. I turned over and put my face in the pillow. It still had her hair in it, mixed with sweat and the rest, like a burnt thread gone cold. I shut my eyes and knew I'd have the same dream again.

The next morning I got up early, dumped the old coffee out of the pot, and washed the whole thing until it shone and set it out on the counter. When Dad got up, Mom was already at the stove with potstickers. The oil spat and she laid the browned ones on a plate one at a time. He stood in the doorway and watched and got a little wistful. "What's the occasion? Potstickers!"

"The kid wanted to make you something," she said, calm, back to him. "He asked me about it last night."

Dad turned and looked at me with something gentle and a little embarrassed. He clapped my shoulder. "Good man. A week in Maui and you grew up."

I looked down, put the lid on the pot, and didn't look at him. The kettle had just boiled and gurgled like a ringing in the ear. Be a good son, I told myself. Yes. A good son. Just filling in the gap he doesn't have the strength to fill, a gap he can't see.

The door shut behind him.

Sun came through the window and the living room went quiet. She finished clearing, came over, and stood behind me. She didn't say anything, just put a hand on the back of my neck, let her fingertips rest a second, and took them away like nothing. She bent to straighten the shoes on the bench, straightened, turned, and moved her lips at me silently. The hall light blurred her face and it took me a while to make it out.

Three words. *See you tonight.*

"Drive careful."

She stood in the entry with his travel mug, dark roast coming off the rim. Today she had on a light green silk blouse buttoned to the collar, the hem tucked into a beige knee-length skirt, a thin leather belt at her waist. Her hair was in a low bun and showed the smooth nape of her neck, and the pearls moved in the morning light.

Dad bent to change his shoes. "Yeah, I've got a client dinner tonight, don't wait on me."

"Go easy on the drinks."

Soft and gentle.

"I know. Keep an eye on your mom, don't let her stay up till midnight again."

"Okay, Dad."

The door closed in front of me. The entry dimmed and the keyring jingled twice and went quiet. I stood and listened to his steps go down and get swallowed by the building's front door. Three seconds of nothing, then the very soft click of the keyring settling.

I let the breath out slow. Every time I saw him off it felt like something enormous and complicated. On one hand the coffee and the boots; on the other, knowing exactly what would happen in this house the second that door was fully shut. The guilt sat in my chest like candy held too long in the mouth — sweet, and bitter under it.

"That one's gone."

Her voice came from behind me. Same voice as before. Different tone.

I turned. She was in the living room doorway with a hand on her hip, fingertips hooked in the zipper of her skirt, head tilted, a small sly smile on her mouth.

"Look at your face. Like you've never done anything wrong."

"What did I do? I just wanted to ask if you slept, Mom."

"Fine. I woke up once in the middle of the night and there was nobody in my arms. Tossed around a while before I got back to sleep."

Her ears went red and she wouldn't give in. "Then why didn't you come find me?"

"Dad was here."

"Well. He's not now."

She said it and it seemed to burn her, and she turned her face away and reached to do up the button that had come undone on her blouse. She stopped halfway, like she'd realized that was too obvious a cover.

"I'm going to shower first."

"Okay. I'll close the curtains."

We've gotten good at this. It's like a set of instructions nobody has to agree on first: she says shower, I say curtains, and then we each do our part. So familiar it scares me sometimes. I went into the bathroom and stood under the hot water with a hand on the tile and let it run from my hair to my feet, and the picture came up anyway: her in the doorway with her fingers in the zipper, the tips curled, waiting for something.

It was already awake, stiff in the cold air of the bathroom. It's been a reflex since we got back from that villa. The second she says *close the curtains* it comes up and there's nothing to be done. I've wondered if something's wrong with me — how does a man have a need this strong, this dependent, for his own mother? But every time I touch her the question gets washed out by the heat.

Like a key finding a lock. Her body is exactly my shape.

I came out, toweled my hair, and went into the room. The curtains were pulled tight and only the bedside lamp was on, throwing a soft warm shadow over everything. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, changed out of the blouse into a thin light gray housedress — but her hair was still in that elegant low bun, pearls still in her ears.

"You're done. Come sit."

I went and sat. She turned her head and looked at me, her gaze resting on the collar of my robe, then back up. She smiled. "Your hair's not dry."

"It's fine."

"It'll give you a headache."

She got up and went to the bathroom for a dry towel, came back behind me, and started on my hair. Gentle, her fingertips through the towel on my scalp. I shut my eyes, breathed in detergent and shower gel, and started swelling again.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"You're doing this on purpose."

She paused mid-motion. Then, slowly, she bent and pressed against me from behind, chin on my shoulder, in a voice almost inaudible, "Because... if I'm too forward, you'll think I'm a pervert."

"You're not a pervert. You're Mrs. Whitaker."

She laughed softly, a feather dropping. Then she came around in front of me, knelt between my legs, and looked up. The lamplight came at her face from the side and pulled her lashes into a fine fan. She reached out, hooked the belt of my robe, and pulled it.

The robe fell open. Her gaze went down my chest and landed on the hard thing between my legs, red, a drop of clear at the tip shining in the light.

"And it's so big."

"That's what happens when I see you."

"Then Mom must feel very accomplished."

She lowered her head and didn't use her hands — she rubbed the tip of her nose against the head, then put her tongue out and licked from the tip all the way down, like working on a popsicle. I gasped, fingers in the sheet.

"Wow, it's so big. It's thicker than yesterday. Are you saving it up for Mom?"

"Don't you like it?"

"I like it. It's just... I feel like I can't fit any more in."

She came closer and took most of it in her mouth. Warm and wet, her tongue quick along the shaft, and I nearly finished on the spot. She felt it, glanced up with something sly in her eyes.

"Slow down, son. If you come this early, what's Mommy's mouth going to eat down there?"

"What do you want to eat?"

"You know."

She reached down, pulled the robe the rest of the way open, lowered her head, and buried her face in my lap, licking from the base up, circling twice, and taking it back in to suck and swallow slowly. She did it deliberately, tormenting me, taking it to the back of her throat and pulling out, her tongue grinding the slit. My lower back tingled and my hand pressed the back of her head.

"Mm..."

A muffled sound from her nose, like something had pushed into her throat, and she took it deeper instead of pulling off, one hand at the base, the other working underneath. I looked down. Her pearls swayed under her earlobes and my reason swayed with them.

"Mom, you're going to make me come."

"No. Mom wants to feed both mouths. If you come now, the lower one's out of luck."

"Then let's switch to the lower one."

"Hm, but... you haven't rewarded Mommy with this yet."

She took my hand and put it on her chest. Through the thin housedress I could feel the soft shape, the nipples already hard, two warm fruits.

I pressed one with my thumb through the cloth. She trembled and let a faint breath out of her nose.

"You — pinch it... Mom's been itchy all day..."

Her voice trailed off, low and sticky, like melting candy. I lifted her skirt and her breasts came out, white in the light. I lowered my head and took one in my mouth, tongue around the areola, then pinched the hard nipple and bit it gently.

"Ah..."

She trembled and pressed her chest to my mouth.

"No, don't bite so light... a little more..."

I worked it with the edge of my teeth, then flicked it fast with my tongue. She went limp as warm water on my lap, hands gripping my arms, broken sobs coming out. Another surge came up in me and pressed against her thighs, burning. She felt it, got off me slowly, turned, bent, and put her head on the edge of the bed.

"From behind... Mom's little hole down there is so hungry it's been dripping."

She pushed the skirt down off her waist and showed the whole pale round of her, and the soaked opening between. She turned her head, eyes red, voice still carrying that slow, dignified tone.

Her lips were swollen and parted, a flower in water. Clear fluid ran down her thigh and darkened the sheet. I looked at that place, the place I'd wrecked, the place I'd shaped. It moved, opening and closing, calling for something.

"Mom, this part of you has taken my shape."

I took myself, pressed against the wet opening, and rubbed it twice.

"Then come in... let Mom get used to the shape a while longer..."

I straightened my back and pushed in slowly.

Scalding inside. The warm wet wrapped me layer by layer, tight and slippery, like a biting finger. Every time it felt like I'd burst and every time it fit exactly, like this body was made to hold me. I got her waist, pulled back, and pushed in again.

"Mm — ah — that's it — so deep — you're hitting Mommy's cervix again..."

"Mom, it feels so good inside."

"Without it... Mom won't be able to live."

She buried her face in the blanket, embarrassed at herself, and mumbled, "You have to take responsibility... responsibility for feeding Mommy..."

I got her waist and went faster. All the way out, all the way back, hard enough to rock her. She lay over the edge of the bed and her breasts hung and swung with every hit. I couldn't see her face, but the sounds had gone from dignified to broken sobs.

"Ah — ah — slower — too deep — you, you've gotten bigger again..."

"I'm all grown up. Don't I just fill the space?"

"It's filled — you're going to poke through Mommy's belly..."

She said no and her body arched back anyway, taking the head deeper. I bent over her back and reached around, found the hard nipple, and worked it between my fingertips. She shuddered all over, walls clenching hard, and pulled another gasp out of me.

"Don't pinch — there — mm — but... it feels good..."

She hummed without sense, not knowing whether to refuse. I pressed harder and went faster. She finally cried out, sobbing at the edge and shameless under it.

"Ah — I can't — Mommy's going to be ruined by you — I'm going to be turned into a sex toy by my son's big cock..."

"So how well does this sex toy work?"

"It works — it works — Mommy's hole only wants her son's cock — please come inside, okay? Fill Mommy up... make Mommy's belly bulge..."

That did it. I drove in as far as I could, against her cervix, and came. Thick pulses poured in and she shook, walls sucking and swallowing. After a while it all quieted. I pulled out and the cloudy white ran from her, mixed with hers, down her thighs in a winding line.

She lay over the edge of the bed a long time without moving. I turned her onto her back. Her cheeks were red, tears at the corners of her eyes, and a lazy smile on her mouth. She looked down at her faintly swollen belly and pressed it.

"Look, Mommy's little tummy is completely full of you."

"Satisfied?"

"Satisfied... and too satisfied."

She giggled, breasts shaking, reached up, hooked my neck, pulled me down, and pecked my lips.

"My son's come is the best thing a mother's ever eaten."

I watched her. She'd just said something filthy, the blush still at the corners of her eyes, and then she tucked her hair behind her ear without thinking, reached for the tie on the nightstand, and put the messy hair back into a bun. Practiced, quick, a few seconds and it was elegant again. She pulled the skirt hem over her legs to cover the mess, did up the collar, stood, went to the mirror, and straightened it.

"Change the sheets. I'll go make dinner."

"You can still cook dinner?"

"Why not? Mom's cooking's always excellent."

She glanced back. The red was still on her ears and her face was calm as if nothing had happened. She bent, picked the pearls off the nightstand, and put them on in the mirror. Then she pushed the door open and went out. At the doorway she paused, turned her head slightly, and said softly:

"He's not home tonight. I'll sleep in your room."

The door shut. I sat on the edge of the bed looking at the big dark stain on the sheet with everything tangled up in me. The thing that had just finished was already moving again. I looked down at it.

"You're hopeless."

It didn't argue. It stood up in righteous indignation.

The sky outside had gone dark. A knife on a cutting board came from the kitchen, steady and even, like nothing had happened. I got up, changed the sheets, folded them, and put them in the washer. Passing the kitchen, she was at the stove with her back to me, apron tied, hair up, spatula in hand, turning the pot roast. The light over her made her warm and domestic.

She felt me looking and didn't turn. "When we eat, sit a little further from me."

"Why?"

"Because... I'm afraid I won't be able to help laughing too much at the table."

I stood in the doorway watching her move the vegetables in the pan, and the thing nodded again. I turned and went back to my room, shut the door, and looked at the shell I'd brought back from the beach on the sill, giving off a faint pearl shine.

At dinner everything looked normal.

Pot roast, roasted vegetables, a bowl of chicken noodle. She sat across from me, picked a lean piece out with her chopsticks, put it in my bowl, and sounded so calm it almost made me forget the last few hours.

"Lean for you, the fatty bits are for your dad."

"Mm."

"Eat slow, don't choke."

"Okay, Mom."

The TV was on in the living room, the evening news. We ate quietly like any mother and son. And then her foot, under the table, came out of its slipper at some point, her bare toes brushing my calf and drawing back. I looked up. She was drinking her soup with a perfectly composed face.

The phone rang. **Mark**. She put the spoon down, picked it up, and the second it connected her voice was a gentle, steady wife's.

"Hello?"

"Yes, we're eating. Just me and your son. He made pot roast, it smells good."

She'd made it. She said I did. Her fingertip traced a loose thread under the tablecloth and her voice didn't give anything away.

"Are you at a dinner? Go easy on the drinks, and don't forget your stomach pills."

"Okay. Then you get some rest too. Here, I'll put him on."

She looked up and handed me the phone.

I took it. His voice came through with a restaurant behind it. "Kid, your mom's been in good spirits these days, that's a lot of it down to you. How about Dad takes you out this weekend?"

"Okay, Dad. Where?"

"Want to go walk by the lake? Your mom's always saying she wants to see the reeds."

"Okay, I'll drive Saturday. Long as Mom's happy."

He'd probably had a couple, because he talked more than usual. "Your mother, she never asks for anything, but she wants everything. Spend some more time with her at home. Spend it for me."

"Okay, Dad."

I hung up and put the phone on the table. She sat across from me watching my face like she was reading something. After a while, quietly, "What did he say?"

"That he'll take us to the lake to see the reeds this weekend."

"He remembered I like the reeds?"

"He said you're always talking about wanting to go."

She was quiet, drawing circles on the rim of her cup, and finally smiled faintly. "He remembers I wanted to see the reeds. He doesn't remember who I wanted to see them with."

She picked up her bowl, drank the last of the soup, and stood to clear. I followed her into the kitchen, stood beside her, took the plate out of her hand, and put it in the sink. The tap ran. With her back to me she said, after a long while, "Are we... really all right like this?"

I know what *we* meant.

"Are you asking me or yourself?"

Nothing. She turned the bowl under the water, round and round, until the foam covered it, then said quietly, "Your dad just said on the phone to spend time with you for him. It's so strange. Even though... the way I spend time with you has turned into this."

"Do you regret it?"

"If you regret it, you don't eat until late tonight."

She shut the tap, put the bowl in the rack, wiped her hands, and turned. The light came down and shadowed her lashes. She looked at me with something complicated and soft and bright.

"I just feel like there's some strange logic between us. Your dad doesn't have time for me, so I keep you company. You're young and you've got energy and nowhere to put it, so I help you get rid of the extra. You fill my space, I take yours down. Neither of us owes the other anything."

She said it with total conviction. I knew she'd worked that explanation out carefully, using it to make the whole wrong thing convincing. I didn't argue. I reached out and took her hand. Her fingertips were cold and curled into mine and held tight.

"Then let's lock this box," I said.

"It's locked."

She agreed, let go, bent, picked up a pot, and put it away. Her movements were a neat, dignified *mother* again, like the conversation had been small talk after dinner.

At eleven that night, when she pushed my door open, she was in a slip dress I'd never seen. Very short, a stretch of pale thigh. The neckline was low and her breasts were half out and moved as she walked.

"You changed."

"Yes. Didn't you say the box was locked?"

She got to the bed and didn't sit, just looked down at me.

"It's locked, but the key's still in the lock."

She smiled a little, lowered her head, took the pearl earrings out, and put them on the nightstand next to the shell.

"Keep those for me tonight."

"Why?"

"Because when I wake up tomorrow I still want to be that dignified Mrs. Whitaker."

She reached out and eased the strap off her shoulder.

"But tonight, dressed like this, all I want to be is your sex toy."

She climbed onto the bed and got over me. Through the thin cloth I could feel her body heat and the damp between her legs. She lowered her head, lips at my ear, soft and gentle and with a chill in it: "Does son's big cock want Mommy again?"

I got her waist, fingers sinking into the soft flesh. It was iron-hard, pressing her belly through her panties. She reached down herself, pulled it out, held it, and stroked it twice. Then she lifted her hips, guided it to the wet opening, and sat down slowly.

"Mm..."

That long soft nose-sound again, like a fed cat.

"Look, Mommy's pussy has been fucked so well by you it opens its own mouth the second you touch it."

She rode me slowly. Her breasts moved in front of my face. I cupped one and put my mouth on it, tongue working the hard point. She shuddered and went soft, and her walls tightened more, resisting and holding on.

"Ah — you, don't suck — mm — Mommy'll lose her strength..."

She couldn't finish a word. She lay down on me, waist still moving. I sucked and got her hips and helped her up and down. She cried out, soft and sticky, very clear in the quiet night.

"Mommy's... Mommy's going to be fucked to death by you... my pussy's full of your shape..."

"What'll you do when I'm not here?"

"Go in the bathroom... do it... thinking about my son's big cock... and then let it run out... like you came on me..."

She buried her face in my shoulder, muffled with embarrassment. It finished me. I rolled her under me and went in again, hard, several times. She tipped her head back, neck a long arc, waist arching like she was welcoming it. I lowered my head and kissed her, swallowing the broken shameless noises, and came into her deep with the last of it.

She shook all over, belly heaving, and it took her a long time to settle. When I pulled out, thick white ran out and soaked a wide patch of sheet. She panted a while, then sat up slowly. Without wiping, she looked down at her faintly swollen belly and pressed her palm to it.

"Full again. Feels like I'm carrying a little you."

I put my hand over hers. Her palm was warm, her fingertips trembling. She put her forehead on mine, shut her eyes, and said in a long soft breath, "When I wake up tomorrow, I won't remember anything from tonight."

"Okay."

Good night, son.

Good night, Mrs. Whitaker.

Her mouth curved. Her arm came down on mine. A moment later she opened her eyes, knelt up, pulled the slip dress back over her shoulders, gathered her hair, and went barefoot to the mirror.

In the glass: cheeks still red, a faint ring of tooth marks on her collarbone, belly slightly swollen, semen running down her thigh. She looked at herself a few seconds, bent, picked up the pearls, and put them on carefully in the mirror. Then she pulled the neckline up over the marks, turned, gave me a small smile, pushed the door open, and went into the living room.

Her gentle voice came back through the door: "What do you want for breakfast tomorrow? I'll get the oatmeal started."

Chapter 9: Sowing

The lock made a very soft *click.*

I was against the headboard with my phone, the screen light on the ceiling like a small patch of moon that hadn't dissolved. I looked up. She slipped in and shut the door behind her.

Barefoot, footsteps almost silent. The light gray slip dress barely reached her thighs and her hair was down, the ends damp, just out of the shower. She stood by the bed, glanced at me, and without a word threw the covers back, got on, and straddled me.

"Dad asleep?" I put the phone down and my hand went to her waist automatically.

"He's out." She lowered her head, her nose brushing my collarbone. "I waited until he was snoring. He had a couple tonight, he's out cold."

"You waited."

"A little." She moved her knees forward and pressed into me. "So you have to make it up to me."

Before I could answer she had her arms around my neck and was kissing me. Her tongue had toothpaste on it, cool and soft, like a mint melting in my mouth. One arm around her waist, the other under the side seam of the nightgown. No bra, the nipples already hard, two cherries in the wind, trembling in my palm.

She made a short sharp sound, like the touch burned, and pressed her chest closer instead of flinching.

"He came home late tonight," I said against her lips. "Didn't even eat here."

"Yeah. That's why I dared."

"Will he be home tomorrow?"

"Yes." She paused, lower. "So tonight... hurry."

"Fast or long?"

She laughed in my arms, her fingers already sliding down to take the hard thing through the nightgown, weighing it like a familiar object. "You decide. It's not the first time I've had you in my mouth."

It fit her palm exactly, a key shaped by repetition, sliding into her fingers. She looked down, lashes low, voice languid. "Look at it, perking up the second it sees me."

"It's like that every day."

"And before I existed?"

"Before, I used my hand. Now I use you."

She liked that. Her mouth curved. Then she lifted her waist, pulled the soaked panties aside, took the throbbing length, aimed, and sat down.

For a second we both stopped.

Her body was a soft, hot mold used again and again. The second the head pressed into the wet opening, the walls came up from all sides, hot and tight, taking it and drawing it in an inch at a time. No angle to fix, no hand to guide. It went to the deepest place along a path her body remembered, like a chess piece going back to its square.

She let out a long satisfied sigh. "Mm... still tastes the same."

"Tastes like what?"

"Like home."

She laughed at herself, shoulders shaking, walls contracting in waves. I gasped and held her waist. "Don't laugh, you'll squeeze me tighter."

"Who told you to say something funny?"

"You said 'like home' first."

"I wasn't teasing."

She started to rise and fall. Her waist sank and lifted, each one grinding the softest part of her. She tipped her head back, the long line of her neck, and moonlight came through the gap in the curtains onto her white skin like a thin glaze. The straps were down on her arms, her breasts out and swaying with her.

I cupped one and put my mouth on the hard nipple. A soft "ah" out of her, and she went limp and pushed her hips down harder, like she wanted to swallow all of it.

"You — your mouth..." she gasped. "Is it for sucking, or for... for fucking your mother..."

"Both." I mumbled it and flicked the tip with my tongue. She wrapped around me, fingers in my hair, her voice thumping on my scalp.

I don't know how long. She finally collapsed, worn out, on my shoulder, panting. The light from the ceiling came through her hair and made the room closer than before. I stroked her damp back, fingers down her spine to the tailbone, and asked, "Mom, do you want another one?"

She paused and looked up, eyes still wet. "...What did you say?"

"I said, do you want another one?"

"Why are you asking?" Her lashes dropped, like it had hit some corner of her. "In bed or out of bed?"

"Is there a difference?"

"In bed, I take it as flirting and say, 'If you want it, come more.'" She drew circles on my chest. "Out of bed, I'd have to think."

"Am I in bed or on the floor?"

"You're still inside me, aren't you?"

I had nothing. She laughed, then went quiet a moment, then said, "But since you asked, I have thought about it."

"About what?"

"If I actually got pregnant with your child... what would your father do?"

I opened my mouth and nothing came. She put her head in my neck, muffled. "He'd think I was crazy, or that he was. He wouldn't think it was you. Never." A pause. "But if I really want it, the child can only be yours."

"Mom..."

"Don't call me Mom." She cut in, her voice shaking without her knowing. "Every time you call me Mom in bed it's like something twists in my chest. It hurts and it itches and it's... so exciting."

I didn't say anything. She was still on me and the warmth was still there where we joined. I felt myself swell a little more and she felt it. She didn't mention it, just started moving again.

"Well... if you really want it," I said at her ear, "we'll try a few more times. I'll come inside you."

She bit her lip, didn't nod or shake her head, just dropped her hips further. That night I came twice. The first time she was still on top; the second I rolled her under me and got her hips until she cried out, "I'm full." Her belly was faintly swollen and I touched it, warm in my palm.

"Look, doesn't it look like it already is?" she said.

I kissed her sweaty forehead. "Maybe you really are."

She laughed softly, then paused, then said, "Then I'll ask him tomorrow."

"Ask Dad?"

"Mm. I can't just get pregnant without him knowing. He has to think it was his idea."

My chest twisted. Like she was afraid I'd take it wrong, she added, "Don't worry, I'll make him think it's his own idea to have another one." A pause, a small laugh. "I've always been very considerate of your father's feelings."

She has. I've watched her do it a hundred times in front of him — gentle, thoughtful, wrapping every decision up as his. Twenty years of being a wife and she's got the art down to a science.

"How will you bring it up?"

"I haven't decided." She rolled off me and took a tissue to the mess between her legs. "Let me think. Over breakfast might be more natural."

"Will he be home tomorrow?"

"Yes. He said he's not going out this weekend."

"Then I'll wait for the news."

She bent, picked up the nightgown, put it on, smoothed her hair, took the pearls off the nightstand, looked at them in the dark, and put them in her pocket. At the door she turned back and looked at me in the night light and smiled faintly. "Good night."

"Good night."

The door shut. Her steps went down the hall and the master door pushed and closed. I lay there with my head churning like a boiling pot.

The next morning the sun was out, a rare thing. Dad sat at the head of the table with a bowl of oatmeal in front of him, looking at his phone. Mom was in the light green blouse, hair in a low bun, pearls in, elegant enough for a magazine. She set eggs and pickles out, sat across from him, and served herself.

Quiet and ordinary. He took a spoonful and remarked, "This oatmeal's good."

"It soaked overnight and I cooked it half an hour this morning," she said, and picked a pickle for herself.

I sat beside him with my head down, not looking too hard.

"Mark, I want to talk to you about something." She put her spoon down, calm.

He looked up from his phone. "Go ahead."

"I want another one."

Three seconds of nothing. His spoon stopped in the air, a drop of oatmeal sliding off the rim and spreading on the table. "...What did you say?"

"I said I want another one." Same tone. She even took a sip of her orange juice. "I'm forty-five this year, which isn't ideal, but my health's always been good. At my last physical the doctor said all my numbers were fine. I want another one while I still can."

His eyes went between her and me twice before he got words out. "You... what are you thinking? You're that age. Besides, don't we have a son?"

"It'd be more alive. It's just the two of us in this place. You're always away and he's at school. I'm alone here with nobody to talk to." She smiled, a gentle light in her eyes. "With a little one the house wouldn't feel so empty."

He was stunned. He opened his mouth to argue, saw there might be something in it, and finally sputtered, "Well... you can't just have a baby because you want one."

"So I'm asking you first." She lowered her eyes. "If you don't want to, forget it."

Perfectly measured. She'd given him the soft gesture at exactly the right moment. I watched his forehead unknot, like *if you don't want to, forget it* had lowered his guard. He was quiet, then chuckled. "Your mother... when did she get like this?"

She didn't answer, just ate. He was quiet some more, then turned to me. "Kid, what do you think of your mother's idea?"

I was trying to make myself the size of a grain of rice and nearly dropped my spoon. "I... I respect Mom's opinion. Long as she's happy."

"See, your son's more considerate than you are," she said, right on top of it.

He had nothing to say to that, and finally waved a hand. "All right, all right, let me think. It's not small. Give me a few days."

"No rush." She put another pickle in his bowl. "Take your time."

After breakfast he sat in the living room with the TV and she went to the kitchen. Passing the doorway, her back to me, tap running, she said softly, "He didn't say no."

"Mm."

"There's hope."

I looked down. My phone had a message from him: *What do you think about what your mom said today?* I locked it without answering. He was in the next room and could come ask any time.

That afternoon I went to the store with her. She pushed the cart between the shelves, no different from any other middle-aged mother. At the meat case she stopped, picked up a pack of pork chops, and looked at it. "Your dad likes these."

"Mm."

She put them in the cart, then, quietly, "You liked them when you were little too. I remember once you got grease all over your face."

"You've got a memory."

"I remember everything about you." She bent for the soy sauce on the bottom shelf. Bent, the collar opened and showed a small patch of pale skin. I looked two seconds and away. She straightened with the bottle, and without turning, smiled slightly. "What are you looking at? Look at home."

My ears burned. She pushed the cart on like nothing had happened.

Sure enough, he knocked on my door before nine that night.

He came in, shut it, and sat at my desk with a cup of coffee gone cold in his hand. After a long silence, "Kid, what do you think about what your mother said?"

"Are you asking my opinion, or do you want me to talk Mom into it?"

"Both, I guess." He sighed. "I'm worried about her health at that age."

"Mom said herself all her numbers are normal." I picked the words carefully. "If she really wants it and you hold her back, she might hold it against you later."

"I didn't mean to stop her." He shook his head, paused, and dropped his voice. "Kid, I'll be straight with you. Your mother had a hard time when she had you. I've always felt like I owed her for it. Twenty-odd years later, if she goes through that again because of this, I..."

He didn't finish. I'd never seen that soft side of him and didn't know what to do with it. He looked down, thumb on the rim of the cup, and finally, like he'd decided, "If

she really wants it, then... we listen to her." He looked up with something like relief. "If she really does have one, you're the big brother. You'll have to help her with it."

I looked at my knees. "Okay, Dad."

He stood and patted my shoulder. "All right, get some sleep." At the door he turned back. "Oh, and if your mother asks, say I agreed too."

"Okay."

The door shut. I sat on the edge of the bed with my back already damp. My phone lit — her: *Did he just come see you?*

One word back: *Mm.*

A smiley face, then, *Don't lock your door later.*

Around eleven she pushed the door open again. This time she said nothing, went to the bed, got under the covers, and put her face in my chest. I got my arms around her and felt her shaking slightly.

"What did he say?" Low.

"He said he agreed." Muffled in my chest. "He said... he owes me, so I can do what I want."

"Are you happy?"

Nothing for a long time. Then, "I'm happy. But I feel... so bad for him."

I was quiet. She didn't need me to say anything. She needed somewhere to curl up. I pulled the blanket over her shoulder and her breathing evened out. Insects outside, and from the master now and then the sound of him turning. She was asleep with her fingers in the hem of my shirt, like if she let go she'd drift off somewhere.

I kissed the top of her head, reached out, and turned the lamp off. In the dark her breathing filled the room like a tide.

At the table I put on the most dutiful face of my life.

He rarely ate at home, so she went all out: pot roast, a roast chicken, barbecue ribs, grilled shrimp, a big pot of chicken and dumplings — the table looked like Thanksgiving. He came in and smelled it and actually smiled. "What day is it?"

"The kid's home and you're off work on time for once. Of course you get a good meal." She smiled and ladled him soup, then pulled a bottle of good bourbon out of the cabinet, casual. "We're happy tonight. Want some?"

He looked at the bottle and his eyes lit. "Oh, what's the occasion? You're opening that?"

"You work hard. Let me spoil you." Perfectly polite. "I'll have one with you."

I ate my food beside her with a good expression and a whole play running in my head: *Mom's such a good actress it's a waste she doesn't have an award. She's clearly got something much more interesting planned tonight than this bottle.*

Two drinks in he started talking — work, the useless new hires, projects blocked by corporate. She sat next to him nodding and agreeing and topping him up so smoothly it looked like she was just being attentive. He enjoyed it, got more animated, and the more animated he got the more he drank.

"It's so good at home..." His face was red already. "All those client dinners, you have to put on a show, it's exhausting."

"Then eat at home more." Another piece of food onto his plate, voice gentle. "Your son and I look forward to you coming home."

I watched him swallow that whole, like a sugared pill. He probably couldn't tell how much of *look forward to you coming home* was real and how much was the opening move. He tipped the last glass back, satisfied, speech already thickening. "My wife's the best... my kid's the best too..."

"All right, all right, you've had plenty. Go lie down." She stood, walked him toward the bedroom, and glanced back at me. The glance was flat, almost blank, and I understood it.

Phase one, done.

After he was in, I sat in the living room a while. Some game show was on, laugh after laugh, and I heard none of it. Ten minutes later she came out, eased the bedroom door half shut behind her, and made a *shh* at me.

"Out?" Breath.

"Out cold. He was snoring twice." She came over and stood in front of me, looking down. No living room light, only the flicker of the screen on her face, making the shine in her eyes clear. "He's already agreed to 'another one'... so tonight's my best window."

Her tone was steady on *best window.* Her fingers were in her hem, going white.

"Scared?" I asked.

She paused, eyes down. "Scared. But I've thought it through these days. Anyway... he won't remember anything when he wakes up." She bent, her head close to my ear, very low and shaking. "I won't even change the sheet. I'll leave it. If he sees it in the morning he'll just think it was me."

My throat moved.

"Ready?" she asked.

I didn't answer. I stood and took her wrist. Her fingertips were cold and she trembled and didn't pull away. I pulled her along and we walked together toward the half-open bedroom door.

A dim yellow line came through the crack — the night light on his side, which he always leaves on. I pushed the door and the smell of the room came out. The sheets were light gray, changed two weeks ago. His water glass and phone were on the nightstand.

He lay on his side with his back to us, snoring evenly and deep, like an old mower dragging out a long rhythm in the quiet.

She stopped beside me and looked at the shape on the bed like it was a boundary line. Then she reached up and eased the strap off her shoulder. The slip dress slid down without a sound, like satin off a branch, and left her shining faintly in the lamp light. Nothing underneath.

"Could you... check if he's asleep?" Whispered.

I went over, stood by the bed, and leaned down to his face. Eyes shut, mouth a little open, cheeks red with liquor, breathing heavy and even. Completely under.

"Out cold," I said.

She nodded, and then, on the bed that belonged to her and him, she walked around to his side like she had every right to be there. She knelt on the mattress, leaned down slowly, and said quietly at his ear, "Mark. Sleep."

He mumbled "mm," turned over, and stayed under. She sat up and turned to me. The lamp lit her from the side and the picture in the dim light looked like something that shouldn't exist.

She opened her arms. "Come here."

My knees were heavy. I went over slow, the floor creaking under each step. He kept snoring, oblivious. I got to the other side of the bed and she took my hand and guided me onto my knees. The mattress sagged and rocked twice.

"You lie down, or me on top?" Low, and shaking.

"You on top. If he rolls over you'll see him first."

"Okay."

She got over my lap, arms around my neck, and looked down at me in the small light. Her eyes were wet, like moon on a hot spring. Her breasts hung over my chest, moving with her breath, the nipples hard as two cherries.

"Are you... hard?" Whispered.

I looked down. Of course I was. From the second the strap came off it had been burning, pressing the zipper like a log waiting for water.

She reached down and undid the tie on my pajama pants, letting it out. Her fingertips ran from the base to the tip and circled it.

"Mm... it's so big... it looks different than when it sleeps at home," soft and gentle, entirely feminine. "It knows where it's going tonight."

Chills down my spine and my hand closed on her waist. She let a soft sound out, lifted her hips, took it in one hand, parted the wet lips with the other, aimed, and sat down.

We both gasped.

Her body was a warm soft mold soaked for a long time, every fold wrapping me exactly from the entrance to the deep, like a hot little mouth sucking from all sides, tight and close. No adjusting, no probing. It went along the memory to the deepest place, like a key back in the lock.

"Mm..." She bit her lip and held a moan in, then let go and took it all the way. She leaned on my shoulder, panting. "It's in... your dad's right there. My pussy's holding my son's cock again."

She started to sway. The mattress creaked softly, one creak after another, mixed with his snoring like a secret duet. I lay there feeling her walls take me inch by inch and something close to absurd rose in me. This was their bed. His water glass was on the nightstand. The sheets were the light gray ones she picked last month. And now she was sitting on it, breathing soft, wet around me.

"Mom... you're so tight inside."

"It's so tight..." She lowered her head, her bangs on my forehead, tickling. "Because Mom's... doing something she shouldn't in a place she shouldn't... so her whole body's tense... even inside..."

Her waist moved a little more. His snoring paused. She froze with her hips in the air. Her walls clenched hard, a startled mouth biting down. We held still and held our breath.

He turned over, mumbled something, and went back under, snoring again.

She let it out, all her weight going limp, forehead on my shoulder. "You scared me to death..."

"He just rolled over." I turned my head. He'd turned to face out, his face an arm's length away, eyes shut, a drunk smile still on his mouth.

"Then... we have to be even more careful." In the near dark, her warm breath at my ear. "Do you want Dad to know his wife is being fucked by his son right now?"

She was trying to scare me, but her body was more worked up than before. The walls gripped, warm fluid ran from where we joined and soaked a patch of sheet. A chill went down my spine and I held her waist hard. "Mom, you're doing that on purpose."

"Yes. On purpose." She laughed softly, sly. "Because thinking about him right there makes my pussy clench tighter and makes me want you in harder."

She began to move, small but forceful, each one grinding deep, afraid of waking him and unable to stop. She gripped the corner of the pillow and bit the sounds back into quick soft breath.

"Mm... mm... could you — could you push up a little... a little more..."

I got her backside in both hands and used her weight to push up. Deep and exact, and she couldn't keep it in — a short sharp whimper got out of her throat. She clapped a hand over her mouth, dropped low, buried her face in my shoulder, and shook.

"Ah... ah..." Heavy breath on my shoulder, voice in pieces. "It's all the way in... all the way... you, too deep..."

"Mom, you're squeezing so tight it'd be a problem if I couldn't get in deep, wouldn't it?" I pushed up twice more.

She was like a fish hooked and pulled ashore, taut, pulsing, legs shaking. She could feel it throbbing and swelling in her, walls sucking, trying to hold every drop. She braced and straightened slowly, moonlight through the curtain on skin filmed with sweat.

"Then... put it all in me." At my ear, lying on me. "In Mommy's pussy... fill Mommy up... plant a seed in there..."

I rolled her under me. She went on her back on the light gray sheet, an arm's length from him. His chest rose and fell, even and heavy, an oblivious bystander to the whole thing. I looked at her and she looked at me. She put a hand over her mouth, but her eyes were a whole night sky. Then she took the hand away and mouthed, *Come on.*

I got her knees and pushed back in and started hard and deep. The mattress creaked fast, mixed with his snoring, a dangerous duet. She bit her hand and pushed every sound into muffled groans, but her eyes stayed on me, saying *harder, I can take it, more.*

The last dozen strokes I was nearly over the edge. She was a mother, somebody's wife, the woman on this bed, her body's memory locked to my shape; and she was also my sin, my consequence, my other clay. My hips stopped taking orders and just drove to the deepest place, and then it poured out of me in wave after wave.

She went rigid, toes curled, walls spasming like a thirsty mouth swallowing everything clean. After a long time she loosened and lay there, chest heaving, belly faintly swollen like a filled container.

We lay to the sound of his snoring and neither of us spoke. After a while she looked down at her belly and up at me, and her lips curved before she whispered, barely audible, "The sheet... doesn't need changing."

I know what she meant. The wet, the spill, all of it stays on the sheet. When he wakes up and sees the mess, his liquor-soaked brain will only remember a long beautiful dream, and he'll comfortably decide it was proof of his own drunk tenderness.

She propped up, bent, took his water glass off the nightstand, and drank the last of it. Then she ran a fingertip around the rim, glanced at the damp patch, then at me, and whispered, "Go to sleep. In the morning, remember to act convincing."

"You too."

She pressed her lips together and curved them, then lay back down beside him and pulled the blanket up. I got off the bed and straightened my clothes, and at the door I looked back. She was on her side, back to me, blanket to her shoulder. He snored on; she seemed to have her eyes shut already. From behind she looked like any wife asleep next to her husband, a world away from the woman who'd just been sitting on me.

I eased the door open and went back to my room.

The next morning, when the sun came into the living room, he woke up.

He came out rubbing his forehead. He looked up and saw her in the kitchen in the light green blouse, hair in a low bun, holding a bowl of cream of wheat. She turned at the sound, let her eyes rest on him a moment, then lowered them, her voice carrying just the right amount of shy. "You're up. Head hurt?"

He coughed. "I drank a little too much... did I... do something strange?"

She pressed her lips together and didn't answer right away. She hesitated, then gave him a reproachful look. "What do you think? The sheet's... so wet."

He paused, ears going red, clearly reaching for a memory and finding only a warm blur. "Ah... last night... I think I did..."

"You don't even remember and you're asking me?" She put the bowl on the table, shy and thin, without a trace of complaint. "You're that age and you still can't pace yourself. Go wash your face, your son's made you coffee."

Guilty and a little smug, he scratched the back of his head and muttered, "God, too much to drink," and went into the bathroom. I stood from the couch and set the fresh coffee on the corner of the table. She leaned out of the kitchen doorway and we caught each other, and there was a cunning in her eye only I could read. She didn't speak, just put her palm on her belly through the thin cotton, pressing, like confirming a secret with no name yet.

She looked up and met my eyes, smiled slightly, and tapped the back of my hand twice with one fingertip — a warm signal left under the table.

Then she turned and went back to serving the cereal.

His snoring came down the hall like an old broken exhaust fan.

I stared at the ceiling and counted to about thirty and my phone lit up.

He's asleep. Come here, be quiet.

Before that message I'd already decided to sleep. But opportunities are like stray cats in the house — if you don't chase them they come and rub your ankles. I threw the covers back and put my feet on the floor. Hall light came under the door like a line of water. I stood two seconds to be sure there was no other movement from the master, then opened it.

The master door was ajar. Warm yellow night-light came through the crack, exactly enough for atmosphere.

I pushed in. First thing, his snoring, deep as a stone on his chest. On his side, blanket to the shoulders, cheeks still red with drink, breathing even. A water glass on the nightstand with drops still on it, like someone had set it there on purpose. Everything calm — so calm you couldn't tell what was about to happen in ten minutes.

There was a half wall of wardrobe by the door. She was leaning on it in the shadow, waiting.

One strap of the light gray silk nightgown was down on her arm and her shoulder was bare. Her hair was loose, the ends in a mess on her chest, like she'd been turning over a long time without sleeping. She saw me and didn't say anything, just lifted her chin at him and crooked a finger.

I went. She got her arms around my neck and pressed in. Her lips brushed my ear, breathy as a feather landing: "He had two before bed and he just went out. He's out cold."

"You waited for him to drop off on purpose?"

"What else?" She smiled, eyes crinkling. "We can't have our son make a wasted trip."

She went on her toes and kissed me. Her tongue was a small animal prying my lips open and drawing back, waiting for me to follow. One arm around her waist, the other under the side seam of the nightgown. No bra. From the strap to her waist the skin was warm like jade from the blankets. Her nipples were already hard, small, trembling under my fingertips.

She went limp when I touched her, leaning on my chest, letting a soft "mm" out and then biting her lip. We were a few steps from him. The half wall only let us see the outline of the back of his head. But the snoring was clear as a warning line.

"Quiet," she said.

"How do I be quiet when you're squeezing this tight?"

She flushed and pinched my waist lightly. I got her hips, lifted her, and leaned her against the wardrobe side panel. I pushed the nightgown up around her waist. Her underwear was soaked through, thin as a film of water, clinging to her thighs. I hooked the edge and pulled, and she lifted a leg obediently and let it slide down.

Steaming, glistening, the lips parted, an overfull flower in rain.

"You did it this morning and you want it again now?" Low.

"We did it this morning and you didn't come inside." She leaned on my shoulder, muffled and sticky. "I've waited all day for this... stop stalling, put it in."

I took the hard length, pressed it to the wet opening. She gasped, went tight all over, shoulders drawn up like a cat about to land. I pushed slowly, the warm walls closing from all sides, tight and slippery, a ripe little mouth that wouldn't let go. She tipped her head back, throat moving, swallowing a gasp into a whisper.

"Mm... so deep... you're all the way in."

"Mom's this tight, of course it goes deep."

"Stop being clever — ah..."

I got one of her legs and began to work slowly. Every stroke went deep and knocked her back against the panel with a soft thump, thump. She bit her hand hard and pushed her moans into muffled groans, but her eyes stayed open, fixed on the bed, making sure he hadn't turned.

"Don't just look over there," I whispered. "Look at me too."

She brought her eyes back, reddening, and gave me a shy, alluring glare. "You... how are you jealous at a time like this?"

"I'm not jealous. I just want you to see who's fucking you."

That made her start and her walls clamp hard, a small mouth sucking. I nearly lost it, got her waist, and went faster. She shook like a leaf, hands clenched, teeth down, and couldn't hold the sobs back, so she bent and buried her face in my neck and turned all of it into damp, indistinct vibration.

"Son... hurry, hurry up and come inside..." she mumbled. "Today's a good day... inside, let Mommy get pregnant..."

"You'll get pregnant."

"Mm... fill Mommy's tummy... give Mommy a baby..."

She was practically begging at my ear. I was at the end, got her hips, and drove deep. It came in waves, hot enough to make her shake. Her walls twitched like a hungry mouth, trying to swallow every drop. I stayed in, wouldn't pull out, until the throbbing died. Her legs couldn't hold her and I lowered her slowly. She leaned on me, panted a while, looked down at her belly, and looked up with wet lashes.

"So much..." She pressed the faint swell. "I held it all in. None leaked."

She brought her legs together carefully, bent for the underwear on the floor, and didn't put it on, just held it. She went to the bed and looked at him. Still out, snoring evenly, completely unaware. Her lips curved, a knowing smile. Then she waved me off. I backed to the doorway and she called me softly again.

"It's noon. He'll be in the office on a call," she said. "The utility closet door locks from the inside."

Then she got back into bed, lay down next to him, and shut her eyes like nothing had happened. I stood in the doorway looking at it and thought that human acting was unfathomable. I shut the door for her and the hall went quiet.

He ordered takeout for lunch. He sat at the head of the table eating and complaining about how fast the weekend went. She sat diagonally across from me in the light green blouse, hair in a low bun, pearls in, elegant as a magazine. She put food on his plate and set a napkin beside him, every move gentle and considerate, nothing showing. I kept my head down and my face controlled. Under the tablecloth her toes had gotten out of a slipper somewhere and brushed my ankle and drew back.

I looked up. She was drinking soup with her head down, lashes low, as if nothing had happened.

After the meal he went into the office as expected. The sound of a video call came through the door, broken up, probably a project review. She carried two cups into the kitchen, set one down, and glanced back. The glance was light, a leaf on water. I put my bowl down and followed her to the utility closet door off the balcony. She pushed it, slipped in, and I went after and shut it and turned the lock.

The closet was small — detergent, mops, boxes, a stack of old newspapers. The window was high and threw a slanted beam through the dust, turning it to light. The dryer was against the wall, its top cool. She leaned on it and looked up at me, eyes bright in the dim, hiding a small patch of sun.

"How long's his call usually run?"

"An hour at least," she said. "Enough for you to take your time, and enough for us to hurry."

"So, fast or slow?"

Nothing. She reached out and undid the bottom button of her blouse, then another, then another. The green silk came off her shoulders and showed a light bra. She bent, stepped out of the skirt, sat on the dryer, opened her legs, and looked me over.

"I want to stand," she said. "You come from behind."

"Aren't you afraid he'll come out for water?"

"Then," with a smirk, "you'd better get my legs weak fast."

I didn't disappoint her. She leaned on the dryer, back to me, skirt and panties at her ankles. I pressed in from behind, took myself, aimed at the wet opening. She was wetter than in the morning — it went in with almost no guidance, and the second it did we both gasped.

"Ah... you... are you bigger again...?"

"Mom, you've gotten tighter."

"Don't put it on me — mm — don't stop, keep going..."

I got her waist and worked. The metal of the dryer carried the rhythm and the hem of her clothes shook with it. She gritted her teeth to keep it down, but the wet slap was amplified in the small room like surf. Sun fell from above onto the back of her neck and her shoulder blades and left a sheen on the white.

Her belly was against the cold metal and shivering, and she didn't pull away, she arched lower. From behind her breasts hung and swung with each hit, two ripe fruits on a branch. I reached under her arm, got one, and worked the hard nipple with my fingertips. She gasped and went tight, voice breaking. "You — there again — I have to wear a blouse tomorrow..."

"What's wrong with a blouse? You don't need a bra under a blouse."

"You — you scoundrel..."

She cursed and her body arched back into the rhythm anyway. I pinched the nipple a little harder and she put her face in her arms and let out a run of soft sticky sounds from her nose. The dryer hummed and her back trembled like current going through it.

"Come," she said, sulky. "Come inside, so Mom can use your seed to make dinner."

I went faster, as deep as I could, and poured it into her again. She shook all over, walls sucking and swallowing, like she was trying to set every drop into herself. I lay panting on her back and it took a while to pull out. The thick white mixed with hers ran slowly down her thigh.

She turned her head, eyes red, looked down between her legs, and muttered, "...Some's already leaked."

She reached into a box beside her, took a clean rag, and pressed it against the opening, like she was pushing it back in. Clumsy and earnest, and watching it sent heat through me again.

"Coming again tomorrow?" I asked.

"Mm." She folded the rag, dropped it in the basket, bent into her underwear, and did up her skirt. "He's at the office tomorrow, gone all day. We can try that couch."

She raised a hand and tidied the stray hair off her forehead. She was the dignified Mrs. Whitaker again, smiling as she made her husband tea. She unlocked the door and carried a cup calmly into the office. I stood in the closet looking at the crack of light cut in two by the sun and thought this house was really turning into a small private plantation.

After dinner he said he was tired and went to bed around nine.

She finished the kitchen, stood at the master door a while to be sure he was snoring, then pushed mine open. No knock, no message. She walked in barefoot in the thin light purple slip, like a cloud. She stood at the head of the bed looking down at me. The straps were loose on her arms and the fabric at her chest was barely there, rising and falling, showing the shape of her.

"He's asleep," she said.

"I know."

"I..." She paused, fingertips twisting the hem. "I did the math. These next few days are an easy window. If you're willing, you can plant it for Mom a few more times."

"How many times?"

"Until it's willing to sprout." Her eyes went to my belly, cheeks pink, and she didn't look away.

Whether it was what she said or how she looked, my body answered. She saw it and laughed softly, then got her legs onto the bed and over my waist. The hem bunched at her waist and showed two smooth white thighs. She leaned down slowly, her breasts settling on my bare chest, warm. The nipples brushed my skin through the cloth, tickling like a cat's paw.

"Mom," I said, taking her waist, "wear this every morning from now on."

"Dream on." She pinched the tip of my nose. "This is only for in front of you."

She lowered her head and kissed me. Longer and slower than the one in the morning, like she was pressing a whole day of unsaid things into my lips. While she kissed me she reached down, took the hard length, stroked it with her fingertips, and ran her thumb over the tip. I jerked and she laughed, pleased.

"You're already this hard and you still won't say anything."

"I've said everything to you. I've only got one mouth left."

"So do you want to talk, or use the other mouth?"

Her body from her hair to her waist was a hazy bow in the lamplight. I rolled her under me. She opened her legs obediently and reached up and pulled the nightgown off. Naked on my sheet, hair on the pillow, nipples up, belly rising and falling. She hooked my neck and pulled me down and whispered at my lips, "Don't be gentle tonight."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Tired," she said, eyes shining, "but better worn out than sorry."

I took a nipple in my mouth and rolled it with my tongue and half her body went limp. I sucked and kneaded the other and the soft flesh overflowed between my fingers. She tipped her head back, moaning, waist twisting like a fish in warm water.

"You — you haven't even gone in yet... and I already feel like you'll flatten me..."

"Then squeeze tighter. I'm coming in."

I kissed down her chest to her belly and further. She knew what was coming and pressed her legs together, then let them go. I opened her thighs; her lips were soaked, a flower in rain. The point showed under the hood, round and shining red. I touched it with the tip of my tongue.

She arched like a shock had hit her and a sound came out: "Ah—"

"Quiet," I said. "Dad's next door."

She shoved her fist in her mouth and her eyes went red. I lowered my head, took the point in my mouth, and flicked it fast. Her legs shook, fingers in the sheet, muffled whimpers through her hand. Less than half a minute and she convulsed, a gush of clear coming out and running down onto the sheet. She curled up like a shrimp and then unfolded slowly, a flower opening in water, completely open.

"You — you're too good at that..." She panted, looking at me hazy. "When did you learn it?"

"Self-taught."

"Your talent's badly distributed."

I kissed her shut. She stopped arguing. I got her legs onto my shoulders and put the head at the wet entrance. She gasped; the head was already in. Hot and tight, walls still contracting from the last one, a warm tight sucking. Wet silk on every inch, holding and drawing.

I pushed slowly and she bit her finger and let a soft nose-sound out to say yes. Only when I was all the way in did she let a long breath go. "Mm... so full... really... so full..."

I worked. The angle, with her thighs up, ground over the place inside every time, like she was being peeled layer by layer. The voice she'd been holding back broke and echoed in the quiet. Moonlight came through the curtain and drew silver on her raised toes.

"Mom... I want to give you a child." I looked down at the faint swell of her belly. The love and the madness in my chest wouldn't stay in. "Let Mom, at forty-five, carry my son's child."

She seemed to be struck by it. Her walls snapped tight, thighs clamping my waist, voice shaking with tears: "Wh — what did you say..."

"I said, I want my mom to have a baby for me."

"You're insane..." she gasped, eyes shining. "You're insane... I'm insane too... mm... then put it in... fill Mommy's womb... give me a child..."

I went faster, all the way out to the entrance and all the way back. Her voice went shapeless, breath and sobs. The water glass on the nightstand wobbled, the mattress creaked in rhythm. His even snoring came down the hall, a strange disjointed taut counterbeat.

"Quick, quick, come inside..." She'd already pinched crescents into my shoulders. "Come for Mommy... let Mommy get pregnant... give it all to me..."

I pressed in deep, hips flush, and let go of everything again. Wave after wave poured in, hot enough to make her belly twitch. She tipped her head back, neck a long arc, filled all the way through, even her fingertips trembling. I leaned down, forehead to forehead, and we stayed connected in silence until the heat died.

After a long while she opened her eyes, soft and bright. She didn't hurry up. She reached for a pillow at the foot of the bed, put it under her hips, raised her legs, and brought them together, and whispered, "Let it stay a while."

I put the blanket over her faintly swollen belly. She shut her eyes, like she could feel the warm weight in there. Moonlight lay on her raised chin and closed lashes and made her face a soft white. After a long while she breathed out, took my hand, brought it to her lips, and kissed the fingertips.

"If I get pregnant this time," she said, "we're nicer to Dad. Even nicer than now."

"Okay."

She let go, sat up slowly, smoothed her hair, and pulled the nightgown back up from her ankles. She stood in the doorway a moment, turned, smiled slightly, and shut the door.

Moonlight through the curtain fell on the shell I'd brought back from the beach. It shone quietly like a pearl, like it knew everything and wouldn't say a word.

Chapter 10: Pregnant

I'd been a busy man lately.

By day a dutiful son — coffee and water for Dad, changing light bulbs, watching the news with him, listening to him say *you're a different person after that trip to Maui.* By night a farmer, tending my mother's field where he couldn't see, pouring out all the energy of twenty years into ground that had gone a long time fallow. Diligently, conscientiously, more diligently than I ever worked for a grade.

Day and night, and the seed took.

It was a Tuesday morning. Dad had just left and his coffee was still in the air. I was on the balcony loosening the soil on the pothos that was about to drown when she called my name. Not loud. With something secret in it.

"Come here a minute."

I put the trowel down and went in. She stood at the bathroom door with a white test stick in her hand, her face laughing and about to cry, lips pressed, eyes wet.

"Is that... two lines?" I asked, already knowing.

"Mm. Two."

Like she was afraid she'd read it wrong, she looked down again and then up at me. In that second a whole filmstrip went through my head: her braced on the dryer in the closet, her on her back on their bed, her on her toes at the sink — all of it, every crazy secret piece of it, ending in a small plastic stick with two red lines in her hand.

"Are you pregnant?" Hoarse.

"I'm pregnant." Softly, and then she smiled. "You're a lot better at this than your dad."

"..."

"Your dad still thinks it was that night because he was drunk and it only took once." She laughed out loud, then covered her mouth like the neighbors might hear. "The

doctor counted the dates and said it would land around those days. Your dad was over the moon. Before he left this morning he was rubbing my belly saying he's 'still got it.'"

I stood in the living room looking at my mother in the light green loungewear with a pregnancy test in her hand, eyes crinkled, quoting my father's stupidity, carrying my child. It was so strange it felt like someone had twisted my common sense and my ethics into a knot and shoved it back in my mouth.

"So... how are you going to tell Dad?"

"Nothing to tell." She wrapped the test in tissue and dropped it in the trash with the efficiency of an expired lipstick. "The dates are that close, he'll assume it was that night. All I have to do is nod and blush when he says, 'It was that time, wasn't it.'"

She actually lowered her head and pretended to blush, lips pursed. My heart fluttered and I nearly laughed. I went over and said quietly, "Did he say how he's going to explain the age to you when it's born?"

"A forty-five-year-old mother, a medical miracle, hm?" She looked up, sly. "Anyway. With your mother's face, another one isn't outrageous."

We looked at each other in the bathroom doorway and both burst out. Then her face firmed up and she poked my chest. "What are you laughing at? I'm covering for you in this mess."

"Yes. You hold it, your uterus will hold it for me."

"You dare talk back!"

She raised a hand and I ducked and the doorframe banged. She lowered it, looked down at her belly, and her eyes and voice both went soft. "But... there really is one in there. It feels so strange."

"What's strange about it?"

"It's like something quietly landed," she said. "The belly isn't even showing and it still feels like there's somebody in there."

I went over, squatted, and put my ear against her through the skirt. She looked down and her fingers went into my hair, scratching gently. I could feel the warmth under the cloth and her heart going a little fast.

"What do you hear?" she asked.

"I hear him saying, 'Dad, don't rush, there's plenty of time.'"

She laughed, her finger stopping on the back of my head. "He calls you Dad?" Teasing, with something else under it. I looked up and said, seriously, "Of course."

She didn't answer. She bent slowly and kissed my forehead. Light, and with a tenderness she'd never show in front of him. Then she straightened, smoothed her hair, and said, "All right, enough. Your dad's coming home for dinner, I have to get that fish out and thaw it."

"Want help?"

"Wash the fruit on the coffee table for me." She turned for the kitchen, her voice back to efficient and domestic. "Oh — your dad said this morning he wants to go to the furniture store this weekend. Cribs."

"A crib... already?"

"He said the due date's next spring, so now's the time to look and take your time." She stopped in the kitchen doorway and turned and smiled slightly. "He wants one that'll last until the kid's three."

"That's ours to buy."

I bent to the fruit and the tap ran. The mess in my chest swelled and softened under the water. A crib, bought on the father's belief that he's the father, and then put together with my own hands. The absurdity was past what my brain could hold, and it made a strange kind of peace anyway.

At dinner he was in an unusually good mood.

He didn't look at his phone. He put a piece of fish in her bowl, turned to me, and said, "Kid, I've got news. Your mother... is pregnant."

The word *pregnant* came out awkward and proud. I held my bowl and kept my face composed. "I know. Mom told me."

"Talk about a coincidence — one time and it took!" He shook his head, smiling, marveling at his own charm. "I told your mother, the Whitaker genes are just strong."

He got prouder as he talked. She sat beside him with her head down and her ears faintly pink. The blush wasn't put on; I knew she was a little embarrassed, because the genes in her belonged to a different Whitaker. I shoveled food in and chewed a long time and tasted nothing. He turned to her. "Did the doctor say anything about supplements? Should I have somebody bring folic acid back from overseas?"

"The doctor said just eat normal." She put her bowl down, calm. "Drinking less would be better than anything."

"Okay, okay, I'll quit, I'll quit." He nodded several times, reached for his glass, stopped in the air, and pulled the hand back. "Happy today. I'll skip the last one."

Looking at his careful, barely contained joy, I got a lump in my throat, guilt and pity together. He had no idea that the man who'd actually been *still got it* that night was sitting next to him with his head down over a bowl.

"Dad," I put my chopsticks down, "I'll come look at cribs with you this weekend."

He paused, then smiled. "All right! Kid, you come too, we'll pick together." He clapped my shoulder and turned to her. "See, I told you a younger one's good for us. Even our son's more sensible."

She smiled, lips together. "Yes. Thanks to you."

Her eyes came off his face, rested on mine a moment, and went away. Brief, and it warmed me like lukewarm water. After dinner he actually stayed in the living room with us a while before yawning and going to bed. He's been going earlier lately — maybe late fatherhood has taken a weight off him.

I sat on the couch and listened to the master door shut. Half an hour later the snoring started down the hall. I was about to turn the TV off and go to my room when my phone lit. No message. One word: *Come.*

I turned the TV off, got up, and went to the master without knocking. The door was ajar and the lamp inside was warm yellow. She lay on her side with the blanket to her chest, hair on the pillow. She saw me push in and didn't move, just pointed at him with her lips.

He was in his usual position, on his side, snoring even and deep. I went over and sat on the edge. She reached out under the covers and took my fingers. Hers were warm with a thin film of sweat.

"He just went out," she said softly.

"Mm."

"He kept touching my belly before bed saying, 'Daddy's here, baby.'" Then, "He wants a girl."

"So do you think it's a girl or a boy?"

"How would I know?" She laughed softly. "Whichever it is, it's yours."

There was mischief in her voice. I bent and kissed her belly through the blanket. She shivered. "Don't be silly... he's right next to us."

"Didn't you say he likes touching the belly? So do I."

"You, you..."

She lifted a corner of the blanket and let me in. I lay face to face with her, his snoring behind us like a heavy cushion. She looked at me in the lamplight, soft and bright, and ran a finger down my forehead to my chin. "Have you lost weight lately?"

"You've drained me."

"What nonsense." She pinched my waist. "I'm the pregnant one, and I didn't make you do that every day."

"You said yourself, 'the first three months, move as little as possible, but that doesn't mean not at all.'"

"I meant moderate!" she whispered, face red as a cooked shrimp. "If you dare put weight on my stomach I'll never forgive you."

"Then I won't put weight on your stomach. From behind."

She kicked me under the covers. I caught her ankle and pulled her in. She didn't fight it; she put her leg over my waist, a cat finding the warm spot. The snoring went on like tolerant background noise. She tipped her head back, lips parted, and let me push the loose hair off her forehead.

"He'll notice if you're in here too long," she said.

"Then you called me here."

"I just want you to touch it..." She pulled my hand to her belly and pressed it there through the thin nightgown. "I want you to know it's yours."

I put my palm flat on her belly, still soft and flat, and could almost feel something moving under it. Neither of us spoke. We just leaned together quietly, an arm's length from him, sharing the one secret.

After a while she nudged me. "Go back."

"Okay."

Just as I started to get up she caught my hand, low and soft. "Tomorrow... he's at the office all day."

"And then?"

"And then the utility closet's still the utility closet." She let go, turned her back to me, pulled the blanket to her shoulder, and acted like she'd never said anything.

I sat on the edge looking at the back of her head and her neck, bare in the air, white in the moonlight. For a second it felt like I'd stolen a treasure in broad daylight. I got up, went out on my toes, and shut the door. Back in my room I lay staring at the ceiling while my blood came slowly to a boil.

The next morning he left with his briefcase as expected. At the door he bent and waved at her belly. "Daddy's off to work. Be good, baby." She smiled, took his hand, and patted it. "Don't be late."

After the door shut she stood with her back to me, watching him go, and turned only after a long while. She saw me still at the table and smiled slightly. "What are you looking at? Not enough yet?"

"I'll never get enough of the devoted-wife act."

"Stop being smart. Dishes."

She turned into the closet and left the door open. I put my chopsticks down, put my bowl in the sink, wiped my hands, and went to the half-open door. She was standing by the dryer holding a shirt she'd just taken down, like she'd been waiting. I shut the door behind me and the latch clicked and cut the world off.

She leaned on the dryer, looked up, and spoke in the languid voice of early morning: "Tell me — if your dad knew what happens in this house after he leaves, would he still be happy to go to work?"

"Probably glad to get out."

She smiled and said no more, reached up, got her arms around my neck, went on her toes, and kissed me with an urgency that had no explanation. One arm around her waist, the other under the hem of the nightgown. Nothing underneath, and the crotch already damp, slippery to the touch.

"When did you get wet?" Low.

"Your dad hadn't even left... I was thinking how it'd be just us soon, and it started." She answered indistinctly and untied the nightgown as she did. It slid off her shoulders and showed a body gone a little softer with pregnancy. Her breasts looked fuller than before, faint veins showing, the nipples standing like two fruits that had waited all night. Her belly was still flat but softer and wetter than before, the first sign.

"Careful, don't put weight on the stomach." She bit the seam of her lip, turned, and braced both hands on the dryer. "From behind."

I got her waist, pressed the hard length against the wet opening. She gasped and her shoulders drew up. I paused a second, then pushed in slowly and carefully. She was hotter than before from the pregnancy, walls like a thicker, softer silk, holding firmly without squeezing too tight. She let out a held gasp and trembled. "Mm... so hot... it feels fuller than before..."

"Because you're taking it in better than before."

"Shut up... you farmer..."

I got her hips and worked gently. I didn't dare go big, and because of that every stroke was unusually clear. She put her head down and bit the back of her hand, pushing the sounds back into muffled moans. The dryer rocked with the rhythm and gave a low hum like it was covering for us.

"Can you feel it?" She turned her head, eyes red. "There's a little one in my belly... I feel tighter than usual... maybe he knows Daddy's here..."

That nearly finished me. I gritted my teeth and slowed. "You shouldn't say things like that right now."

"Why not?" Breathless, laughing a little. "He's still got to call me Mom and call you Uncle."

"You did that on purpose."

"Yes, on purpose."

She pushed back and took the head deeper. I couldn't hold it, got her waist, and after a few heavy strokes came at the deepest point. It poured in and she shook, walls sucking, trying to keep every drop. We panted a while in the closet before she straightened and leaned on the dryer. She looked down at the thick fluid running out of her, then at me, satisfied and languid. "Now the one inside should be more settled."

"You think this is hammering a nail?"

"Right." She bent, got her robe, tied it fast, and was efficient again. "Nail it down hard and it can't get out."

While she made lunch I sat in the living room and heard her humming. Light and cheerful, with something of a folk tune in it, as graceful as the pothos on the sill in the sun. This family was growing into a crooked, thriving tree somehow. Dad thought he'd watered it, and the real roots had already gone quietly into the ground between her and me.

After the meal he went to bed early as usual. She came out of the master with a glass of water and paused at my door.

"He's asleep," softly.

"I know."

"Your dad's been bragging to people again today about being a dad a second time." She leaned on the frame and looked down at her belly. "The baby kicked me while he was saying it."

"Kicked?"

"He's too small to kick." She looked up. "I just wanted you to know how happy he was."

She paused, then, "From now on, we treat him better. Even better."

"Mm."

She stood watching me a moment, came in, took my hand, and put it on her belly. Even through the thin housedress it was warm and soft, a secret not yet told. Her palm covered the back of my hand, fingertips pressing.

"This," she said, "is yours."

Moonlight came through the window and lit half her face. She looked down at our hands, a slight smile at her mouth, like a long-kept secret finally finding a crack of sun. Then she let go, stepped back, and waved me off. "Sleep. We're up early."

"You too."

She turned for the master. At the door she stopped, turned back, looked at me, and said nothing, just pointed gently at her belly and then at me. Then she pushed the door and went in. It shut behind her and locked his snoring and my whole heart in the same room.

By the fourth month things had settled.

The first three months she threw up constantly and lost weight. Even Dad got worried and cancelled two client dinners and came home to eat plain oatmeal with her every night. Now she was much better. Her appetite was coming back, her color was back, pinker than before if anything. Her waist had thickened and her chest was unusually full, so she walked with a sway, like she was carrying two ripe honeydews under her clothes.

She said herself this pregnancy was good at growing babies.

I believed her. For a month she'd been sneaking into my room every night saying she couldn't sleep and wanted company. Then she tested positive and the doctor said nothing in the first three months, so she behaved for a while. But every night she'd still take my hand and pull it to her belly and have me hold it through the thin nightgown.

She said she could sleep that way.

I'd look down at the slight swell and trace the faint line down it with a fingertip, like touching a stove warming up. And I'd think, *this is insane.* And then I'd see her eyes shut, lashes fluttering, breath going long and deep, and think, *so what if it's insane. If she's happy it's worth it.*

Today too.

Afternoon sun came through the gap in the curtains in warm gold streaks. She sat on the edge of the bed with her hair still damp on her shoulders in a beige maternity dress. The skirt was wide, past the knee, but the bodice was tight and the fabric drew her breasts clearly, the nipples showing a darker shade through it.

She was putting lotion on her calves, legs out, white, the round of her belly making a gentle slope under the skirt. At four months it wasn't hidden by the loose fabric anymore, standing round like a watermelon in the sun.

She felt me looking and didn't look up. Her voice was lazy with the afternoon. "What are you looking at? It's not like you haven't seen it."

"Your belly."

"If you're looking at the belly, look at the belly. Don't stare at my chest."

"I didn't look at your chest."

"Your eyes are practically on the floor and you say you didn't."

Caught, I stopped pretending and sat next to her. She turned her head, eyes bright, a sly smile on her mouth, and handed me the lotion. "Perfect. You can do my back."

I took it, put some in my palm, rubbed it warm, and went behind her. The neckline was low and showed her whole pale neck and shoulders. She'd taken good care of herself these months; even her back had gone rounded, the sharp shoulder blades covered by a thin layer of softness, like white jade in warm water. I ran my fingers down her neck and shoulders over skin usually covered, and felt her flinch.

"Cold."

"I warmed it."

"Your hands are just warm."

"So do you like it or not?"

Nothing. But we both knew what the silence was. I finished her back and went down to her waist. She turned a little to the side, belly out front like a gentle barrier, or an invitation.

"The doctor said at four months I can start exercising moderately..." She lowered her head, soft. "Your dad asked me yesterday if I felt off. I said no. He said good, and told me to walk more."

"Walk?"

"He meant walk." She glanced at me. "But I feel like walking isn't enough."

I looked down at her open neckline. Her breasts were fuller than before, the areolas darker, a ring of light brown, the nipples standing, nearly through the fabric. I touched her through the dress. She flinched like a switch had flipped and didn't pull away.

"Does it go up or down?" I asked.

"My nipples are so swollen!" Grievance in it. "The bra I bought a few days ago is tight again. They get hard at the slightest thing and rub on the cloth and it itches and hurts. Your dad even joked that pregnancy makes them delicate."

"Then let me see."

She pursed her lips and said nothing, and pulled the neckline down. Her breasts came out like ripe fruit, a size bigger than before, white, the nipples red and hard like two grapes that would burst. I lowered my head and took one in my mouth and she let a long sigh out.

"Ah... that's good..."

"Dad doesn't touch them?"

"He does, but he doesn't dare press, like a thief through pajamas." She couldn't help laughing. "He's afraid of hurting your brother."

"How do you know it's a brother?"

"What if it is? Anyway, he says he wants a girl."

I switched sides, tongue around the areola, sucking gently. She tipped her head back, the long curve of her neck to her collarbone, her voice unsteady. "Mm... suck lighter... I have to wear clothes tomorrow... but... but the other one itches... a little more..."

So I sucked harder, working the hard trembling nipple with the edge of my teeth. She went limp, hands on the edge of the bed, waist swaying, breathing changed. "Mm... your mouth... is a hundred times better than your father's..."

"If he heard that he'd be furious."

"He can't hear." She smiled with wet eyes. "He's at a client dinner. He said he won't be back till ten."

I set the lotion down, lowered my head, and kissed down her neck to her belly. I put my palm on it. Four months, round and full, a pouch holding the moon. I bent and kissed it and she laughed and pushed my head away. "Don't be silly, the baby's watching."

"Let him watch. Good chance to learn."

"What are you telling him?"

"That his mother's being taken care of by his father."

Her ears went red and her neck went pale pink. She didn't answer, just took my hand and guided it to the hem of her skirt, her fingers a little sweaty, the tips curled, waiting.

"Then... why don't you come in?" Soft and sticky.

I pushed her skirt up and the fabric bunched at her waist like a cloud. No underwear, and the soft plump flesh glistening, petals melted by the sun. Her lips were parted, fuller and more swollen than before, the engorgement of pregnancy. I put my palm on it and pressed lightly and she gasped, legs closing a little.

"Soaking."

"It's been... it's been wet a while. When I got out of the shower, thinking about you out there, I got a little..."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Shouldn't I keep some composure?"

She started laughing and bit her lip halfway, because I'd parted the lips with a fingertip and found the point under the hood. More sensitive than usual; one touch made her shake. "Ah... don't, not there... mm... I can't..."

"Then I'll go somewhere else."

I pushed a finger into the warm wet opening. It was a cozy, faintly pulsing passage, overflowing, running down my palm. She gripped my wrist, fingers tightening on their own, wanting it in and wanting it to stop. But her body was louder than her mouth; her waist sank and took the finger deeper.

"You — you can just come in..." shaking. "It's so empty inside... I want you to fill it..."

She lay on her side with one leg curled up, giving her belly comfortable support. The position drew the curve between belly and groin clearly, a warm waiting nest. I pressed in behind her, chest on her back, left hand around to hold her belly. Right hand took myself and pressed it to the wet opening.

She turned her head, eyes wet, voice soft like she was afraid of disturbing the one inside. "Gentle... don't press on my belly..."

"I know."

I pushed in slowly. Her walls were warmer and softer than usual with the pregnancy, silk soaked in warm water, wrapping from all sides. She moaned softly and her hand found mine on her stomach, fingertips digging into my fingers. "Mm... so full... when you came in... I could feel something move in my belly..."

I stopped a moment, waited for her breathing, then worked slowly. Light and slow, afraid of force, unwilling to leave. Her body was a warm container and held me completely. Her swollen belly was under my palm, rising and falling with her breath, and I could feel the warmth of life in it, merged with her own.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"It's good..." she mumbled, "but... a little too light... could you go a little faster..."

I did as told and went a little faster. Her breathing quickened, her hips moving with me, pressing back on each stroke. From behind her backside bumped softly against my belly with wet sounds. Her nipples rubbed the sheet and trembled with each one. She felt it and her voice went sobbing. "Mm... my nipples... they itch so much..."

"Want help?"

"Mm... you, rub it for me..."

I freed a hand, slipped it under her arm, got a breast, and kneaded it gently. She let out a soft, almost inhuman sigh and leaned back into my arms like all her strength had gone. I worked her chest and moved slowly behind her, the swollen weight swinging in my hands, the nipples between my fingers, rubbing with each stroke.

"Ah... that's it... it's so good..."

She started moaning, words breaking up. "You... did you practice this on purpose... why are you always so good at it..."

"Self-taught."

"Don't give me that... mm... your dad's never made me feel like this..."

Her walls clamped suddenly, so tight I nearly couldn't hold on. Her whole skin had gone pale pink, like the hormones had made every sense raw and the smallest touch set off a ripple.

"You're so tight inside." At her ear.

"That's how it is in pregnancy..." she gasped. "The doctor said it's so nothing leaks out..."

"Then should I be careful nothing leaks out?"

"What kind of question is that..."

She laughed, and every laugh made the walls twitch like they were calling for help. I sped up a little and the laugh turned to ragged sobs, then to a blurred breathy sound.

"Slow down... I'm close..."

"I'm waiting."

I worked slowly a few more times and the last one went deep and stayed. Her whole body tensed, walls spasming, and clear fluid came out of where we joined and left a dark spot on the sheet. She breathed fast and slow for a long time before loosening, going soft against my chest like melted candy.

I didn't finish. I waited until she came down from it and pulled out gently, the hard length dragging on her inner thigh.

"You haven't..." She felt it, hoarse.

"You're too tight, I couldn't bear to let go."

She smiled, shifted, turned onto her back, opened her legs to show the wet, and put a pillow under her waist.

"Again." She patted the pillow. "Face up this time. I want to look at you."

"Pressure on the belly?"

"Hold yourself up a little, don't go all the way up." She took my hand and put it on her belly. "The baby's in there. Daddy, hold yourself up."

My chest burned. I put the head at the entrance and slid in slowly. She tipped her head back and let a soft "ah" out and got her legs around my waist, toes hooking like anchors. I braced on the pillows either side and didn't dare put my weight down, hips suspended, working steady and rhythmic. Her belly nestled between my arms like a warm little hill, moving with her breath.

"Mm... so deep..." Her voice shook. "You're at the very end... it's so hot..."

"Is it good?"

"So good..." Head back, eyes red, like she'd melted from it. "So good... I feel a little guilty toward your father..."

"Then why keep going?"

"But if you stop I can't bear it..."

She got an arm around my neck and pulled me down so I could breathe at her ear, soft and sticky: "Come inside. Anyway... there's one in here already, a little more won't hurt."

Chills down my spine. A few last hard strokes, the deepest point, and it went out of me. She shook all over, walls sucking and clenching, trying to swallow all of it. After a long while I pulled out slowly and the cloudy white mixed with hers ran from the swollen opening. She didn't hurry to wipe it, just covered it with her palm and sighed.

"Feels like you just gave the one in my belly a little brother or sister."

"That's a weird way to put it."

"Then how would you put it?"

We were both quiet. Sun came through the gap in the curtains onto her belly and turned the curve to gold. Her eyes were half shut, fingers stroking her own stomach, greeting the life in it.

"Have you noticed?" she began, lazy and satisfied. "Your dad's been a completely different person these months. So happy."

I lay beside her and pulled her skirt down over her belly. "What's happened?"

"He used to come home with his face set, and now the first thing he does is touch my belly and say, 'Was our girl good today?' He's quit drinking because he's afraid it'll affect the baby. A couple of days ago at his company physical he brought the report home and told me his blood pressure and cholesterol were way down, his fatty liver went from severe to mild." She trailed off. "Don't you think that's... a good thing?"

"It is."

"Even though what we did... nobody would believe it if I told them. But his health's genuinely better, I'm happier than before, and the baby's growing steady." She turned her head, eyes bright in the light. "Sometimes I think what we did was probably the right thing. It's not ethical, but if it makes all three of us feel better... then I'd rather keep going down the wrong road."

I looked at her, at the curve of her belly shining in the sun, at the thin layer of tears at the corner of her eye, and couldn't tell if it ached or warmed. We'd crumpled up the rules ourselves long ago and stuffed them in that shell from the beach. But she was right. At least now this house felt more like a house.

She took my hand and put it on her belly, closed hers over it, and moved me slowly in a circle along the curve. The light outside went deep and gold, and she hummed a folk tune, very soft, like she was singing to the baby and to me at the same time.

Chapter 11: Blind Date

Dinner that night was probably the closest we'd ever come to a genuinely happy family.

Dad sat at the head of the table and didn't look at his phone. He spooned up some soup, blew on it, drank it, and let out an "Ahh" like a health-food commercial. "It's good to be home."

She sat across from him with her chopsticks up and the bowl of chicken soup in front of her untouched. Her appetite was better than the first three months but she still couldn't eat freely. She had on a loose pale pink maternity dress and the hem draped over her belly like a cloud. She'd just showered; her hair was up in a bun, showing her neck. The light lay on her collarbone, a little rounder than before the pregnancy, like a thin layer of jade under the skin.

He picked up a piece of pot roast, chewed twice, and put his chopsticks down. "By the way, kid. Dad's got something to tell you."

My chopsticks stopped in the air.

"I've been thinking, and your mother getting pregnant is a gift, a double blessing. No — a triple one."

"Triple?" I said, playing along, bowl in hand.

"First, your mother's pregnant. Second, I had a physical last month and everything came back normal, the fatty liver's down." He patted his stomach, proud. "Third—"

He drew out the syllable and turned to look at her for permission. She lowered her eyes with a faint smile and said nothing. He turned back to me, eager to spring it. "Dad's set you up on a blind date."

"...Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. I've seen the girl's picture. She's young and pretty and her credentials are excellent. Kindergarten teacher, both parents are teachers, a family of teachers. Your mother said she's a good match too."

He pulled his phone out, swiped, and turned the screen on me. Bright, neatly composed, clearly chosen with care. A young woman under a dogwood in bloom, white dress, long hair on her shoulders, shallow dimples when she smiled. Undeniably pretty, like a designed cover. Young. Clean. One look and you knew she was the type who'd teach nursery rhymes and wouldn't dare open her son's bedroom door at midnight.

My grip on the chopsticks tightened.

He went on. "Her name's Nora Kessler. Twenty-four. She teaches kindergarten at Cedar Ridge Elementary. Her dad and I were in the same class in college — we had dinner the other night and got to talking about you, he said his daughter's single, so we figured we'd put you two together. Sunday morning, the coffee shop on Kirkwood. You'd be interested, surely?"

"Dad, I—"

"Don't tell me you're busy, you've got no classes on weekends."

"I'm not busy—"

"So she's not pretty enough?"

"No—"

"Then it's settled." He smacked the table, picked up his soup bowl like a glass, and said, "All right, done. Sunday, ten in the morning. Don't forget."

My mouth opened and shut. Maybe no word covered the absurdity of it: *your father eagerly introducing you to a prospective partner while you've secretly got his wife pregnant.* I stole a look at her. She was sipping soup, lashes down, the spoon tapping the rim with barely any sound. She didn't seem to mean to look up. But the tips of her fingers on the spoon had gone white.

"Mom, do you think I should go meet her too?" Almost without thinking.

She looked up, met my eyes for a moment, and looked away. "Go. The girl's nice."

On *nice* her voice was soft. But I knew she didn't usually sound like that. She hums while she chops vegetables in the kitchen, she complains to me about the yellowing pothos while she waters the balcony, and her voice always has warmth in it. Those two words just now went across like they'd slid over ice.

"See, your mother said so too." He chuckled, ladled soup, let it cool, and pushed it to her. "Here, drink. Our daughter needs the nutrition."

She looked down at the bowl and hummed softly.

The second half of the meal I ate a little blankly. He talked at length about the Whitaker name and double blessings, saying things like, "Once your mother's delivered next spring and things are settled on your end, this house'll be busy," and "We'll need two more chairs at Thanksgiving from now on." She listened quietly, answering now and then, sometimes picking up a green vegetable and chewing it very slowly, like she was tasting something complicated.

After dinner he went into the office, satisfied, to call his old classmate and lock in the weekend. I put the dishes in the sink and ran the tap and the water filled the quiet living room.

She'd come into the kitchen at some point. She didn't say anything, just stood beside me and reached for the dry towels. But I saw her eyes rest on my face a moment and drift off like nothing. I shut the tap, dried my hands, turned, and faced her.

Her belly was noticeable now. Four months, round under the loose dress, a small watermelon in the sun. She leaned on the counter with a hand unconsciously on her stomach, giving off both gentleness and exhaustion.

"What do you want to say?" She went first, soft.

"I don't have anything to say."

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're beautiful."

She paused and her ears went slowly red, like a drop of paint in water. "...Don't talk nonsense. Your father's in the office."

"I'm telling the truth."

"Telling the truth doesn't help either." She turned her face away, eyes down. "Go meet that girl this weekend. She's young and pretty and the right age. She'd be a good match."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

I looked into her eyes. She looked up and looked back. The air went so still it was like something had pressed pause. The kitchen window was open a crack and the evening draft came in and blew a few strands of hair onto her cheek. She didn't push them back. She just looked at me, and her gaze had a thin indescribable layer in it.

"Mom," I said. "I've already got somebody."

Her fingers on the towel twitched. She didn't ask who, didn't ask when. She lowered her head and her other hand stroked her stomach, like confirming something secure in there.

"...Then I should go and meet her anyway," she said, hoarse. "The more people you meet, the better you know who's actually right."

"I know who's right."

"You don't know."

She looked away first. She picked up a dry towel and wiped her fingers, over and over, so slowly it wasn't wiping, it was waiting. But I didn't say anything more. Neither did she.

After a while she spoke, her voice back to its usual gentleness. "Your dad means well. Look how happy he's been, and his health is better than it's been in years. It's rare for this house to have a good atmosphere. Don't go against him. At least go see the girl once, have a coffee — just... just to make your dad happy. Okay?"

"And what about you?"

"What about me? "

"Are you happy?"

She lowered her eyes, her fingertips tracing the edge of the towel a few times before slowly speaking: "Do you want to hear the truth?"

"Yes."

"I'm a little sad," she said, quietly. "But I don't know if being sad is the right thing to be."

Her fingertips went around the edge of the towel again, once, twice.

"Your dad is right. That girl is good. You really are at the age where you should be thinking about getting married. I'm this pregnant, I can't act like a girl and stand in your way." She looked at the towel instead of me. "But you asked if I'm happy, and I..."

She didn't finish.

She turned, hung the towel on the rack, and smoothed her skirt down over her stomach. Her hand stayed there a second, low, like something under the cotton had shifted and she was checking on it. Then she took two steps toward the kitchen doorway and stopped with her back to me.

"Go see her on Sunday. Mom will pick out a nice dress for you."

She walked out. Across the living room. Into the master bedroom. The door didn't catch all the way; it stood open a hand's width, throwing a warm yellow bar of light onto the hallway carpet.

I stood at the sink. In the study, Dad laughed at something on the phone, loud and easy, the way he laughed at other people's jokes. My heart was a covered pot on a hot burner, rolling, with no place to go.

The moon was out over the street. It came through the window and laid the seashell's shadow long across the counter, the ridged one from the beach, the one she'd packed in the outside pocket of her suitcase and set on the sill the day we got home. She hadn't asked who the shell was for. She knew. She just didn't know for sure.

And I hadn't said it. Some answers you can't take back once they're out.

Sunday was going to be a long, long blind date.

Sunday's weather was good enough to be insulting about it.

I stood in front of the mirror in the light blue shirt she'd dug out of the back of the closet the night before, collar pressed, cuffs pressed, still carrying the wet iron smell of the steamer. When she handed it over she'd looked at my face a beat too long and said, "Wear this," and nothing else.

I said okay. Standing in front of the mirror now, I couldn't tell if she didn't want to lose face in front of Dad's old classmate, or if she wanted to prove something to herself.

"Ethan. Come on." Dad's voice from the living room, louder than it lives. "Don't leave her sitting there."

I got my keys and my phone and went out. Dad was at the shoe cabinet with one foot up on the mat, dark blue polo, khakis, shoes polished like he was going to church. He looked ten years younger than usual and slightly smug about it. Mom was on the sofa, bent over the strap of a low flat sandal, her light green maternity dress bunched up around the work.

She got the strap through the buckle, sat up, and patted the skirt down, and smiled at me like the morning hadn't cost her anything.

"I'll come too." She stood. "You three will be awkward. I'll keep your father company and get a look at her."

My heart did something stupid. She kept going. "Your dad says four people over coffee is more natural."

Dad grinned. "Her dad's an old classmate of mine. I've known her since she was in pigtails. And your mother's been low all week, she needs to get out and talk to somebody. Four people. That's what family atmosphere is."

Four people. I turned it over. Could anything be more ridiculous.

But I looked at her and she had her canvas bag on her shoulder already and was standing in the entryway, eyes flat as a pond, giving nothing.

"Let's go," she said.

Ninebark was up on Kirkwood, near campus, a narrow front and a long room behind it, wood tables, rattan chairs, warm bulbs, dried flowers on the wall, a row of pothos in the window. Not busy on a Sunday morning. The corner was quiet.

Nora Kessler was already there, in the window seat.

She was better than the picture Dad had shown me. Long hair back in a low ponytail, white dress, light makeup, clean as a glass of lemonade. She stood up when we came in and smiled like she'd been taught to. "Mr. Whitaker. Mrs. Whitaker."

Good voice, too. Clear.

Her eyes went to Mom's stomach and stayed a second and her smile got wider. "You're expecting? That's wonderful. I love kids."

Mom smiled and put a hand on her belly. "You teach kindergarten. You'd have to be patient."

She said it kindly, and then her eyes moved from Nora to me and back, appraising a painting. "Nora, sit down, don't stand on ceremony."

So the four of us sat. Dad and Mom on one side, facing the room. Nora and I on the other. Dad beside Mom, me across from Mom, Nora on my right. Checked tablecloth, hanging low, covering everything under the knee.

Sun through the blinds, striped across the tabletop. Coffee and toasted muffin in the air.

Nora pushed a menu across. "I got a latte. What do you all want? Their maple latte's good."

"Americano," Dad said, and then, for me, "My son drinks Americanos too. Don't let the skinny fool you, he's not scared of bitter."

Mom opened her menu and read it slowly. "Hot milk. No sugar." She closed it and looked up at me. "And you?"

"Me too. Iced Americano."

"Something cold first thing." Her tone was flat, so you couldn't tell if it was a correction or a worry. "Change it to hot."

"It's hot out, so it's fine."

The server took it and we all sat there a second. Nora picked it up, used to this, probably.

"Your dad said you just got back from Maui? Was it brutal? I went to Florida my sophomore year with friends and peeled for a week."

Dad laughed. "It's hot, but your aunt had a good time. I worked two weeks straight for that honeymoon." He said honeymoon like a husband, easy, and then glanced down at Mom's belly. "Trip paid for itself, though."

Mom looked down like it embarrassed her a little. She picked up her water instead of answering. I picked up mine and drank, trying to get out from under the word.

"What are you studying?" Nora turned to me and blinked, curious.

"Computer science."

"Oh, a programmer." She laughed. "So you'll be a really good coder, or whatever."

"It's all right."

"His grades are good," Dad put in. "Programming's steady. Nora, early childhood, that's a great field. Kids love a young pretty teacher, don't they."

"They say that. It's exhausting, though. I spend all day outsmarting tiny con artists." She made a face and rolled the edge of the tablecloth between two fingers.

It was easier than I'd expected. Nora could talk, and Dad talked over her in a good mood, and Mom said a few things with a warm fixed smile, the way a dignified mother sits over her son. But my attention was going under the tablecloth.

First it was the corner of something against my knee. I ignored it. Then it was fur, slow, up the outside of my calf.

I looked down, halfway, and stopped.

She'd taken her sandal off. Her instep was white, her toes long, and they were out from under the hem of her dress and across the gap between our chairs, toward me.

My heart went.

She was turned to Dad, saying something into his ear, easy, her eyes on the middle distance, like none of it was hers. Then she turned back to Nora, voice level: "Nora, do you live alone?"

"Only child." Nora nodded, smiling.

I pressed my knees together to hide what was happening. The foot didn't stop. It came up the inside of my calf, sole warm, toes brushing the side of my knee, slow enough to be mean. The sandal strap must have been hanging off her heel. Her ankle was white, the arch a long slant, and it slid down to my thigh.

My thigh jumped under it. Across from me she sat up straight, dignified, and tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear so the pearl showed. I'd been watching her for a month. Before, it read as gentle. Now it read like a signal.

"Is he hot?" Nora said. "Your face is so red."

"Little bit. The AC in here is turned up."

"It is warm in here," Dad said, and looked at Mom. "Aren't you hot? Should we get them to drop it?"

"I'm fine. It's just right." Soft, even. Under the tablecloth her toes had come down on my thigh, and I could feel the pressure of them through the cotton. She pressed and rubbed her sole in a small circle, like a massage, or like she was checking something. Then her toes walked inward, a little at a time, and found the shape I couldn't do anything about.

My brain went white.

She felt it. It was so obvious, so hot, so clearly outlined even through the fabric, that her toes paused and then pressed down, once, testing.

I got a cough out. "Went down wrong."

"Slow down, you're grown," Dad said.

Mom didn't say anything. She picked up her hot milk, drank, and hid her mouth behind the rim. Under the cloth her toes were moving again, up the shaft, and when they crossed the head through the fabric my hands closed on my own thighs.

Nora was telling a story about a kid who'd shoved Play-Doh up his nose. Dad laughed from his chest and said "Any pictures?" I laughed too, and it came out like a wince, because Mom's foot had changed angles and her big toe and second toe had closed on the base of me through my pants and squeezed.

I slid down the bench half an inch and nearly took the water glass with me.

"You okay?" Nora said.

"Yep. Fine."

I drank the ice water down. Her foot kept going, sole dragging up the length of me, toes circling at the top, then sliding back. Her skin was warm and the grain of it was coarser than a hand and strange, and it made the whole thing ache.

Then she pressed once, flat, and hooked her toes into the cuff of my pants.

She had lost her mind. Dad was right there. Nora was right there.

But the foot was inside the trouser leg, up over my calf. Every hair stood up. Her toes were cool, with the strap marks still on them, and they went over the ankle and up the inside of my leg, past the knee, up the thigh, to the middle.

She moved faster than I'd have guessed, surer. Her toes paused at the base of my thigh, then rubbed.

"Hm." It came out of me low and hoarse. I cleared my throat. "Restroom. I might need to."

"What do you need the restroom for? Coffee's not even here," Dad said.

"I feel a little off."

I started to stand and her foot slid up and her toes pressed the softest part of my thigh, and I sat back down hard, knees banging the table.

Dad looked at me like I was sick in the head. Mom drank her milk.

"Might be the caffeine," she said, and set the cup down. "It's not even here yet. Sit and settle."

Under the cloth her toes had gone down my thigh to the front of me and hooked the elastic of my underwear, and pulled it down.

"Actually I'm not good at ordering coffee either," Nora said, helping. "I have a coworker, her hands shake if she has a cup. Some people are sensitive. It's a real thing."

"Yeah. He didn't drink it before either," Dad said.

While they talked, my underwear came down over the shaft by two inches. It came out, thick and dark, and there was already a bead at the tip. Her foot came down on my stomach and slid, and then the whole hot length of me was lying on the top of her foot, and her toes closed around it and drew up, base to head, slow.

Something in my skull gave way.

The skin on the back of her foot was smooth. It felt better than it had any right to. Her toes going up over the head, with the rough soft of them, was nothing like my hand. I got a grip on my thigh and made noises down in my throat and dressed them up as a cough.

"Ethan, your face," Nora said. "Do you want me to get the server for more ice water?"

"I'm fine. The AC's just warm."

Across from me Mom smiled a little. She shifted and crossed one leg over the other, lazy, and the new angle let her hold the whole of me between her arches. Her toes squeezed and she drew up the shaft to the base, then cupped the head, and it felt like being carried along a ledge.

I was close. I stopped caring and reached under the cloth to press her foot, to tell her. My hand got to the table edge and she pulled the foot away, and then her toes spread and closed on the head and pinched.

"Ugh." I bit my lip.

"Oh no, is it heatstroke?" Nora dug in her bag and came out with a pack of tissues and pushed them at me.

"No, no." I wiped my forehead with one. Mom hadn't stopped. She could feel it coming. She let go and set her sole flat against the head and pressed, light and even, once, twice, right on the slit.

My reason went to dust. Under the tablecloth, in the middle of a bright Sunday, in a coffee shop with people in it, I held the bench edge with both hands and came. It went over her foot, and she held still, and then drew it away and rubbed the back of her foot on the hem of her skirt in the dark.

I sagged back against the bench like I'd been pulled out of water.

"Why are you sweating?" Dad said.

"Didn't sleep great."

Nora looked at me, worried, and pushed the tissues over again. "Here. Wipe off."

I took them. My hands weren't steady. Mom across from me picked up her milk and finished it, calm, quiet as a mother who had come to sit with her son.

"Nora, do you like movies?" she said, and smiled at her.

"I do. I haven't seen any of the new ones."

"Then you two should go," Dad said, right on top of it.

They talked again. Under the tablecloth she put her foot back in her sandal like nothing had happened. But her lashes were going in the sunlight, and she reached up and moved her hair behind her ear and showed her neck.

She bent and picked up the tissue that had fallen, folded it square, and set it on the corner of the table, careful, like she was setting down something that already

belonged there. Then she sat up and looked out the window. When the coffee came she pulled mine to her side, stirred it, and pushed it back to me. "Drink it while it's hot."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome."

She didn't look at me again. The sun came through the window onto the side of her face and made her look framed, calm and gentle and dignified, like the whole thing under the tablecloth had been something I made up.

Outside, the door swung and the afternoon came at me and I squinted.

Nora stood at the bottom of the steps with her phone, waving it. "So, iMessage later?"

I looked at the new contact on the screen and nodded. "Yeah. See you."

"Come by whenever," Dad said, generous. "Your aunt's stuck at home pregnant and bored, she could use the company."

"Okay. Bye, Mr. Whitaker. Bye, Mrs. Whitaker."

Mom was a step behind Dad and off to the side, the green dress moving in the wind. She had the measured smile on, jade and sunlight, and her hand was on her belly and her fingers were going slowly back and forth over the cotton.

"Let's go," she said.

On the way home Dad talked the whole way about how great Nora was, how solid her parents were, what a double celebration it would be. I held the wheel and agreed at intervals. Mom sat in the back and looked out the window. I couldn't hear her breathe. In the mirror I got the corner of her profile, watching the trees go by.

At home Dad said he was tired and went to lie down. Mom stood in the living room a second and then went into the kitchen. I went to my room and shut the door and stood against it until the heat in my pants went down.

Her foot under my trouser leg. Her toes on the head through my underwear. The sole was rougher than her palm and cooler than her fingers, and it had felt like being stepped on in a way that made everything in me stand up.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked down. There was a ridge in my jeans again you could see from across the room.

I put on loose sweats and tried to think about my fall schedule. My phone lit up. Nora. *Did you get home okay?*

I looked at it for two seconds and typed *Yep, home* and locked it.

I didn't have the energy for another girl. I already had one in my head who wasn't supposed to be there.

Dinner was quiet. Dad, pleased with himself, opened a beer and put a bowl of chicken noodle soup in front of Mom. "There. Eat something."

She took it and ate a little and didn't look at me. Then she set the spoon down harder than she needed to.

"I'm done. I'm tired, I'm going to shower."

She pushed her chair back in the gray cotton nightgown, her belly making a small drum of the fabric, and went down the hall without looking at me.

Dad watched TV a while and was in the bedroom before nine-thirty. The door stayed cracked and pretty soon the snoring started, even and deep.

I sat in my room with the door shut and the screen in front of me and wrote nothing.

Around ten there were footsteps in the hall, soft, one at a time, until they got to my door and stopped.

No knock.

The knob turned and the door came open.

She stood in the doorway in the gray slip nightgown, straps off her shoulders, the neckline low and lit by the hall. She didn't come in. She tilted her head and looked at me with no expression and no smile, and her eyes were bright and loaded with something she wasn't going to name.

"Mom?"

She came in, closed the door, and turned the lock. The click went off in the room like a stone dropped in deep water.

She stood at the foot of the bed, looking down. "Did you add her?"

"...Yeah."

"Is she pretty?"

"...She's fine."

"Fine." She said it back and smiled with her mouth and not her eyes. "I added her too. I've already thought of what to say to her tomorrow. *The weather's nice, are you free this weekend?* Want to try it?"

"Mom."

"Don't call me Mom." She came a step in, her belly pushing out from under the nightgown like a small shield. "When you were in that coffee shop and I had my foot on you and made you come under the table, did the word Mom even occur to you?"

I had nothing.

She stood there, and her eyes went down the front of my sweats and stayed. Then she smiled, slow, and it was not a nice smile. "Your dad says you met her, then you came home and hid in your room and coded. I guess you're still thinking about her."

"I'm not."

"Then what's that in your pants?"

I looked down. She didn't wait for the explanation. "If you like her, go. I won't stop you. I'm pregnant, I can't stop you from seeing people."

She walked over, sat on the edge of the bed, and looked down at her belly and stroked it with two fingers. "But if you sleep with me tonight and text her tomorrow, is that reasonable?"

I sat down beside her and took her hand. She didn't pull away and she didn't hold on. She looked at the gap between us.

"I added her because Dad was watching. I couldn't say no." I said. "You know who's in my head."

"I know." She looked up, and there was a little acid in it. "But the two of you looked good standing there. Your dad says your signs are compatible."

"What do signs know."

"Then what do you know?"

I took her wrist and pulled her palm up and kissed it. Her fingers jumped.

"That counts," I said.

Her eyes filled. The cold went out of her face all at once and left something wronged underneath.

"When I watched you laughing with her today, I wanted to lock you in a room." She had her head down and her voice was small. "But I can't. Your dad thinks it's for your own good and so do I. And there's this other thing in me. I'm petty. I'm petty enough to be jealous of a kindergarten teacher."

"You're carrying my kid. What are you jealous of?"

She snorted. "Who says the kid lets you have anything."

"He'll give in. His dad gave in to his mom."

She laughed in spite of herself, and it came up crooked and soft. She punched my chest. "Smooth talker."

"So are you going to kiss me or not?"

She didn't answer. She leaned in and kissed me, cool lips and warm underneath, and her tongue came in small and careful. I got an arm around her waist and the other hand under the hem of the nightgown and up the inside of her thigh. Her breath went heavy and her knees gave and she came down into me.

"Today," she said into my shoulder, muffled, "while I was doing that to you under the table, I got soaked. My underwear was done, and I sat there the whole afternoon wet and cold, and you were laughing with somebody."

"You told me to go."

"You go because I tell you to? Since when are you obedient?"

I kissed her to shut her up. She made a wet sound down her nose and it went into my mouth. I pulled the straps off her shoulders and her breasts came down out of the silk, heavier than before, the nipples dark as flower petals.

I rolled one between my fingers. She flinched and then pushed her chest out at me.

"Easy. They're sore."

She got her hand into my waistband and took hold of me. Her thumb went over the slit and spread what was there. She looked down and there was something mean in her voice. "Doesn't seem to have had enough."

"It misses you."

"Does it miss me, or does it miss her?"

"Say her name again and I'm going."

Her fingers tightened. "You dare."

I laid her down on her side and got in behind her. Her belly took the mattress and she settled onto it, and her waist had gone soft and loose with the pregnancy. One hand on her hip, the other down between her legs along the hem. She was wet through.

"Was kicking you with my foot at the coffee shop not enough?" She had her head turned, voice thick.

"Not enough."

"Then come in yourself. Slow. Don't put weight on the baby."

I lined up against her and she was so wet that the head went in at the first push and she took it all around me, soft and hot and close. She bit her lip and made a low sound from her chest.

"Mm. It's in."

"Mom, it's so hot in there."

"You. Slower. My stomach's tight."

I held still and let her breathe and then started, slow. She was hot and close and it held on to every pull and every push, and each one went through her like a fill and an ache at once.

She hummed, broken. I brought a hand around from her hip and took a breast and worked it. The nipple was hard as a pebble.

"Mm. Not so gentle."

"How hard?"

"Feel it yourself. They're full, it hurts, but it's itchy."

I squeezed harder and pulled the nipple out between two fingers. She shook and her walls clenched and my scalp went.

"You. Careful." Her voice wavered. "You have to feed your sister tomorrow. What if you wreck it."

"It won't wreck. It's elastic."

"You get worse at talking all the time." She pushed her hips back and took me deeper. I held her hip and kept the same short rhythm. Her breath went ragged and she pushed her sounds into the sheet. Her belly moved in my hand with each one, a warm heavy little moon.

"Later," she got out, "if you really do marry somebody, will you still, will you still do this to Mom?"

"No."

"Then why did you add her?"

"Dad told me to."

"Dad tells you to and you do it. If I tell you not to go with her tomorrow, are you going?"

"Whether I go depends on..." I stopped on purpose. "Try saying her name again."

She laughed and the laugh got cut in half by a push and came out a moan. "Ah. Don't hit there. Mm."

"Are you going to say it?"

"I won't say it. Hurry up and finish inside. I'll forgive you after." Her voice went sticky and small. "Let Mom feed the one in her belly too, so she stops kicking me."

That did it. I went faster and she came apart under me, one long shudder that ran from her shoulders to her ankles. On the last few I pushed in as far as she went and came. It kept going, and she held tight and her walls pulled at it, working to keep all of it.

Then she went slack, on her side, breathing, her belly going up and down.

"That's so much," she said. She put her hand under it and touched herself. "It's all in."

I pulled out and it came after me and went onto the sheet. She didn't wipe. She lay there maybe fifteen minutes and then sat up, fixed the straps, picked her slippers off the floor, and went to the door.

She had the knob in her hand and didn't turn around. "Tomorrow, if she messages you, answer from the living room so I can see you."

"Why?"

"Because I need to know if your smile is really that good."

She went out barefoot. The door clicked.

Chapter 12: Dating

Monday I woke up to the phone buzzing.

Sun through the curtains, one hot yellow stripe across the sheet. I got the phone up and squinted at it. Nora. *Morning, Ethan. It's gorgeous out. Good day for a walk.*

I read it three times with last night still on me, and the last thing she'd said, *will you still do this to Mom.* I put the phone face down and rolled into the pillow. The case smelled like detergent. It didn't smell like her.

I picked it up. *Morning. It is. You going out?*

Yeah, I have to go in and finish a couple of growth reports. Kindergarten teachers do overtime too, turns out.

Is it that bad?

You write code, we write handbooks. Both of them are workplace injuries.

I laughed out loud at that one, alone in my room.

Then: *Hey, that coffee place you mentioned, I went last week and got the maple latte. It's so good. We should try something else next time.*

I sat with the phone. This is where it goes somewhere. Except the phrase *next time* took a detour and hit a wall with Mom's name on it. I was still typing when the knock came and the door opened.

"You up? Porridge is in the pot."

She stood in the doorway with her hair back in a tie, light blue housedress, neckline loose enough to show a collarbone. Her belly hung round under the dress. She had a dish towel in her hand from wiping the counter, and her eyes went to my face and then to the phone.

"Who's that so early?"

"Um. Nora."

"Oh." She didn't ask anything else. She turned and got a few steps down the hall and stopped with her back to me. "Porridge is in the pot. Eggs are done. Eat."

"Okay."

She went. I looked at the unsent smiley on my screen and sent it, plus: *Maple latte's good, try something else next time. I'll take you to a movie when you're through the busy stretch.*

I locked it. It felt like writing a check I wasn't sure I wanted to clear.

Breakfast was calmer. Dad had already gone. She put a bowl in front of me and one in front of herself and sat and ate small and slow, spoon barely touching the rim. Every so often she looked down at her belly and touched it, checking that whoever was in there was still there. I kept my head down.

"How's it going with Nora?"

I put the spoon down. "Fine."

"What do you talk about?"

"Her school. Lattes." I stopped. "We're going to a movie sometime."

Her spoon hung a half second and then went on. "Oh. Good. Which one?"

"Not decided."

"Tell me when you decide."

Why do you need to know. She didn't answer that. She finished, stood, took her bowl to the kitchen, and only at the door said, quietly, "Tell me, so I can find out what's good to eat near that theater."

She didn't turn. The hall light cut her profile in half. I finished my porridge and didn't answer.

All week the texting stayed at a normal, almost blind-date frequency. Good mornings. Good nights. She sent a picture of paper cuttings from her class, I told her about a graph problem from lecture. She sent a picture of an orange cat that came to the school gate to mooch, and I told her the cat had a better life than a junior with a 8 a.m.

It was comfortable. It was so normal I could talk myself into being an ordinary guy getting to know a pretty girl his family introduced him to. And then every time I did, I thought about her foot under the tablecloth, and her belly on the mattress, and her voice saying *let Mom feed the one in her belly too.*

So I kept the conversations from going anywhere. Good mornings, good nights, *get some rest,* and nothing that committed me. Until Friday, at dinner.

"How's it going with Nora?" Dad said.

I swallowed. "Fine."

"Fine. What's fine." He put his fork down like he'd been waiting all week. "Why don't you ask her to a movie? Your mother and I went to a movie and it took until the second one before I even held her hand."

Mom ate her soup and didn't look up. Dad said, "You kids today don't even know how to go to a movie."

I looked at her. She went on eating, extremely slow. She was listening.

"All right. I'll ask if she's free Saturday."

Dad nodded, satisfied. "I'll cover the tickets."

I picked my fork back up and my phone went in my pocket. I got it out under the edge of the table. Nora: *No class Saturday afternoon. Movie? A new animated one is out, people say it's good.*

I typed under the cloth. *Sure. Saturday afternoon.* Send. Three seconds. Across from me Mom's head came up a little. Or didn't.

"Get two iced teas with the tickets," she said, from over the rim of her bowl.

"Got it."

"Get hers hot. Cold's no good for girls."

"Your mother's thoughtful," Dad said. "Learn from her."

I ate and didn't answer.

Saturday morning I stood in front of the closet a long time for no reason, three shirts on the bed. My phone went. Mom: *She's downstairs.*

How do you know?

Saw her from the balcony. Then: *White dress today. It's pretty.*

I stared at that. Then I grabbed the blue shirt and went out. She was on the sofa with a glass of water, calm. "Going out?"

"Yeah."

"You have money?"

"Enough."

"Mm." She drank. I thought she'd say something else and she didn't. Only when I was at the door with a shoe in my hand: "Come back soon."

I paused with the shoe half on. "Okay."

Nora was at the bottom of the steps in the white dress with her hair down and two cups of iced tea, and she held one out. "Half sweet. The other's unsweet. Your mom said cold's no good for girls, so I got mine without ice. Figured you might forget."

I took the cup and looked at her. Clean and open, like a gardenia. I didn't know what to do with her. I was carrying somebody else around in my chest and standing in front of a person who had no idea.

"It's not far," I said.

She walked beside me without taking my arm or crowding me. Sun came through the leaves and went over her skirt in coins. She said, "Ethan, you weren't really hot to come, were you?"

I looked at her. No reproach in it, just a knowing little smile. "You've been somewhere else all morning."

"I don't have other plans," I said. "Let's go."

She looked at me another second and then nodded. "Okay."

The movie was good. An animated thing about a boy and a talking whale crossing an ocean. She was absorbed in it, little gasps. I sat with a cup going warm in my hand and watched the water on the screen and did not watch the aisle.

When it ended we went out into a street gone orange with the low sun. She said, "That was good. Thanks for coming."

"I wanted to see it anyway."

"Then next time one comes out, should we go again?"

I looked at her and nodded. "Sure. Next time."

She smiled like the whale at the end. We walked back slow, talking about nothing, at a polite distance, and at the corner by the building she said she could get home and I said it was fine. She went off toward the bus stop with her skirt moving and I stood and watched her go.

Then I went up. Mom was on the sofa with the TV on, gray housedress, belly resting in her lap, a glass of warm milk half gone on the table.

"You're back. Was it good?"

"It was good." I sat down next to her. "It's about a whale and a boy."

"Sad?"

"Little bit. At the end."

She didn't answer. After a while she put the milk down and stood, hand on her back. "I'm going to bed. You should too." Two steps, and she stopped and looked at me sideways with half her face in shadow.

"Next time you ask her out, tell me which theater in advance."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know if there's a place on that street that sells fried chicken." She turned into the hall. "You said it was good. I want to try it."

The second time, I texted her from the balcony and Mom watched me do it from the sofa with a basket of laundry in her lap, folding, not looking up, folding the same T-shirt twice.

Saturday she was in a light blue dress with her hair braided. She had the teas already. "I got here early," she said, like an apology.

Inside, the theater was dark and the trailers were running. Row seven. I let her go in first and took the aisle seat and put my cup in the holder and settled in to get through two hours.

The lights went down. The music came up. And a figure came down the aisle in the dark, slow, with the cautious gait of somebody five months pregnant, and stopped at the empty seat on my right.

I looked up.

Black hoodie with the hood up, mask pulled under her chin, a bucket of popcorn in her hands. No pearls. Hair down instead of tied, hanging over her shoulders, so she looked like a girl out for a late movie. If it hadn't been for the small round shape under the oversized sweatshirt I'd have walked past her.

"Mom?"

"Shh." She put the bucket in my lap and sat down in seat nine, unhurried, like she'd had the ticket in her pocket all week. "Don't talk over the movie."

I held the popcorn. My brain was a blank for a good five seconds. Nora was on my left with her eyes on the credits, and there was a pregnant woman on my right eating popcorn.

I leaned toward her and dropped my voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Seeing a movie." She picked out a kernel and crunched it. "Didn't I say to tell me the theater? I looked up the times when I got home. This one fit."

"Which seat did you buy?"

"Nine. Right next to you. Aren't you surprised."

Surprised enough to crush my cup. Her hand came out of the hoodie pocket and found my thigh in the dark and patted it twice, like calming a spooked dog. "Watch the movie. Don't think about it."

Twenty minutes in, the two leads kissed and Nora breathed *oh* and turned to me. "That was shot so well."

I nodded like a man watching a movie. In my peripheral vision Mom's hand went into the bucket and came out without popcorn and slid down the rim and landed on my lap.

Khaki, thin. Her fingers just lay there. It started to stir anyway. Her fingertips drew a small circle on the inside of my thigh, light as a feather coming down, and my whole body locked.

"Mom," I breathed. "This is a theater."

"I know." Her fingers went into the trouser seam. "So keep your voice down, or she'll hear you."

She took hold of me and I nearly came up out of the seat. Her palm was warm and her fingertips were tacky with popcorn sugar, and she rubbed them over the head twice. I bit my lip and swallowed the noise. On the screen the leads were still kissing, the score was syrup, Nora sighed at it. My knuckles were white on the armrest.

"You can't," I got out.

"Can't what? Move?" She laughed under her breath and her thumb went over the tip where it had gone wet. "You're leaking here and you want me not to move?"

She worked it slow, base to head, and then her fingertips at the head, and it went up my spine every time. The screen light moved on her face. She looked like she was judging a well-paced art film.

"Tell me," she whispered, almost under the music, "what would she think if she turned around right now and saw that?"

Her thumb circled the slit and dragged. I nearly left the seat.

"Mom, you..."

"Me what." She pinched, quick. "Think about it. She asked you to a movie and you got hard next to her from your mother's hand. Don't you feel guilty?"

She didn't wait. She went faster, two strokes up the shaft and then her fingertips at the head, and it came over me warm, and my breathing went loud and stupid. The veins stood up on the back of my hand on the armrest.

Nora turned. "Ethan, do you think they end up together?"

On the screen the two of them were across a river from each other. I got a hum out and had no idea what it meant. Nora smiled and turned back.

"She asked if you'd be together," Mom whispered. Her fingertips were massaging the head. "What do you think. Will you two be together?"

"Mom." Through my teeth. "Do you have to do this."

"I want the answer."

Her hand stopped. She didn't let go. She had the base between thumb and finger and she closed slowly, holding it and not letting it finish, and it was worse than anything.

I turned my head. In the dark her eyes were two bright coins and she was looking at me like the answer to a riddle she already knew.

"...No," I said. "I sat next to her and thought about you."

She held still a second and then her mouth curved and she let go and started moving again, easy now, like a reward. "That's more like it."

The movie ran. The leads embraced in rain. I sat between two women, one watching, one working me in the dark.

She changed it up in the second half, thumb and finger in a ring, up to the head and stopping under the ridge, circling there, and that spot has always been the end of me and she has always known it. My back went flat against the seat.

"Mom. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Go on." She let go and wiped her fingers on the hoodie and picked up the popcorn. "Don't keep her waiting."

I got out of the seat. Nora turned. "Where?"

"Bathroom. Right back."

I went up the aisle hunched over. The corridor was bright and I leaned on the wall and got my breath and looked down. There was a wet spot at the tip of the khakis. I breathed until it started to go down, and thought about her fingertips, and it didn't go down.

At the end of the corridor I heard steps behind me, unhurried. She came up with a piece of popcorn in her teeth, innocent, and didn't stop as she passed. She pushed the accessible restroom door and turned and crooked a finger at me.

I gave it maybe a third of a second and followed her in.

The lock turned. The light was white and there was nowhere to hide. She pushed the hood back and her hair fell and her belly was still round under the loose sweatshirt. She tipped her head back and her eyes had mischief in them.

"Uncomfortable, was it? Being handled like that by your mother in a theater?"

"You did that on purpose."

"What did I do on purpose?" She tilted her head further. "I happened to buy the seat next to you. I happened to put my hand in your pants. I happened to make you that hard. Which one was on purpose?"

"All of them."

She smiled and didn't argue. She stepped in and pulled my shirt up and ran her fingertips down my stomach, and then into my waistband and took hold of it, still half hard and coming up again. "Energetic today. In the theater it was jumping in my hand."

"It jumps if you hold it."

"Would it jump like this if she held it?"

She looked down and flicked it through the fabric and I got a hand on her shoulder. "Mom. What do you want?"

She looked up, bright and soft. "Nothing. I want to see who was actually in your head when she asked you out." And she went down.

Her belly made it awkward, but she got down and stayed down, and unzipped me. It came out and stood up and the tip was wet in the light.

She flicked it. "See. It does that the second it sees me. You say you're thinking of me. It's more honest than you are."

"Mom..."

"Don't talk." She put her mouth on it.

Warm and wet and her tongue at the tip, and my back hit the door with a thud. Outside the movie was a muffled wall of sound. Inside she knelt on the tile with her hands, hands that fold laundry and ladle soup, holding me and working her mouth up and down and looking up at me the whole time.

Her tongue went from the base to the head and she took the head in and sucked. I made fists and breathed wrong. She laughed around it and the hum of it went through me. One hand at the base, the other cupping and rolling, and her lips and tongue at a rhythm, and it was coming in waves.

"Mm." Loud in the small room. "It's bigger in here than it was in the theater."

"Don't talk."

"You don't want me to talk?"

"If you talk I'll..."

"Then what. In Mom's mouth?" She looked up with spit at the corner of her lip. "You made the same face in the coffee shop."

She put her head down and took it deeper, tongue flat and turning, and the back of her throat was close around the head. I couldn't hold it. I put a hand on the back of her head and she didn't flinch, she took more.

The light hummed. Somebody walked past the door and their steps came and went.

"Mom. Close."

She sped up, tongue quick at the head, hand going. It broke and I got a low sound out and it went. She stayed. Her throat moved and she swallowed, and there was too much of it and some ran out the corner of her mouth and down her chin and onto the collar of the black hoodie.

She came off it and coughed once and wiped her mouth with her thumb and looked at the spot on her collar and then up at me, eyes wet and pleased.

"Wow. That's a lot. Were you saving it?"

I was against the door with my lungs going. "Next time say something first."

"Then it isn't a surprise." She got up on the sink and straightened her back, hand under her belly, and looked at herself in the mirror. Her mouth was red and full and her cheeks were high with color and there was a wet, ambiguous mark on her collar. She took a tissue, wet it, dabbed the collar, fixed her hair, pulled the hood up.

"You go first." Her voice was back to even. "Don't leave her sitting there. I'll stand here till the color goes down."

"Can you stand here by yourself?"

"What, am I going to run?" She smiled at the mirror. "Go on. She'll come looking."

Her face in the light was still damp, like a moon just pulled out of water. I pulled her hood down another inch over her eyes. "Then go home after. Don't stay for the whole thing."

"Okay." She tipped her head back so her eyes showed over the mask, smiling. "You too."

I opened the door and the corridor air hit me. The movie was still going, a seam of light and music at the theater door. I zipped up and pulled my shirt down and pushed my hair flat and went back in.

Nora turned. "Everything okay? You were gone a while."

"Fine. Drank too much tea."

She laughed and turned back to the screen. I sat down and picked up the cup and drank, and there was still the smell of her in the seat next to me. Steps came up the aisle. She sat down in nine and picked up the bucket and held it at me.

"Want some?"

Flat, everyday. I put my hand in and took a kernel and ate it. Sweet.

She looked over, and something went across her eyes, quick, and then she watched the movie. I sat between the two of them with the sugar melting on my tongue.

I turned and pushed the door open and the cold air of the corridor hit my face. The movie was still going, a slice of light and muffled music leaking out of the crack. I breathed, zipped up, pulled my shirt down, pushed my hair flat, and went in.

The lights were still down. On the screen the male lead stood at the edge of the surf with his shoes in his hand, watching her walk away up the beach. I went back up the steps to row seven. Nora turned her head and whispered, "Why did it take so long? Were you feeling unwell?"

"It's nothing. I probably drank too much tea."

I sat. I picked up the cup, gone lukewarm, and drank from it. She laughed under her breath and turned back to the screen. I sat there and there was still a faint, familiar smell in the empty seat on my right.

Soft steps came up the aisle. Mom came back into it, sat down, picked up the bucket, and held it at me.

"Want some?"

Flat voice. I put my hand in and took a kernel and ate it. Sweet. She glanced at me, a small shine in her eyes, and turned back to the movie. Sitting between the two of them with the sugar melting on my tongue, I had the feeling this Saturday afternoon was going to leave a mark on my life.

The movie ended. The three of us went out together.

Nora didn't notice the extra person until we were past the lobby. Mom pulled the mask down under her chin and her eyes went wide and delighted: "Auntie? You came to a movie too?"

"I was bored at home. I came to crash the party." She smiled, mild, and stroked her belly with one finger. "The movie was great. Thank you for taking our boy out for some air." Her eyes crossed my face and settled back on Nora. "You two have fun. Auntie's going to head home."

She waved and turned up the street. The evening breeze filled the oversized hoodie and it billowed out behind her, and her belly showed under the hem, and she walked slow, one hand on her back. I stood there and watched her go.

Nora followed my eyes for a second, then lifted her phone. "There's a new dessert place around here, I think. Want to try it?"

I looked away into her clear face and got a smile up. "Sure. Let's try it."

At least tonight, whatever else, this girl gets home safe.

The clock on the wall hit 11:30 and Dad's old snoring started on schedule from the master bedroom, like a river that doesn't stop.

I sat on the edge of the bed with the phone lit. Nora's message hung there. *The movie was great tonight, thanks Ethan.* I stared at it, not sure what to say back, or whether to say anything at all.

The lock clicked.

Mom came in wearing the light gray silk nightgown, her hair loose and a little crushed on one side, like she'd already lain down and gotten up again. She shut the door, turned the lock, and leaned back against it, looking at me, and in the dim lamp her eyes were like a deep pool somebody had stirred with a stick.

"Did she message you?"

"...Yeah. She said the movie was good."

"Anything else?"

"Good night."

"Good night." She said it back slow, walked over, and sat on the edge of the bed. Her belly made a soft curve under the silk. She looked down and touched it with two fingers, comforting whoever was in there, or maybe herself. "She certainly knows how to pick her moment."

"Mom, we watched a movie. That's all."

"I know." She looked up and her eyes were wet for no reason. "I know you watched a movie. I know she didn't hold your hand. I know she said thank you. But when I think about her sitting next to you in that white dress, smiling and talking to you, I get..."

She took my hand and put it on her belly. My palm went flat on the thin silk.

"It's uncomfortable right here." Then she laughed at herself. "I'm this old and I'm getting jealous over something like this."

"Where's the old?"

"Stop. Don't try to talk me out of it." Her cheeks were already red. She let go of my hand, stood, and bent to pull the straps off her shoulders. The gray fabric slid down over her collarbone and her body came out from under it, held up by the belly. She couldn't hide her shape anymore. Her breasts were fuller, the nipples darker, like petals stained by berries, and her lower belly was round and low. She turned a little sideways so the light got all of it. No shyness, no flinching. Look at me, the whole pose said. This is what's in front of you now.

"Did she look at you like this today?"

"She didn't get undressed."

"So what does she think of you?"

"Just... watches the movie like a normal person."

"Like a normal person." She said it back slowly, tasting it. Then she bent and put her hands on my knees and looked up at me. "Do you know, when you're not home, I sit on the couch and think, is he talking to somebody like this right now? Is somebody else smiling at him with her eyes?"

"There's nobody else."

"You're not talking to anybody else right now," she said, and her hand came up my knee, "but you've got somebody in your phone."

She took hold of me through my pajama pants. Her fingertips found the shape of it and went up from the base, slowly, like she was making a point. It stood up in her hand fast enough that it was embarrassing, and the outline showed through the cotton.

"Mom, you..."

"Shh." She put her finger to her lips. Her eyes were wet and bright and pleased with themselves. "Your father's asleep. Miss Nora's asleep. It's just you and me in this room. Don't you want to touch your mother?"

Soft and pushy both, half coax and half order. My reasons went out from under me. I got a hand around her waist and pulled her at the bed. She came willingly, knelt on the mattress, got a hand under her belly, and lay down on her side with one leg bent and the skin of her thigh showing. The hem was already bunched at her waist. No underwear. Wet.

"When did you get this wet?"

"It started when you were still in the theater." She turned her head and her voice went injured. "You were sitting there watching a movie with her, and I was watching you, and her hand was on the armrest so close to yours, and I just..."

She didn't finish, because I was already there, pressed to her, sliding in. She took a breath and then pushed her hips back on purpose and let me go in an inch at a time. Hot, wet, slick as silk in warm water, tight around every bit of me, and my own breathing went loud.

She tipped her head back and let a long sigh out of the bottom of her throat. "Mm. Finally. Full again."

"You're so tight in there."

"You're too big. Every time you come in it's like you're trying to stretch me out." She smiled at the wall. "So much I almost forget my own name."

I got an arm around her waist from behind and started slow. Not too hard, because of the baby. Not too gentle either, because that jealous little hole of hers was clamping and pulling at me, doing the talking for her mouth. Her breathing broke up. Her fingers dug in the sheet. She pushed her moans into the pillow. Every time the head caught that spot her waist shook and the corners of her eyes went red.

"Today," she got out, muffled, "when you were watching that movie with her, did you think about your mother?"

"Yeah."

"What did you think about?"

"I pictured you here, waiting for me to come home."

"Now that you're home you're only allowed to think about me." She turned her head, and there was a shine at the corner of her eye in the lamplight. "Only look at me. Only touch me. Only give me all of it."

She leaned back to take me deeper. I put my mouth on the back of her neck and tasted salt and the warm smell of her skin. She made a soft noise and then laughed at herself. "Your bites tickle."

"So do you still want it?"

"Want it."

Soft and sticky, like a piece of melted candy. I got a hand on her hip and gave it to her properly. Her voice came apart into pieces and shook from her throat down to her fingers. I put my palm on her belly and held it there.

And then the phone lit up on the nightstand.

One buzz, then a short ring. The music went off in the quiet room like a dropped plate, right at the edge of the whole thing.

I stopped. Nora's name was on the screen.

Mom's breathing stopped. She turned her head, looked at the screen, then at me. Her eyes went from drunk to clear, and from clear to something I couldn't name, part smile, part sulk.

"Why is she calling at this hour?"

"I have no idea."

"Answer it."

"...Now?"

"Answer it." She propped herself up and pulled away from me slowly. I slid out of her and there was a thin, shining line left behind. She lay down on her side against a pillow and jerked her chin at the phone. "She can't sleep and she wants to talk. You can't just leave her hanging."

I couldn't tell whether she was testing me or genuinely pushing me off. The phone kept ringing, stubborn. I reached over, picked it up, and put it to my ear.

"Hello? Nora?"

"Ethan!" Clear and bright, with an embarrassed little laugh behind it. "Sorry to call so late, I... I couldn't sleep. I was just wondering if you were up."

"Not asleep yet."

I tried to make it sound normal. Out of the corner of my eye Mom was crawling over to me, slow, like a big cat that's decided on something, and she knelt between my legs. Her hair hung down and hid half her face while she looked at me, wet and half hard, lying on my thigh.

"I got kind of keyed up from the movie and I keep thinking about that whale." Nora's voice came down the line. "Are you home yet?"

"Yeah. A while ago."

"Good. Do you have class tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Elective in the morning."

"Am I keeping you up?"

"No, no."

Mom's fingers came down on me right then, light, like petting a sleeping cat. I clamped my legs and turned on my side to get away and she already had the head between her fingertips, going in a slow circle. It stood up again in her palm, aching.

"Ethan? Why are you a little out of breath?"

"It's nothing, I just... got up for some water."

She knelt there looking up at me with a smug little smile, proud and full of mischief. Then she put her head down and took me in her mouth. Warm and wet and her tongue going in a slow circle, and my whole back went stiff as a board.

"Ethan? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, go on."

She started moving. One hand around the base, working her mouth up and down, slow and thorough, her tongue finding the spot under the ridge every time. Like she was doing it deliberately slowly, taking her time, my scalp prickling. I wanted to warn her, wanted to say something into the phone to cover it, but her eyes were up on me and her eye corners were curved, like, what.

"That ending," Nora said. "Do you think the whale ever goes back to the sea?"

"I... I think it does. It goes back. It... it always belonged to the sea."

Mom laughed around it. She tried to keep it quiet and the hum of it still made me jump. She pushed her head down and let it sit deep in her throat, the soft inside of it squeezing, measuring. I nearly crushed the phone.

"Ethan, you're breathing hard again. Are you sick?"

"No. No, it's just hot in here."

"Is the AC up too high? Do you want to turn it down?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll go turn it down."

Mom pulled off and stood up and walked over, and she didn't touch the AC. She put her face down near my hip, her lips brushing the wet length of me, and whispered, "Better turn it down. You're so hot you can't even talk to people."

Then she took it back in her mouth and there was no slow in it now. She swallowed and released, quick and practiced, tongue winding, fingertips working the base. It came up through me like a wave and my head went empty and I almost made a sound I shouldn't have.

"Ethan, then... I'll let you go. Go to sleep early?"

"Mm. You too."

"Good night!"

"Good night."

The screen went dark and I couldn't hold it. My chest was heaving. I got a hand on the back of her head and she didn't pull off, she took it deeper, and something between a laugh and a gurgle came out of her throat. I breathed like I'd been running. She knelt there with her throat moving, swallowing all of it. Then she looked up with her lips wet and her eyes red and a lazy, satisfied smile on her face.

"When you talk to her on the phone," she said, "she's much better behaved than in bed."

"Mom."

"Shut up." She wiped her mouth, glanced at me, still half hard. "Go rinse off in a minute. Let me clean you up first."

She took a tissue off the nightstand, bent, and wiped me inch by inch. Very gently, like she was cleaning something she liked. The gentleness had nothing to do with sex in it. It was the way she used to wipe grit off my knees when I fell down.

I looked at her lowered lashes and didn't have anything to say.

"When you..." She finished, folded the tissue, put it on the nightstand. "If you really end up with her, will you still let me take care of you like this?"

"You always can."

She didn't answer. She looked up at me for a long time, then her mouth curved slow, like moonlight coming up out of water. She stood, fixed the straps, smoothed her hair, went to the door, turned back. "Then that's settled. Come lie down."

Her hair was still a mess and her face was flushed and she had the calm, certain air of somebody who had already decided for everyone. Looking at her, my chest went full of cotton and I couldn't speak. She didn't wait. She opened the door, went barefoot into the hall, and walked toward the master bedroom that belonged to her and my father. The door clicked. The room went quiet.

I looked down at my palm, where she'd wiped it. Her fingertips were still in it. I closed my hand on the warmth, held it, opened it. Then I got up, went to the window, and pushed it open a crack.

Night air came in with a little early-autumn cool in it. Lights out past the trees, blinking like a half-shut eye.

Behind me the door opened a crack and her head came around it, drowsy: "What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Anything."

"Then porridge. I've got beans soaking."

"Okay."

She nodded, satisfied, pulled her head back, and shut the door. I stood at the window a while. Then I looked at the phone. Her last message lay in the thread, *Good night.* I didn't answer it. I put the phone down and lay down. The streetlight threw the shadows of the branches on the ceiling, swaying, like a fish swimming. I shut my eyes and my finger curled in the dark, still warm, still holding the shape of hers.

Chapter 13: Love

In the end, it didn't go anywhere.

That night I walked Nora to the bus stop. She stopped under the sign, and the streetlight made her white skirt look almost transparent. She turned and gave me a faint gardenia smile. "Ethan. Thanks for today. The movie was good."

"Yeah. It was good."

"Well. Good night."

"Good night."

She got on the bus and sat at the window and waved at me through the glass. I waved back. As it pulled away she looked down at her phone, and I guessed she was

scrolling our thread. I stood at the stop and watched the bus shrink into the dark and felt no reluctance at all, just a strange peace.

It didn't go anywhere. There wasn't room.

I got home around 9:30. The living room light was on and the TV was on, the same house-flipping show. Mom was on the couch with her legs tucked, hair still damp from the shower, peeling an orange. She looked up and smiled. "You're home."

Flat, but with a thin upward bend in it. The voice she uses when she's in a good mood and doesn't want to be caught at it.

"Yeah. I'm back." I changed my shoes and sat at the other end of the couch. "Where's Dad?"

"Client dinner. He said he'd be late." She put an orange segment in her mouth, chewed, and then said, "Oh. When he called, he told me something."

"What?"

She set the peel down, wiped her fingers on a tissue, and looked at me with her eyes crinkling. "He said Nora's father called this afternoon. Said the girls have met a few times and get along fine, but Nora feels you're always polite and never take the lead, and she was on the fence about whether to keep going. Your dad thought about it and said if you're not interested, don't waste the girl's time. So he turned it down."

"...Oh."

"'Oh.' That's it? 'Oh.'"

"What should I say? 'Thank God'?"

She gave me the *are you stupid* look. I picked up my water and drank. What I actually felt was complicated. I was sorry for Nora. She's a good girl. But mostly it was relief, like being let down off a tightrope, and the ground under my feet was solid again, even if I landed badly.

"Your dad also said," she peeled another segment and held it out to me instead of eating it, "that you shouldn't feel pressured. He said you're twenty-two, there's no rush, take your time."

I took the orange and ate it. It was so sweet it was almost too much. She went back to the TV and got absorbed in it, fingers resting on her belly, tapping along with the plot. Her profile in the lamplight was gold and gentle, lashes making a small shadow, mouth curved like a cat in the afternoon sun.

"Mom, you're in a good mood."

"Am I?" She didn't turn.

"Yeah. You've talked more today than usual."

"That's probably because you've been quiet, so it makes me look talkative."

She laughed at herself first. I laughed too. The studio audience on the TV laughed and covered the small quiet.

After a while she stood, hand on her back, and went toward the kitchen. "I heated some porridge. Want some?"

"Sure."

"Serve yourself."

"Aren't you going to serve me?"

"How old are you that you need to be fed?" She didn't turn around, but there was laughing in her voice. "I'll heat it. I'm not serving it."

When I got to the kitchen door she had already ladled out two bowls and was stirring honey into one. She looked up. "Yours doesn't have honey. Come get it."

"Why did you serve me one at all?"

"Just did." She picked up her bowl and went past me, her shoulder brushing my arm. I stood in the kitchen looking at the steaming bowl, the porcelain spoon laid on the rim. By the time I carried it out she was at the table with hers, sipping, and she looked up. "Wash your bowl when you're done."

"Okay."

Dad came home very late. I heard the door and the shoes, and Mom's sleepy mumble from the master bedroom, *you're back.* Then water in the bathroom. Then nothing. I lay there staring at the ceiling and the night was smooth as an ironed sheet. No thinking, no hiding, no looks that only happen in the dark.

I slept well.

The sun came through the curtains in the morning like a warm cat on the sill. The living room already smelled like breakfast. Dad was at the head of the table on his phone and Mom was at the stove frying eggs in the light green loungewear, hair tied back. She turned her head. "You're up? Good timing. Eggs are done."

"Why eggs today?" Dad put the phone down and looked.

"Your son said he wanted some yesterday." She slid one onto a plate and brought it over. "I fried you one too."

He took it and bent over it. "Mm. My wife can cook."

She smiled and didn't answer. She sat down, picked up her coffee, and drank. Opposite me, sun on half her face, lashes down, lips wet. Serene as a picture in a frame.

"Oh, right." Dad remembered something and put his fork down. "Your mother told you about Nora, right?"

"She did."

"You don't have any objection? Dad figures if you're not feeling it, it's just not meant. Can't force it. Your mother agrees with me." He turned to her. "Right?"

She was drinking and she hummed, calm. "Yeah. If it's not meant, it's not meant."

Flat. But her eyes crossed my face for a second and went back to her cup, and there was something in it nobody else would have caught.

After breakfast Dad left for work. She cleared the plates and I went out to the balcony to water the plants. The pothos had finally forgiven my rough handling and put out a few new leaves, bright green in the sun. She came out with a glass of warm water, cracked the window for the morning air, drank, and asked the glass, "What was the ending of that movie?"

"...The whale went back to the sea."

"Oh." A pause. "And the boy?"

"The boy stood on the shore and watched it go."

"He didn't go with it?"

"He's got his own life." I set the watering can down and turned. "Besides, he knows a whale shouldn't stay on land."

She traced the rim of the glass with one finger. After a long while, quietly, "And you? Are you the whale or the boy?"

I thought about it. "I'm the one on the shore."

She didn't ask anything else. She finished the water, set the glass on the sill, and smoothed her skirt down over her belly. It looked very round in the morning light. She stroked it, and her voice had a lazy satisfaction in it. "That's good. At least there's somebody on the shore watching."

She went inside. I stood on the balcony and the maple leaves moved in the wind and the fall felt quieter than other falls. Not the season. The house. Dad's health was better, he smiled more, and Mom didn't hold everything in her mouth anymore, she hummed old songs around the kitchen. And me, whatever else I'd done that couldn't go in a family album, I was still on the shore.

That afternoon I came in and she was on the couch with her phone, looking happy in a way that wasn't her usual mild smile. This one was a girl's.

"What's going on?"

She looked up with her eyes lit and held the phone out. "Your dad just texted. He doesn't have to work late tonight, he's coming home early. And," she held it, making me wait, "he said he'd stop at the bakery on his way and get honey cake."

"Honey cake?"

"Yeah." She looked down and ran her finger across the screen, like she was reading it again, or hiding her mouth. "He said he remembered I like that place. He hasn't gotten anything from there in years."

I stood in the entry with my keys in my hand. Something went through me that was warm and sour at once. Warm, because she's so rarely this happy. Sour, because what made her this happy was that Dad remembered a bakery.

"...That's worth being happy about," I said.

"Mm." She glanced at the phone again like it was still glowing. Then she looked up. "I'll start dinner so we can eat early and the cake will still be warm when he's home." She stood, rubbed her back, and went toward the kitchen. At the door she turned. "Oh, if you've got a minute, peel me some garlic?"

"Okay."

I put the keys down and went in. She was bent over the rice bin, belly against the counter, working at it. I moved the bin closer. "I'll do it. Go sit."

"Can you?"

"Better than you."

She gave me a look with a smile in it and didn't argue. She stepped back and leaned on the counter and watched me dump rice into the pot, add water, add more water, add too much water. Finally she reached over and put her hand on mine on the pot. "That's too much. Pour some out."

Her fingers were cool on the back of my hand. She let go quickly and turned to light the burner like nothing had happened. I stood there holding the pot, watching the water settle, and my heart was going harder than the ripples.

Dad came in at dinner with the box. Old-fashioned cardboard, the same as always. Mom leaned out of the kitchen, saw it, and her whole face lit. "You really got it?"

"Why would I lie to you?" He put the box on the table and patted it. "Still warm. Wash your hands."

She came over and opened it. Neat rows of honey cake, a white layer between pale gold, shining under the lamp. She picked one up, blew on it, bit it, and her eyes went into two shallow crescents. "Tastes just like it used to."

"Course it does. The owner still remembers you. I said your name and he said, 'Oh, Mrs. Whitaker, it's been a while.'"

She didn't answer. She looked down and took another bite and chewed very slowly. For a second her profile got younger, like an old photo somebody had recolored.

After dinner Dad didn't go to the study. He sat on the couch with her and watched TV, hand on her belly. "Was our daughter good today?"

"She's a few months along. How is she going to move?"

"Let me listen." He bent and put his ear against her. She looked down at him and her hand came off her knee and went into his hair and stroked it. He sat up, encouraged, like he'd heard something. I sat at the other end of the room with my phone and said nothing.

That moment was so complete. Complete enough that I felt like a footnote that shouldn't be in the picture. Maybe I was overthinking it. But looking at the small smile on her mouth, I thought, let it be. Some things can stay at the bottom of the sea. As long as the whale doesn't swim back, the surface stays flat.

Around ten Dad went to shower and Mom went into the master bedroom. I watched TV a while longer, until the shopping channel came on, and turned it off. When I stood up the phone buzzed.

Nora. *Ethan, thanks for the movies and the coffee lately. Let's stay friends. I hope you find the right person.*

I looked at it for a few seconds, typed *OK,* locked the screen, and put the phone on the coffee table.

Pale moonlight. Tree shadows moving on the wall. I turned the living room light off and went back to my room. Passing the master bedroom there was a warm line of light in the crack of the door. I paused, then kept going.

I sat on the edge of the bed a while. The seashell was on the pillow, the ridged one from the beach, pearly under the lamp. I picked it up and held it and it took the warmth of my hand. Then I put it back, turned the light off, and lay down.

Through the wall, faint, my father and mother laughing about something. I rolled over and shut my eyes and there was a calm in me I hadn't expected. Fine. The whale went to deep water and the boy stayed on the shore. Let the rest stay under it.

In the morning she was already in the living room. An empty plate with honey crumbs on the coffee table and a glass of warm water in her hand. She didn't turn around, but her voice had a contentment in it like she'd slept well. "You don't have class today, right?"

"Not till the afternoon."

"Perfect. Could you repot those plants on the balcony for me?" She turned then and gave me a small smile, sun on her face, glowing, belly round as a sun-warmed watermelon.

"Okay."

I took the glass out of her hand, drank from it, put it down, and squatted by the pots. She sat on the couch and didn't move and just watched me work. After a silence she said, softly, "That honey cake your dad brought home was good."

"Mm. I don't eat sweets, you can have all of it."

"Then ask him to get it again next time," she said, quieter, "if he remembers."

Sun on the floor and her words and my shadow in it. I pulled the pothos out of the old pot and the roots were damp and the soil smelled fresh. She sat with the glass and watched my back and didn't say anything else.

Outside, the wind went through the maples like a very soft tide.

My phone screen flickered and I stared at a thread I'd scrolled a hundred times and couldn't read a word of. The light cut the living room into sun and shade and the air had that thick autumn smell in it. Nothing had happened, and I still felt like a bone had been taken out of me, so I couldn't sit up straight and couldn't lie down either.

"Hello."

A white hand waved in front of my eyes.

I looked up. Mom was standing by the couch with a bowl of green beans in one hand and the other on her hip. Loose light purple dress, hem at the knee, a stretch of pale calf under it, belly round and full as something grown on purpose. She tilted her head and looked me over. "Where'd you go?"

"What?"

"I said it three times. Where'd your soul go." She put the bowl in my lap. "Snap those. When you're done your soul will come back, right in time to help with dinner."

I looked at the bowl. She didn't leave. She stood there twisting the hem of her dress in her fingers, waiting for something. I bent and took the first bean, broke the ends off, snapped it, and dropped it in the bowl beside me. She squatted too, took one, and worked it with me. Squatting, the neckline fell forward and there was a shine of skin in the sun. I looked back at the bean in my hand and realized I hadn't topped it.

"You seem distracted. Did you break up with somebody?" Light, but with a probe in it.

"What love life?"

"Nora. You two went to a movie a few days ago. I even bought a seat next to you, didn't I?" She smiled at the memory of her own prank. "Your dad says she's the one who called it off. Aren't you a little sorry to lose her?"

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"Then why are you like this?" She stopped snapping and turned her head, and her eyes were a cat's that has seen something move. "I saw every time you two met. You weren't enthusiastic, but you weren't cold either. She started a conversation, you answered. She asked you to a movie, you went. I thought you had some interest. And now you're relieved, and you sit on this couch all day staring at nothing?"

"...I just didn't know how to explain it to her."

"Explain what?"

That she wasn't in my head. That every minute I sat next to her, my head was on the pregnant woman beside me. That when my mother's hand was on my cock in the dark of that theater, I didn't think about the girl in the white dress for one second.

I turned it over on my tongue and swallowed it. I put the last beans in the bowl and said, as flat as I could, "Can't explain it. Just restless. It'll pass in a few days."

She didn't say anything. She looked down at me, checking how much of the misery was real. Then she stood with the bowl, took a few steps, and turned back. "You're just stubborn."

And she didn't go to the kitchen. She came back and bent down. Not far, because of the belly, but far enough that her face was close to mine. She reached out and put her fingertip on my forehead, like she was pushing through a shell. "Something's on your mind. Tell me. Mom cares."

I looked at her. The evening light was behind her and it lit the fine hair on her face gold. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and her eyes were still clear as a pond with wind on it. Her fingertip stayed on my brow, cool, and didn't move away.

Like somebody had hold of my wrist, I reached up and took her fingertips.

Her face slipped for half a second, like she hadn't planned on it. But she didn't pull away. She let her finger fall into my palm and stay there.

Her fingers were light and soft. I held them like a thread that was about to float off. My throat closed and my voice came out hoarse. "Mom. There's somebody in my heart."

Her lips moved and stopped. Her fingertips curled in my palm like a startled animal. She didn't pull away. She only asked, quietly, "Who?"

I didn't answer. My eyes went from hers to the bridge of her nose to her parted mouth. She understood it all at once. The red came up her ears and she didn't look away. The air got tight and even the light outside seemed to hold still. She whispered, "Why aren't you saying anything again..."

I didn't let her finish.

I leaned in, got a hand behind her neck, and kissed her.

She made a soft *mmph* like she was behind and catching up. Her body went stiff and then the stiffness melted out of it. Her hand was on my shoulder and her fingers tightened in the collar of my T-shirt and she didn't push.

Her lips were soft and warm and slightly sweet, like she'd just had tea with honey in it. I took her lower lip in my mouth and sucked it. Her breathing went uneven and her fingers shook on my shoulder.

I only meant to touch her and back off. But that little bit of warmth was a spark in dry grass. My tongue went between her lips and eased her teeth apart and found her tongue, and she trembled and didn't pull away. She tipped her head back instead, like she was handing it over.

I kissed her deeper. She swallowed a small sound and her tongue answered mine awkwardly, out of practice. Her breath came warm on my cheek. My hand went down her neck and her spine to her waist. Her palms were flat on my chest and I could feel the heat of them through the shirt. She made another small sound and her lips parted, catching air or waiting. I didn't chase. I waited for her to come. She did, and pressed in harder this time, her tongue winding into mine, and there was a little defiance in it.

We kissed for what felt like forever. The light from the window moved west and the cotton of her dress went dark in one place with sweat. Her breathing was ragged. When she let go her hair was a mess, her lips were red as a crushed flower, and her eyes were wet.

Her belly was against my stomach, going up and down.

"You..." she said, hoarse. "What kind of heartbreak is this?"

"I'm not heartbroken."

"And the face on you."

"I'm thinking about how to dig somebody out of my heart." I put my forehead on hers and her breath was warm on my lips. "I've been digging. I can't get her out."

She was quiet a long time. Then she laughed, and it shook. "You fool."

She didn't pull away. She hooked her fingers in mine and put my hand on her belly. Warm, round, a safe secret. She looked into my eyes. "Then stop digging. There's already one of you in here. Another one won't hurt."

The air between us was like water on the boil. When I kissed her again she opened her mouth and made a soft sound up her nose. My hand went down the edge of her belly to her side, and through the thin dress her nipple was standing and brushing the back of my hand. I didn't touch it. I put my arm around her waist and let her lean on me and put my face in her neck.

Her breath fell behind my ear. "Have you been holding this in for days?"

"...Yeah."

"Then why didn't you come and find me?"

"Afraid you'd be sick of me."

"When have I ever been sick of you?" She turned her head and her nose brushed my earlobe. "I'm more afraid you'll come to your senses and stop coming."

Her voice lifted my heart up out of my throat and set it down. I tightened my arm and pulled her back against my chest. She turned her head and touched my lips, a kiss as light as a dragonfly, and worse than the deep one.

"Mom," I said, hoarse. "I missed you."

She paused, then smiled. Indulgent, helpless, and relieved, like something had finally been let out. She put her fingertips at the corner of my mouth. "Well. You've seen it now, haven't you."

Her cool fingertip sat on my lips like a seal. I looked down at her. She looked back, steady, calm as deep water. Her other hand stayed over mine and our fingers were laced across her belly. This, I thought, is what shore means. The wind stops here. The waves stop here.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table. She glanced at it and looked back, unbothered. She let go of my hand, stood with a hand on her back, bent to straighten her skirt, and tidied her hair. She pursed her lips, checking herself for tells. Then she bent and flicked my forehead, light, familiar.

"Go wash your face. What do you want for dinner?"

"Whatever you make."

"Then cold green beans and stir-fried bitter melon." She picked up the bowl and went to the kitchen, and at the door she turned and winked. "It's not bitter. But if it's too bitter, Mom can take the seeds out for you."

She was gone before I could answer. I sat on the couch with her fingertip still on my forehead and her warmth still on my mouth. Outside, the maple shadows moved in the evening wind like a hand writing a note in the margin.

The morning sun came through the gap in the curtains and lay a hot gold line across the sheets. I woke up and didn't open my eyes. My first thought was, what color dress will she wear today.

That probably explains a lot.

I rolled over and put my face in the pillow. It smelled like her from yesterday afternoon. I sighed and sat up and threw the covers back.

Dad was at the table with his phone. Mom was carrying porridge out of the kitchen, sun behind her, gold around her edges. Apricot cotton dress, hair up loose, the pearl earrings. She saw me and smiled. "Awake? Good timing. It's just ready."

I answered and sat down across from Dad. She came and set the bowl down and the rim brushed the back of my hand, light as a petal going downstream. Dad didn't look up from his phone. That touch wasn't an accident. I bent over the bowl. The rice was cooked soft and there was honey in it, from the jar she'd made yesterday.

"What's the schedule today?" Dad put the phone down and took a pickled bean with his fork.

"Nothing. Resting at home." She sat beside him. "You?"

"Business trip this afternoon. Back tomorrow afternoon." He looked at her. "You going to be all right here alone?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" She laughed. "We've still got our son."

He smiled and patted her hand, the old habit of a married couple. "All right. You two watch the house. There are ribs in the fridge, remember to cook them."

"I know."

I drank my porridge and didn't get in the way, and the rim of the bowl hid half my face. When she said *we've still got our son,* it was flat, but there was a bend in it under the four words.

Dad left around three. The suitcase wheels went over the entry, the door clicked, and the house went strange and quiet. The maple shadows moved on the living room floor in green ripples. I stood at the table with a glass in my hand. She leaned in the kitchen doorway with a glass of warm water and looked at me, half smiling. "Your father's gone."

"Okay. He's gone."

"So." She tilted her head. "What do you want to do today?"

I put the glass down, walked over, and kissed her. She made a startled *mm* and the water wobbled and almost went over. She laughed and turned her head. "Don't be silly. I haven't even had breakfast."

"I wasn't full."

"You had a bowl of porridge."

"The porridge wasn't sweet enough."

She laughed, set the glass on the shoe cabinet, hooked an arm around my neck, came up on her toes, and kissed me back. Longer than I expected. Her lips were warm from the porridge and her tongue came out like a small animal just awake, testing my mouth. I got an arm around her waist and a hand on her shoulder, and her belly came against my stomach through the cotton, warm and heavy. She breathed out as we came apart, forehead to forehead. "Your father just left and you..."

"He wanted to go. I didn't stop him."

She laughed and her shoulders shook. She patted my chest. "Smooth talker. Go do the dishes. I bought ribs. Braised or stewed?"

"Whatever you make."

"Sweet talk, that's all you do." She went toward the kitchen, turned back after two steps with her cheeks still pink. "You do the dishes. I'll get the ribs started."

The afternoon was quiet, so quiet it didn't feel like a secret at all.

She stood at the stove and blanched the ribs while I washed up. The tap ran, she hummed an old song, and every so often she looked down at her belly and said, "Be good, baby." The sun came through the sheer curtain and lay on her moving skirt and the kitchen smelled like a kitchen. I dried my hands, stood behind her, and put a hand on her waist. She didn't turn, she just leaned back into me like a cat that had found the warm spot.

"Stop it, I'm cooking."

"I won't make trouble. I'll stand here a minute."

"How am I supposed to cook with you standing there?"

"You do yours. I'll do mine."

She shook her head and didn't push me off. The oil was hot and the ribs went in and spat. She stirred and muttered, "Neither of you is easy. The little one's kicking me and the big one's stuck to my back."

"The big one wants you to touch him too."

"How old are you, jealous of something in a belly?"

"Not jealous. Just saying."

She couldn't hold it in and laughed. She turned and tapped my nose with the spatula. "All right, big baby. Get the ribs out. I'll call you when it's ready."

After dinner it wasn't dark yet and the cool came in the window cracks. I sat on the couch with the TV on and she came out of the bathroom with her hair down. She sat at the other end, tucked her legs up, and leaned into me.

"What's so interesting on TV?"

"It's a thing about whales."

"Then talk to me a while."

"About what?"

She didn't answer. She turned her head and her earring caught the light. She reached over and traced a small circle on the back of my hand with her fingertip, like she had something and lost it. Then she said, "Come closer."

I moved.

"Closer."

I sat shoulder to shoulder with her. She let out a satisfied breath and put her head on my shoulder and her voice went muffled. "Your dad's back tomorrow afternoon. Isn't this... a little bit like stealing?"

"It is a little."

"Are you scared?"

She didn't answer her own question right away. Then she said, "I'm scared. But I'm more scared he won't come back."

I didn't say anything. That was heavier than any confession. The shadows moved outside. She leaned there and her breathing went long and even. I looked down at her profile. The lamplight stretched her lashes and the corner of her mouth was curved like a sleeping cat.

"I'm going to do the dishes," she said after a while, soft.

"I'll do them."

"You can't get them clean."

"Then you do them and I'll stay with you."

She smiled and stood with a hand on her back. At the kitchen door she glanced back. "Could you tie my apron? I can't reach the back."

I got up and went over. Her back was to me and she held up the light blue apron. I put it on her and tied the bow at her waist, and my fingertips brushed the cotton. She waited, not talking, not hurrying me. When it was tied she didn't leave. She turned her head a little, her eyes soft in the lamplight. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Then." She looked at me. "Do you want to kiss me now?"

I bent and kissed her cheek. She smiled and turned to the tap and started washing. From behind she looked like an ordinary wife doing an ordinary chore. But her ears were red, and standing there behind her I knew what was under the ordinary.

At ten she said she was sleepy. She got to the bedroom door and stopped and looked back. "I'll make porridge in the morning."

"Okay."

"Remember to drink it."

"Okay."

She seemed like she wanted to say more and didn't, just smiled and pushed the door open and went in. The door didn't shut. It stayed a hand's width, a long yellow bar of light on the floor.

I stood in the living room looking at it with something warm and sore in my chest. She hadn't shut it. That was the signal. I walked over and pushed it and she was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head down, taking off an earring. She heard the door and didn't look up. She pursed her lips, set the pearl on the nightstand, picked up the other one, and took a long deliberate time with it. I looked at her back, at the bent nape of her neck, at the soft line of her breasts under the loose nightgown, and went over. She got the earring off and held it in her palm and squeezed it.

I sat down behind her. She turned her head and her eyes went soft and amused. "Why'd you come in? I thought you were going to stand at the door till morning."

I got my arms around her waist and my chin on her shoulder. She leaned back against my chest and let out a breath. "Don't let your dad find out tomorrow."

"I'll try."

"'Try' what?" She pinched my arm. "Say 'definitely.'"

"Okay. Definitely."

She was quiet, then quieter: "When he left today he said, 'There are ribs in the fridge, remember to cook them.' If he knew who the ribs were for... do you think he'd still have said it?"

I didn't answer. Her fingers were on the back of my hand, going over the knuckles, reluctant. "Will you hold me like this from now on?"

"Yeah."

She was quiet a while, and then her mouth curved. "Then that's settled." She pulled away, turned, and looked at me with her eyes bright. "Go shower first. When you're out, I need to talk to you about something."

"About what?"

"Go wash. I'll tell you after."

She winked and pushed me off the edge of the bed. I stood and went to the bathroom and stood under the hot water wondering what *something* was.

When I came out with my hair in a towel she was already in bed with the blanket up to her chin and only half her face showing, a cat in a cocoon. The lamp was on her shoulder. She patted the mattress. "Come here."

I lay down. She gave me half the blanket and turned over to face me. She didn't say anything. Her eyes went from my forehead to my eyes to my mouth, sketching. Then: "I've thought about it. When your father's back tomorrow, we go back to how we were. Mom is Mom, Dad is Dad. To him we're a normal mother and son."

"Yeah."

"But where you can't see me," she put her fingertips on my lashes, "I'm your girlfriend. No. Your lover. The secret kind, the back-hallway kind, but the serious kind." She paused and her voice went soft. "Do you want me?"

I didn't answer. I got an arm around the back of her neck and pulled her in. She curled up like a cat that had found its house. Her breath went warm and long on my

neck. A long time later, when I thought she was asleep, she said, "Tomorrow morning I'll make you red bean porridge."

"Okay."

"With honey."

"Okay."

"Good night, then." She pushed closer, already slurring. "Before your dad gets back tomorrow... we've still got a morning."

I looked down at her. The lamp lit half her face, her eyes shut, her lashes a small shadow. I kissed the top of her head and closed my eyes and listened to the insects and her breathing. The autumn night was very quiet.

In the morning the smell of frying eggs woke me.

The pillow was empty and the blankets still held her warmth. I sat there a second, then got up and went out. She was at the stove with two eggs going gold in the pan, light pink long-sleeved loungewear, hair in a loose braid over her shoulder. She turned and smiled. "You're up? Good timing. Porridge is ready too."

There was a bowl of red bean porridge on the table with honey floating on top. She slid the egg onto a plate, added a spoon of honey to the porridge, stirred it, and set it in front of me. Habitual, silent care. I bent and drank. It spread across my tongue, sweeter than yesterday's.

"To your taste?" She sat across from me with her own bowl and tilted her head.

"It's sweet."

"Is it?" She blinked. "Maybe too much honey. But I said I'd make you red bean porridge, didn't I?"

"You can put in less."

"I was afraid it wouldn't be sweet enough." She said it like the most ordinary thing in the world and drank, her eyes crinkling.

Sun fell on the table between us. Fried egg and honey in the air. Her belly was warm in the sun, a quiet nest. I didn't want to break the morning.

At noon Dad came back. I was on the couch with a book when the lock turned. She was on the balcony hanging clothes, and she turned with the mild smile already on. "You're back? Was traffic bad?" She put the rack down and went to meet him at the entry.

We both slid over without a seam. She took his bag and bent for his slippers and said "Hi, hon" so naturally it sounded like it had never been anything else. He straightened up from his shoes and patted her shoulder. "Yeah. I'm back. How've you two been?"

"Fine. I made red bean porridge last night, there's half a pot. Want some?" She went toward the kitchen. He answered and followed. I sat with the sun on the page making the paper white. From the kitchen: him drinking, and muffled, "Mm. Yours is the best." And her, gentle, "Of course."

I looked down at the unfinished sentence. The words were a little blurred. I wasn't jealous of him. He's the husband, the owner of the house. It was just that she'd done it so well it stung. She wears mother and wife so tight, and she only takes them off in front of me.

That night he was tired from the road and went to bed early. She went to the master bedroom. I stayed in my room until almost eleven and then turned the light off and lay down. The phone buzzed.

Are you asleep?

Not yet.

Then come to the kitchen for a minute.

I waited two seconds, got up, and pushed my door open. The hallway light was on and there was a faint glow from the kitchen. She was at the stove in the light gray nightgown with a cup of hot water, the burner on, steam going up. She heard me and turned. "Your dad's asleep. I couldn't sleep, so I got up to boil water."

She paused. "I'll wait for you."

I didn't say anything. I went over, took the glass out of her hand, put it on the stove, and took her hand. Her fingers were cold and she flinched, then held on tight. The kettle gurgled and the steam went up in a white puff under the light.

She leaned in, forehead on my shoulder, muffled. "When your dad's back I have to pretend again. It's tiring."

"Then don't pretend when he's not home."

"When you're not home I don't have to pretend." Her voice went sly. "But when you're not around, I don't even want to."

She laughed at herself first, soft, eaten by the steam. She let go of my hand, turned the burner off, picked up the glass, and drank. Then she turned back with her eyes red from the steam. "Go back to your room and sleep. You've got class tomorrow."

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"You were waiting in the kitchen. What did you want to say?"

She held the glass and paused. Then, quietly, "I just wanted to tell you. This morning when you were drinking that porridge, I looked at you and thought, if only life could just stay like this." She smiled a little, didn't wait for an answer, and went past me. At the kitchen door she stopped without turning. "I'll make you some more in the morning."

Then she was in the hall, pushing the master bedroom door open, into the room that belongs to her and my father.

I stood in the kitchen and looked at the dead burner and the glass with a water mark on the rim. I picked it up and turned the tap on and rinsed it, like I was washing off a print that shouldn't be there. Then I turned the tap off and picked the glass up again and squeezed it and put it back.

The moon was in the treetops, a quiet eye that wouldn't close. I turned the kitchen light off, went back to my room, and lay down.

In the morning the sun came through the sheer curtains onto the foot of the bed. The living room smelled sweet. She was at the stove with her back to me, steam going up off the red bean porridge and curling around her. She heard me and didn't turn. "You're up? It's just ready. I put two spoons of honey in."

She turned with a bowl in her hands and gave it to me with a smile. Sun behind her, gold in her messy hair. Her fingertips brushed the back of my hand as she handed it over, a leaf drifting into my palm.

"Eat up," she said. "You've got class."

I bent and drank and the sweetness went from my tongue all the way down. She held her own bowl and sat across from me and drank quietly. No extra words. The steam came up between us and the maple shadows moved on the floor in slow, endless waves.

She turned with the bowl in her hands and gave it to me with a smile, sun behind her, gold on her hair. Her fingertips brushed the back of my hand, a leaf drifting into my palm.

"Eat up," she said. "You've got class."

I bent and drank. The sweetness went from my tongue all the way down. She sat across from me with her own bowl and drank quietly and there were no extra words, only the steam rising in the light and the maple shadows moving on the floor in long, patient waves.

The story probably starts that morning when my father dragged his suitcase out the door.

He stood in the entry with his foot on the mat, bent over his laces, half a piece of toast still hanging out of his mouth. She leaned out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee in her hand. "Drink this on the way. Don't do it on an empty stomach."

He took the coffee and grunted and patted my shoulder. "Work's a mess right now. Keep an eye on things here."

"Okay, Dad."

"Her belly's getting bigger. Don't let her lift anything."

"Okay."

He paused like he wanted to say something else, and then he just waved, opened the door, and went out. The lock clicked. The keys on the shoe cabinet jingled twice and went quiet.

I stood there without turning around. From the kitchen, quiet: "He's gone?"

"He's gone."

"Then I don't need a bra today."

I said nothing for a second, because my brain had to reboot.

She leaned out of the kitchen doorway, hair loose in a tie, absolutely delighted with herself. The neckline of the light gray loungewear hung open and there was a bright slice of skin under her collarbone.

"What's that face for?" She tilted her head. "I didn't say I wasn't going to wear one. I said I didn't have to."

"You're teasing me."

"I'm stating a fact. What you do with it is your business." She turned back to the stove. "Porridge is ready. Help yourself."

I stood in the living room listening to the pans and decided the temperature in this apartment had gone up several degrees on purpose.

At breakfast she sat across from me with her bowl and ate slow. The belly was a hard round curve under the cotton and the sun came in sideways and made a gold plate of it, like a cat asleep in a window.

I kept my head down. Her voice came over the rim of the bowl anyway. "What are we doing today?"

"What are you doing?"

"Your dad's not home." She picked up a pickle with her chopsticks and chewed it. "Didn't we agree that when he's not home we're lovers?"

She said it with such confidence that I had nothing. She didn't seem to mind. She took another sip and then her eyes lit. "Let's go to the store."

"Kroger?"

"Yeah. I'll make you hot and sour fish for lunch and get a rack of ribs for soup tonight." She put the bowl down and stood, hand on her back. "You're coming with me."

"With that belly?"

"That's why you're coming with me. Your dad said not to let me lift."

She didn't wait for an answer. She went to the bedroom to change. I sat looking at half a bowl of porridge, then took it to the sink, washed my hands, and waited in the entry like a man being taken to his own execution by very pleasant guards.

She came out in the light blue cotton dress, the waist cut wide enough to make room for the whole round of her, the hem at her calves and a slip of white ankle under it. Canvas bag on her shoulder. She came up to me and bent to get her shoes, and the neckline opened, and her breasts swayed forward in the fabric and settled back when she straightened. She caught me looking and smiled. "What."

"You're beautiful."

"Smooth talker." She went past me, and as she passed her fingers brushed the back of my hand like a feather dragged over water. She opened the door and the sun came in and wrapped her up.

The store wasn't busy. She wanted the fish, so she went straight to the counter and bent over the tank, and the skirt rode up and showed the back of her calves. I stood beside her and stared into the water like a man with a theory about fish.

"That bass looks fresh, doesn't it," she said, pointing at one cruising along the glass.

"Sure."

"That one," she told the kid behind the counter. He netted it, weighed it, bagged it. She handed the bag to me. "Here."

"You brought me along to carry a fish?"

"What else?" She blinked. "Your dad's away. Somebody has to do the heavy lifting."

She pushed the cart on and I followed with the bag. She went down the aisles stopping and starting, picking things up and putting them back. In the snack aisle she stopped and turned around. "Want something? Chips?"

"Can you eat chips?"

"I'm buying them for you. You've gotten thin."

"I haven't gotten thin."

"I said you have, so you have." She took a bag of plain ones and put it in the cart, then picked up a bag of the tomato ones, looked at it, and put it back. Then she picked it up again. "You loved these when you were little. You ate a whole bag once and got a sore throat and I yelled at you. Remember?"

"I remember. You said you'd never buy them again."

"Well, I'm buying them again." She dropped the bag in the cart and pushed it away. I stood in front of the shelf looking at two bags of chips in a shopping cart and something in my chest went soft and full at the same time.

She got the ribs, a bunch of celery, a box of mushrooms, and a bag of dried dates, which she's been living on lately. The cart filled up. She pushed it along slow, the belly swaying under the dress, like a small hippo out for a walk. The skylight put a fuzzy halo around her head. Every so often she looked down at her phone, or picked something up to read the label, or turned around to make sure I was still behind her.

It was all so ordinary. Ordinary the way any couple's Tuesday is ordinary.

At the register she stood in front of me and turned around. "Don't you feel like an old married couple right now?"

"Old married couples stay home and cook and go to the store. That's exactly what we're doing."

"That's true." She pursed her lips like she was holding a laugh in. "So tonight, shouldn't an old married couple do the things old married couples do?"

My heart jumped. She watched it happen on my face and looked pleased, turned back, took a pack of gum out of the cart, and set it on the belt without another word.

The cashier rang it up. I paid with my phone. She picked up the gum, opened it walking out, put a piece in her mouth, and handed me one. "Mint. Wakes you up."

I put it in my mouth and the cold went off on my tongue and then went sweet. She walked ahead of me with the canvas bag on her shoulder and the skirt moving and the sun made a fresh watercolor of her.

At home she put the fish in the fridge and tied on the apron and stood at the stove. She said she was making me the fish. I leaned in the doorway and watched her pour the pickled mustard greens out of the bag, rinse them, chop them. She wasn't fast, but she was careful. Every so often she pushed a loose hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist. The fish was already sliced thin and shining in the bowl.

"What are you standing there for?" She didn't turn around. "Cook the rice."

"Okay."

I rinsed the rice and set it going and then she said, "Peel me some garlic."

I stood beside her and peeled. She reached for the garlic and her fingertips crossed my palm, cool. The oil heated and the greens went in and the sour, sharp smell took the whole kitchen.

"If your dad were home he'd complain about this smell," she said, stirring. "He can't stand pickled greens."

"And me?"

"You?" She turned her head and her eyes went crinkly at the corners. "You eat spicy, you eat sour. You're easy."

"Then are you going to feed me for the rest of my life?"

She stopped for a second. Her ears went red from the bottom up. She didn't answer, just slid the fish into the pot one slice at a time, and her voice was deliberately flat. "It's in. Get the bowls."

I put the bowls and chopsticks out. She carried the pot in, steam rolling off it, and the smell of it filled the living room. She set it in the middle of the table and sat down next to me. "Try it. Tell me if it's got enough flavor."

I picked up a piece, blew on it, put it in my mouth. It was tender and the sour and hot and salt all broke at once and I hissed.

She watched my face and smiled. "Good?"

"Good."

"I'll make it for you all the time now." She took a piece herself, blew on it carefully, ate it, and nodded at herself. "Hm. Still got it."

Then she took another piece, picked the bones out, and put it in my bowl. "Eat that one. It's boneless."

I looked at the white fish in my bowl and my throat got tight. She was already eating again, head down. The sun came in on her slightly oily lips and the whole room smelled like the pot.

After lunch she said she was sleepy. While I cleared the dishes she leaned back on the couch and watched me at the sink. "You look good washing dishes."

"Your eyes are going."

"I didn't spend any money." She yawned and turned on her side and put her face into the cushion and her voice went muffled. "I'm going to nap. Wake me when you're done."

She was asleep fast. The apartment went quiet except the tap and a bird outside. I washed, dried my hands, and went back in and she was curled up on the couch, the dress pulled tight over the belly, her hair all over the cushion, lashes down in the sun like a sleeping cat.

I bent and picked up the throw blanket and put it over her. Her hand came out from under it and took my wrist. Light, but my heart stopped.

"Don't go," she mumbled. "Lie down a minute."

"...Okay."

I sat on the edge of the couch and she moved over to make room. I lay down and her warm body came against me, her forehead on my shoulder, her hair at my chin, tickling. Her breathing went long and even again.

Neither of us slept. She stayed close with her fingers on my chest, drawing small circles over my heartbeat through the shirt, circles light as a butterfly landing on water. I didn't move and I didn't breathe too fast. A sound would have broken the whole afternoon.

After a while she sat up, rubbed her eyes, and looked at the slant of the sun. "What time is it?"

"Almost four."

"That long?" She yawned and looked down at me, blurry and rumpled, like a sea otter somebody had hauled onto the dock. She looked at me for a second and then bent and put a light kiss on my mouth.

It was light as a petal and gone as fast, and the warmth of it stayed on my lips like a fresh burn.

"I'm up." She sat straight and stretched. "What do you want tonight? There are ribs in the fridge."

"Whatever you make."

"Then it's rib and lotus root soup." She stood with a hand on her back, went to the kitchen door, looked back. "Open that bag of chips. The tomato ones, the ones you liked. Don't let them go stale."

I opened the bag and put one in my mouth. It tasted exactly like being nine. Sweet and sour and salty and crisp. The light outside had gone soft. She stood at the stove chopping the ribs, dropping them in cold water, turning the heat on to blanch them. The pot bubbled and the kitchen filled with the smell of lotus root and pork.

After dinner we sat on the couch together. She leaned on my shoulder and flipped channels and stopped on an old movie. The two leads met in the rain and he put his coat over her shoulders and they ran under one umbrella. She watched it and said quietly, "Your dad used to chase me like that."

I didn't answer. She didn't go on. She put the remote on the coffee table and turned her head and her eyes were shining in the low light. "But right now I'm thinking about you."

She seemed startled by her own sentence. She looked down and laughed at herself and her ears went red. Then she turned into me and put her face against my chest and her voice went muffled. "Your dad's back tomorrow morning."

"Mm."

"Then we've still got a few hours of romance tonight."

She looked up with her eyes crinkled and something mischievous in them she didn't even know was there. My heart went like a hammer.

That night she came into my room in the gray slip dress. Her hair was down, the ends still damp, her skin still dewy from the shower under the lamp. The belly pushed out high under the silk, a small round moon.

"You're in here," I said.

"Weren't you waiting for me?" She stood at the bed and tilted her head.

I put my hand out. She came and took it and curled her fingers into my palm and then, following my pull, knelt down in front of me. She tipped her head back, her eyes bright, and the light on the tip of her nose looked like honey.

"Did you miss me?"

"I thought about it."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Everywhere."

She laughed, lowered her head, and came close, her nose brushing mine, her voice going soft and sweet. "Then tell me first. What part of me did you miss most today?"

I had nothing. She was pleased. She straightened up on her knees and came closer, her breasts pressing into my chest through the silk, settling with her breath, and my heart went like a drum.

"Not saying?" Her voice had mischief in it. "Then I'll say it for you."

She lowered her head, nuzzled my chin, slid down my throat, and stopped at my collar. Through the shirt, her lips touched my heart. "Is this where you missed me?"

"Yeah."

"And here?" Her fingertips found the half-hard shape of me through the sweats and traced a circle. "Does this part miss me?"

"It does."

"How much?"

"So much it's about to explode."

She smiled and untied the drawstring. It came out hot and hard and brushed her cheek and she didn't flinch. She tilted her head and rubbed the head of it along her cheek and looked up at me.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"If you say one more word I'm going to lose it."

"Then lose it." She lowered her head and took the head into her mouth.

Warm and wet and her tongue going over the slit, and the tingle shot from my tailbone to the back of my skull. I got both hands in the sheet and made a noise down in my chest. She took it shallow, teasing, swallowing and letting go, her tongue circling the ridge, and every suck pulled at my lower back.

She came off it with a thread at the corner of her mouth and her voice gone thick. "Do you like it?"

"I like it."

"Then do you want to go inside Mom?"

She was watching me the whole time. I sat up, got an arm around her waist, and laid her down. She went on her back and the straps slid off and her breasts came out, heavy and white under the lamp, and I put my mouth on one and worked the nipple with my tongue. She hummed and her fingers went into my hair and pressed, wanting more pressure.

She was soaking. I opened her with my fingers, brushed the little bit of her that was standing out, and she jerked and her legs closed and then opened slow. My fingers went into the wet and it was hot and soft and closed around them like a small hungry mouth.

"Mm... you, get in..." Her voice shook. "Don't just use your hand. I want you."

I pulled my fingers out and set the head against her and pushed in slow. She tipped her head back and let a long sigh out like she'd finally been filled. Tight and wet, opening an inch at a time and closing on the rhythm, shaped for me.

"It's so big... it's still so big every time..." she gasped. "You're all the way back... the little one's moving..."

"Does he welcome his father too?"

Her face went red and she slapped my shoulder. "You and your mouth..." But her hips came up to meet me and took me deeper.

I went slow. With the baby I couldn't put weight on her, so I lay beside her, one arm around her waist, the other at her breast, kneading, and came into her from behind. She leaned back against my shoulder and her breathing went ragged.

"Mm... like that... slower... it's so deep..."

"Does it feel good?"

"It feels so good... from behind you go so deep..." Her voice broke up under the thrusts. "Tell me. If your dad knew what we're doing, wouldn't he lose his mind?"

"He's not back till morning."

"Then... then we've got all night..." She turned her head, her eyes red like she was drunk. "Feed me."

I held her tighter and went faster. She started to contract in waves, pulling at me, and I let go and pushed in as far as she goes and came. She shook all over and her walls spasmed and swallowed it.

We held each other, breathing. She leaned back on me with her hair stuck to her cheek and her chest going. I kissed her forehead. Her eyes were shut and her mouth was curved and her voice was lazy.

"Are you going to make me porridge in the morning?"

"I am."

"With two spoons of honey?"

"Three."

She liked that. She made a soft satisfied noise and turned over and held me hard, her belly warm against my stomach like a little stove, and buried her face in my neck. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

"Goodnight, then." She pushed closer and shut her eyes.

I held her and looked at the moon over the maple outside like an ear that never closes. Her breathing went long and even, but her fingers stayed hooked in the hem of my shirt, afraid I'd run while she slept.

The night was still as warm spring. Her, me, and the one in her belly who didn't have a name yet. I kissed her forehead again. She didn't wake, just smacked her lips and pushed closer. I put a hand on the round of her belly and felt the small steady beat in her wrist and shut my eyes.

Chapter 14: A Daughter

The day his daughter was born, my father walked the length of the labor and delivery hallway for two hours and came out more wrecked than she did.

When the nurse brought the wrinkled little thing out, all the strength went out of him. He hit the wall, then pushed off it and came over, and didn't dare put a hand out. "My daughter? Is that really my daughter?"

"Mom and daughter are both fine."

He wiped his big hands on the seam of his pants and then took the crying bundle, and looked down at it, and his eyes filled up.

"It's a girl..." His voice was so hoarse you could barely hear it. "I've got a daughter."

Mom lay in the bed, pale, smiling with the corners of her mouth. "Look at your dad. Happier than anybody."

I stood at the foot of the bed and watched him hold her like a piece of china, saying *my daughter, my daughter.* Everything in me came up at once like a pot boiling over, sweet and sour and bitter and hot, and I didn't know whether to laugh or turn around. He'd wanted a girl for six months. Now he had one, and he looked ten years younger and walked with his shoulders back.

The day we brought her home he drove. He put Mom and the baby in the back and buckled them in and then got in the front, and I sat beside him and looked at the swaddled bundle in the mirror, at her small red face, and felt like I'd been in on a fairly outrageous miracle.

Her name is Nell. Dad gave it to her. "Nell," he said, "because if you keep somebody in your heart, they always come back to you." Mom glanced at me then, eyes crinkling, and didn't say anything. I looked down at my phone and thought the phrase probably had a second meaning.

Nell is a good baby. When she isn't hungry or fussing she lies there with her big black grape eyes open, looking around. Dad acts like he won the lottery. First thing after work every day he washes his hands, dries them, and carries her around the living room saying, "Did Nell miss Daddy today?" and "Look at Nell's little feet," and "Oh, my little princess is smiling." Mom sits on the couch and watches him and sometimes shakes her head and sometimes smiles to herself.

But she's happy. You can tell.

That afternoon the sun was bright through the living room windows and the floor was warm. Dad sat cross-legged on the rug with Nell between his legs, waving a plush rabbit in her face and going *tap tap tap* at it. Nell tracked the rabbit and then actually got a hand out and grabbed at it twice. He nearly came off the floor. "She grabbed it! She grabbed it! Nell can grab things!"

I stood in the kitchen door with a glass of water and couldn't help it. Mom was at the counter cutting an orange, sun on her profile, light pink loungewear hanging loose with the neckline a little low and a slice of collarbone showing. She bent and cut a segment and then cut a small piece off it and held it to my lips. "Try it. Is it sweet?"

I opened my mouth and took it and the sour-sweet broke on my tongue. She watched my face and smiled. "Sweet, isn't it?"

I nodded. She didn't take her hand back. Her fingertip stayed on my lower lip, like she meant to wipe off a drop of juice and didn't, and let the cool of it sit there a second before moving away.

In the living room Dad was still at it. "Nell, look what Daddy's got! A bunny! Come on, grab it, grab it!"

She glanced into the living room to make sure his whole attention was on the baby, then looked up at me. Her eyes in the afternoon light were two bright grapes and there was something sly in them. Then she came up on her toes and licked my lips, quick.

"Juice," she said, and turned to cut another orange.

I stood behind her with the wet still on my mouth, frozen. She picked up the plate and turned and her shoulder brushed my chest and her voice was barely there. "Don't just stand there. Go sit with your dad."

I took my water into the living room and sat next to him. He was busy comparing Nell's hand to his. "Son, look. Her hands are so small."

"Mm."

"Just like you were," he said, and there was something nostalgic in it. "When you were born you were that wrinkled, and when you cried the whole floor heard you."

I looked down at Nell. She'd lost interest in the rabbit and was looking at me, wide open. Bright and black, exactly like Mom's. My heart skipped and I said, soft, copying his voice, "Nell?"

She turned her eyes like she was hunting for me. Dad laughed. "Oh, she knows you! Look at that, she's looking right at you!"

I laughed too. He got more and more excited, holding the rabbit over his head and shaking it and making buzzing noises, filling the room with his own chatter. Nell stared at the rabbit and her little mouth opened and shut and she got out a syllable. He nearly went over backwards on the rug. "Mom! Did you hear that? Nell talked!"

Then a warm hand took my wrist.

I looked down. Mom had come from the couch to my side without my hearing it. She didn't look at me, her eyes were still on Dad and Nell, but she pulled me half a step toward the blind spot by the kitchen door. That half step put me completely out of the living room's sight line.

She didn't let go. She came up on her toes and kissed me.

That kiss was nothing like the juice. Her lips parted and her tongue came in and went around my mouth and came out, and the whole thing took under three seconds. Before my heart could even catch up she'd let go, stepped back half a step, smoothed her skirt, and said in a flat, steady voice, "Oranges are cut. Take them in."

She carried the plate into the living room like those three seconds had been an illusion of orange juice. The warmth of her tongue was still on my lips and my breathing was off. I watched her go and looked at my father, oblivious by the couch, and thought that I was getting better and better at working a soft rope.

That night Nell went down early. Dad pushed the crib next to his side of the bed because he wanted to keep watch, and Mom chased him off. "You work tomorrow. Get some sleep. I'll get up when she wakes."

"Then call me..."

"Why would I call you? You don't have any milk."

He had nothing to say to that and went obediently to the master bedroom. I went to my room and shut the door and lay on the bed with my phone for a while. Around eleven I turned the knob without knocking.

She slipped in and locked it.

Light gray slip, hair down, skin still pink from the bathroom steam. She came to the bed and sat and looked at her own fingers and didn't say anything. I turned over. "Is Nell asleep?"

"Mm. She ate and she's out cold."

"And you..."

"I can't sleep." She looked up, eyes crinkling. "The doctor cleared me."

Those four words went into the room like a stone in a pond. My throat moved. She didn't wait for me to say anything. She bent and kissed me, longer and much deeper than the afternoon, her tongue easing my mouth open, cool and warm with toothpaste, like a small fish going into deep water. I got an arm around her waist and my fingers sank into the silk and her whole body shook once, but she didn't pull away, she pressed closer.

"Keep your voice down," she said against my lips. "Your dad's next door."

"He knows Nell's asleep."

"If he hears anything else..."

"Then we'll be quieter."

She laughed, and the laugh got swallowed by the kiss and came out her nose. She climbed over my lap. The pregnancy was gone and her waist hadn't come back yet, and what was there was soft warm flesh, like a ball of cotton against my stomach. I put my hand under the hem and up her inner thigh, and when my fingers found how wet she was she gasped and put her face in my neck.

"You knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I miss you." Muffled, injured. "I miss you here and I miss you inside."

I didn't make her wait. I turned her onto the mattress. The nightgown pushed up to her waist and her legs came out, still white as peeled eggs so soon after, and she opened them a little and under the light her lips were fuller than before, like a flower soaked in rain, shining. She opened herself with two fingers and showed me the little red thing at the top, already out.

"Touch it," she said. "Touch it, it's been waiting so long."

I put my mouth on it and teased it with my tongue. She went rigid and got the sheet in both hands and a long thin breath came out of her nose and she bit her lip to kill the rest. While I sucked it I slid my fingers into the wet, and it was hot and soft as new honey and closed on them at once, complaining.

"Mm... hurry... I want it..."

I sat up and pushed my pants down. She looked down at me, her throat moving, her voice hoarse. "Get in."

I set the head against her and she arched to meet it and we both made a sound. Still tight, still hot, but softer than before, like velvet soaked through, taking me from all sides. I went in slow and her head went back and her throat made a long curve and the corner of her eye went wet.

"Mm... so full... full again..."

"Easy..."

I stopped at the deepest point and looked down at her. Her eyes were shut and her chest was going and her breasts, loose, moved under the silk with the nipples standing out through it. I reached behind her and pulled the straps down and they came out heavy, a full size bigger than before, the areolas darker, still damp.

"My milk's come in," she said. "There's a lot these days. Be gentle when you touch them."

I took one nipple in my mouth. Not much came but my tongue caught a faint sweetness. She hissed and her fingers went into my hair, not sure whether to push or pull. I sucked twice more and she couldn't hold it. "Stop... if you keep it up the milk really comes..."

I didn't stop, I flicked it with my tongue. She shook and her walls clamped hard enough that I nearly lost it. I let the nipple go and looked up at her. Her face was red as a peach and her eyes were wet and there was a look in them she didn't know she had.

"You did that on purpose."

"Yeah. I did."

She glared with no threat in it and hooked a foot around my waist. "Then move."

I got her hips and went slow. Every push landed on the spot and her voice came out of her in pieces between her teeth, like a kitten with a hand over its mouth. Out in the hall the master bedroom creaked. She went tight as a fist and I nearly finished right there.

"Wait... wait..." She bit her lip hard and her breathing went shallow.

I stopped and listened. Snoring came through the wall, even and stupid, like a pressure valve. She let out the breath, all of her going limp. "That nearly killed me."

"So do you want to keep going?"

"...Want to."

Barely there, and stubborn. I bent and kissed her and started again, slow and deep, and she opened her mouth and let our tongues tangle and swallowed her own sounds. Moonlight came through the curtain and put silver on the floor. She lay in it with her hair spread on the pillow and her breasts moving with the rhythm, bathed in it.

"Hurry..." she said between kisses. "I'm... I'm close..."

I went faster. Her toes curled and her walls began to spasm, wave on wave, and I lifted her legs and pushed deeper and felt it roll through her until her whole body bent like a bow and she got out one long-held sob. Then I couldn't hold it either. I pressed into the deepest part of her and came, everything I'd saved for a month.

She shook all over, her lower belly working like it was trying to take all of it. After a long time her toes came uncurled and she collapsed into the mattress like the bones had been taken out of her. I pulled out and it followed, thick and white, and left a warm stain on the pale sheet. She looked down and didn't wipe it, just pressed her lower belly, her voice wrecked and satisfied. "Full again."

"You happy now?"

"Mm. Happy." She smiled and hooked an arm behind my neck and pulled me down and kissed me. "Tomorrow morning, if your dad sees me in a good mood, he'll ask why."

"So what do you say?"

"I'll say I dreamed Nell said mama." She blinked. "He'll believe it."

I laughed and so did she. She lay back and turned on her side and put her face on my chest and I put an arm around her. She curled up like a cat that finally got the fish and doesn't even bother to wag its tail.

In the morning Dad was up before anybody. Nell woke and made noise and he came out of bed barefoot and picked her up and kissed her all over. "Good morning, Nell! Did you miss Daddy today?"

Mom stood in the master bedroom door with a bottle, watching his face, and smiled without saying anything. Light green loungewear, hair up loose, glowing like she'd been watered all night. He played with Nell a while and then looked over at her. "Hon, you look great today."

"Really?" She looked down at herself, calm. "Probably because Nell slept through the night and so did I."

"That's true. Our daughter's getting to be a good girl." He bent and rubbed Nell's nose. "Isn't that right, Nell? Daddy's little sweetheart."

She brought the bottle over, took Nell out of his arms, and sat on the couch to feed her. He squatted next to them and watched her nurse and grinned like an idiot for a long while and then had to touch her little feet. Sun came through the window onto the three of them, the whole thing as warm as a magazine ad.

I stood in the hall and watched. She had her head down over the baby, doing the most ordinary thing in the world. But she lifted her eyes over the back of the couch and looked at me. Light and quick, like a thread going through the morning, and the corner of her mouth went up before she looked down again.

Dad, oblivious, kept chuckling at his daughter. "Nell, when you're big, Daddy's going to give you the best of everything..." I stood in the shadow of the corridor with the sun on my feet, watching her bent over the child with that small smile, and I knew I should go back to my room. Then her eyes came up over his shoulder and landed on my face and her lips moved with no sound.

I read it. *Good morning.*

I stood there with the sun warm on the tops of my feet, like the half of her face that had been on my chest all night. I smiled and said it back without a sound. Then I turned and went to my room and shut the door and leaned on it and looked at the ceiling. From the living room came Dad's voice, softer and sweeter with every word. I shut my eyes and heard my own heart, steady and loud.

That morning his phone rang and he had to go in, but he'd be back in two or three hours. He kissed Nell and then ruffled my hair. "Keep an eye on your mother. Call me if anything happens."

"Okay, Dad."

"If my daughter cries, you..."

"I let her listen to the engine," I said. "She paid attention last time she rode in your car."

He stopped and then burst out laughing. "Fine. You're more resourceful than your old man." He got his shoes and his bag and went out. The lock clicked and the entry went quiet again.

I stood in the living room looking at the door. From the master bedroom came a soft hum; she'd woken up again. She leaned out of the kitchen with a bottle and gave me a small smile. "Your dad's gone?"

"He's gone."

"Perfect." She set the bottle on the counter and came over and stood in front of me with the sun behind her, gold all over her. She took my collar and pulled me down and came up on her toes and put a very light, very tender kiss on my mouth.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm giving that one back to you."

I got an arm around her waist. She didn't pull away, she leaned in with her forehead on my chin and let out a breath like she'd put down something invisible. The maple shadows moved outside and Nell went quiet in the bedroom. I kissed the top of her head.

She didn't open her eyes, just laughed softly. "It'd be better if your dad didn't come back."

"He's back in two or three hours."

"Then let's ignore him." She tipped her head back, eyes bright. "Sit with me a minute. Just a minute."

I took her hand and sat on the couch. She leaned on my shoulder and pulled her legs up and curled in. The sun came onto the coffee table and lit a pearl earring she'd dropped there last night, and the little bead glowed. She stayed like that with her head on my shoulder and her breathing going even. In the bedroom Nell made a soft sound and went quiet. Wind in the leaves outside like a long, patient rhythm. I looked down at her profile and the sun moving on her lashes, and without a sound I tightened my hand on hers.

She didn't pull away. She held on and laced her fingers between mine. We sat there in the light without talking.

The afternoon sun crawled across the balcony and lay on the floor warm and lazy. Nell had just gone down, her mouth still working at the memory of milk, both fists up by her cheeks like a little surrendered frog. I squatted by the crib and watched her a while, at how fast she'd gone from fists and crying to a clear drool bubble and total peace.

"Little Nell Whitaker, you're a mess. You drool in your sleep."

"You did too. More than her."

Mom's voice came off the couch, languid and a little hoarse with the afternoon. I turned. She was leaned into the corner of it with one leg bent and the other over the arm, holding a cup of warm date water. Light cotton loungewear, waist still soft and not recovered, gentler than before somehow, like a ball of dough.

She started to get up and sat back down. Her brow pulled in and she didn't say anything.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Your face says plenty."

She gave me a look with no force in it at all, like a baby whose toy got taken, cheeks puffed. She put the cup on the table and hesitated and then said, quietly, "My breasts are engorged. Nell only nursed twice and went to sleep and it's still sore."

She glanced down at herself. There was a small dark wet patch on the front of the cotton, the edges damp, like a flower that had quietly gone over.

"Want me to help you get some out?"

It took me a beat to hear what I'd said. My ears went hot.

She was quiet for two or three seconds. Then, softly, "I tried myself, but there's too much and my arms get tired. Could you work the knot in my back? The doctor said that's where it blocks."

She turned, slowly, hand on her back, and sat sideways with her back to me. The neckline hung loose and showed the back of her neck, and there was a faint red mark from her nap. I stood looking at her back and took a breath and went over.

I sat and the cushion sank and she swayed. I touched the back of her neck, and immediately thought this opening was like something out of a script. She didn't seem to think so. She found a sore spot herself and pressed it and hissed. "Right there. It hurts when you press."

"Bear with it."

I traced the line of her neck and shoulder and found the hard lump inside her right shoulder blade. Light pressure and she went tight and a small whimper came out of her nose. "Mm..."

"Hurt?"

"Sore. And swollen. But it's sort of good."

I softened and worked it in circles with the heel of my hand. Heat came up under the skin and the lump started to give. She had her head down and her shoulder blades moved with her breathing. After a while she said, "That's a little better, but it's still so swollen lower down."

"The back of your dress is wet."

"...I know." She paused. "Could you see if there's a hard place? It's been a few days. It's blocked."

She said it like it had nothing to do with her. But her ears were already red in the light. I took my hand off her shoulder and the air went quiet. Then she turned around to face me and pulled the strap down, easy, and moved the fabric aside, and the top edge of one breast came out.

Fuller than before, tight against the fabric edge, almost shining with it. Faint blue veins under the skin, and the areola and nipple were swollen and much darker, like fruit about to run. She moved the cloth aside slowly and without hesitating, like she'd planned this step and was only waiting for me to put a hand out.

"You used to massage them for me," she said. "When Nell couldn't latch you'd put a hot towel on and work them. I don't think I was this embarrassed then."

She was using *then* and *now* like an explanation for her own pulse. I didn't call it out. The nipple was already standing and there was a bead of milk on the tip, warm in the light.

"When it hurts this much, who cares how it looks," she said, softer, and the softness was for herself. "What are you standing there for?"

I put my fingertips to the swollen shining skin. It was warmer than the rest, like holding a mouthful of warm water. I pressed gently and she shook and a groan came out her nose. Milk came and ran down the curve of the areola and rolled under my finger and left a wet trail.

"Look at it. It's coming out by itself." My voice was hoarse.

"If you press and work it, it might clear." She swallowed. "I've felt a lump for days. Nell isn't strong enough to get it out. You're stronger. Sucking might work better than hands."

"Sucking?"

"Mm." She had it all planned. "Think of it as covering for Nell's little mouth. You grew up on it."

She looked at the window like she was putting her nerves up in the trees. Looking at her red ears, my heart went like something in a cage. Everything she said she said in the voice of a mother, all of it perfectly reasonable. And under the skin of it she was coming apart.

I bent and took the wet nipple in my mouth. She let out a very small sigh, like something long stopped had found a way out. Warm milk came and it was faintly sweet and faintly fishy and ran down my tongue and past my teeth. I swallowed and my mouth filled with milk and with the smell of her. She hummed again and her fingers went into my hair and pressed a few times, like pressing something, or guiding me deeper.

"Gently..." she said. "Don't bite... mm... yes, there..."

I changed sides, licked a few times, and sucked. It came in pulses and she sank into the couch with one hand on the back of my head. She didn't push or pull, she just stroked with her breathing. Then, as if something had taken hold of her, her fingertips slid down my neck to my collar.

"You..." Soft, hoarse. "You're pressing into me. You're feeding for Mom and you go and get like this on your own. Are you still thinking about earlier?"

I looked up. Her ears were bright red but she didn't look away. She glanced down and then up again and there was something wet and hidden in her eyes. Her lips were still shining with milk, and she looked at once like the mother who'd fed me and a woman who had just been touched.

"My breasts are still full," I said. "They'll feel better when they're empty."

She didn't argue with what I hadn't said. She slid her hand into my waistband and took hold of me through the cotton, and rubbed it like she was weighing something old and familiar. "Then Mom will use her hand. And you keep sucking for me, all right? Mother and son. We help each other."

She pulled the pants and the underwear down together. It came out and there was a bead at the tip. She looked at it and said nothing and rubbed it into her palm and then took hold of the whole thing.

"Move a little." Her thumb went over the head, easy, like handling a toy she knew. "Now that Mom's made you feel better, you help Mom get all the milk out. Nell's waiting for dinner."

I put my mouth back on the swollen nipple and sucked. It came in gushes and she started to move her hand slow, thumb and finger tightening, up from the base, and then a fingertip circling the ridge. Not too light, not too heavy. She'd had six months to learn it.

I sucked and she kept the patient rhythm. Milk ran and pooled warm between her fingers. She made a nasal sound and lowered her voice. "Mm... are you sucking too hard? It's gone harder. My hand jumped."

Then she laughed at herself, husky, half-mocking and half-indulgent. Her hand went quicker and when her fingertip crossed the head I groaned. Milk ran out of the nipple in my mouth and down my chin and onto her skirt. She didn't wipe it. She used her other hand to pull the back of my head in closer, like letting a baby nurse as long as it wants.

"Look at you," she muttered, working me. "You've still got Mom's breast in your mouth and you're already this hard down there. It was one thing when you were little. Now you're grown and you're still hanging off Mom like this. Aren't you ashamed."

She said ashamed and her hand had no plans to stop. She even changed position and pulled one leg out of the loungewear so the hem bunched at her waist with nothing in the way. She wasn't wearing underwear, maybe from the laziness of being sore, maybe not. She was shining. Her lips were open a little, like a rouge flower in warm water.

"You... you've got me hot all over..." Her voice shook. "The milk's coming better but now it's itching down there. What do I do?"

My hand went up her thigh. When my fingers touched the wet she shook but didn't close her legs. She took my fingers and put them on the seam and pressed. "You feel it for Mom too. See if it's blocked here... mm... put them in..."

I didn't wait. My fingers went into the wet and it was hot and close, a nest that had been kept warm all day. She tipped her head back and sighed, and her hand didn't stop, it gripped harder, working with the fingers inside her.

"Mm... right there... a little deeper..." Her voice was already going wet. "Your fingers pull at it almost like when you nurse... harder than Nell does... keep that up and Mom's going to go crazy..."

She didn't finish. I pulled my fingers out and set the aching head against her and didn't push. The heat made her go tight. She looked down, eyes red, voice hoarse like she'd swallowed warm water. "What are you doing?"

"You haven't finished."

She stared at me two seconds and then her mouth curved like she'd found a reason to spoil herself. She lay back flat on the cushions and put her legs up on either side of my waist and tapped my hip with her heels. "Then come in and suck. Suck till you've had enough."

I sank in slow. She was softer than before the birth, the walls like velvet soaked in milk, soft and tight and taking all of me. She tipped her head back and let a long breath out like something that had been held taut for hours. "Mm... so full... you bad thing, you're in again..."

I bent and took the other nipple, still swollen, and curled my tongue and sucked. Milk kept coming. I swallowed and she shook. My waist and my mouth worked together, and every swallow made her contract, and every contraction held me tighter.

"Mm... ah... sucking your milk and fucking Mom at the same time, aren't you smug..." she said, cursing in pieces, and her voice gave her away. "Mom hasn't even had Nell that long... you suck and push like that and I... I can't..."

"Are they still full?"

"So full... but the more you suck the more..." She surprised herself and put a hand over her mouth without closing her legs. Milk ran from the corner of my mouth and down her cleavage. She looked down. "You're wasting it. Even Nell doesn't eat like this."

I licked the milk off and went harder below. Her sounds started to break and her fingers got the cushion edge. It came on her faster than I expected, maybe the engorgement, maybe the weeks of waiting. She arched and her toes curled and her walls spasmed in waves, and right then I sucked hard and milk shot out of her in a warm hard gush that hit my face and ran off my chin. She made a startled sound and then a run of spasms took her and her walls clamped nearly shut.

"Ah, it sprayed... it sprayed out..." Her voice was hoarse and full of satisfaction and she was still shaking.

I couldn't hold it. I pressed into the deepest part of her and let go, and she was still coming and her belly jumped as she took it. There was a drop of milk still on her nipple, trembling. Her chest was spotted with milk and my spit, and she looked like she'd been pulled out of a flood.

I lay on her, breathing. Her fingers came up on my back and stroked, like soothing an animal that had eaten too much.

"...The milk should run now," she said, softly, lazy and smiling. "Nell should have her dinner tonight."

I looked up. Her face was still red and her lips were curved and her eyes were wet, and she didn't look undone, she looked lazy and pleased. She wiped the milk off my face and her fingertips stayed on my lips a second.

"Sweet talker."

"Mm."

"Go rinse your mouth." She sat up on the couch and pulled her skirt down and straightened the mess of it. Some of it ran down her thigh. She looked at it and didn't wipe right away, just took a tissue off the table and wiped her face and held it and went to the crib. Two steps in she stopped and looked back and smiled. "You've still got some on your mouth. Wipe it, or Nell will smell it and want some."

She turned and bent over the crib where the little one had started to move her fists and open her eyes. The sun came in at her side and made the wet on her dress translucent. I wiped my mouth with a fingertip. It was still sweet.

"Is Nell awake?"

"Yeah, she's up." She didn't turn, just waved a hand behind her. "Get the hot water. I need to make a bottle."

She was still bent over the crib, playing with her, her voice back to its usual soft reassuring thing, as if the wet breathing and the milk had been shadows melting in the sun.

When my father called I was squatting on the balcony watering the plants. He said there was a client dinner and he probably wouldn't be home. Mom stood in the kitchen door with a glass of warm water and said flatly, "I know. Drink less."

She hung up and put the phone on the table and stood there two seconds and then turned and looked at me.

"Nell just went down," she said. "What do you want for dinner?"

I put the watering can down and stood. The sun came in behind her and gilded the hem of the light gray cotton dress. In the months since the birth her waist hadn't

come back and had gone soft instead, and the dress was wrapped all the way from her chest to her knees, like a peach starting to sweeten.

"Look at you," I said.

She didn't answer. She glanced at the crib. Nell was out cold, both fists at her cheeks, a clear drool bubble at the corner of her mouth. She looked at her and then back at me and there was a warm-water color in her eyes.

"Then sit with me a while," she said, softer. "He's not home and she's asleep. It feels like it's been a year since we had any time."

She went and sat on the couch and put the water on the table. Her skirt slid up with the movement and showed her calves, still milky under the skin. She didn't pull it back down. She patted the cushion. "Come sit."

I sat. The couch dipped and she leaned toward me. Her shoulder came against my arm through the thin cotton, soft and warm, exactly the same as it always is. She didn't talk. She just sat, like she was waiting. The sun moved across the table from her fingers to my wrist.

Then she turned her head. "My breasts are full again. Nell only ate a few bites and the other side hurts."

"Want me to work it?"

She pursed her lips, neither yes nor no. She looked down and adjusted the neckline. It was already loose, and with the adjustment half a breast almost slipped out. Full and round, like an overfilled balloon, faint blue veins under the skin, and a bead of milk already at the nipple, shining.

"You did well last time," she said, lower. "Stronger than Nell."

It was said soft, like a feather dropping, and in a living room where the only other sound was a clock it made ripples that wouldn't settle. I reached out and touched the skin at the edge of her collar, warm from the milk, like a thin cloth holding warm water. She flinched and didn't pull away, she turned slightly and brought her chest closer.

I lifted the swollen breast out of the neckline and she gasped like she was bearing a weight that would spill. It was burning in my palm, firm with milk but still soft, like a rice cake steamed over a low fire, sinking when pressed and coming back slow. My fingertip touched the nipple and milk came and ran between my fingers and left a dark mark on her skirt.

"Look, it can't wait," she said, and it was half grievance and half indulgence. "Help Mom get it out and it won't be swollen."

I bent and took the nipple and she let out a small sigh like she'd been holding it a long while. Warm milk came and there was the familiar sweet and fishy taste, like a key to an old lock. She stroked my hair from the roots to the ends, gentle as putting Nell to sleep.

"Mm... yes, like that... you suck so well..." Thick and sticky, soaked in honey. "You eat much better than your sister."

"It's my sister."

"It's all the same." She smiled and tapped the back of my head. "It's all Mom's children."

She said it as if it were natural. Natural as a lamp under the eaves lighting a forbidden road. I sucked the other side and milk kept coming. Her breathing sped up and her hand slid down and inside my collar and her fingertips traced circles on my collarbone.

"You're hard," she said.

I didn't deny it. She looked up, her eyes red from the fullness and the touching. "Mom will help you too. If you help Mom get the milk out, Mom can't leave you like this."

So sweet, like a mother looking after her son. But her fingertips had already found my waistband and worked the elastic and gone inside and taken hold of me. Her palm was damp from the milk and it wrapped me like warm wet cloth. Her thumb rubbed the head and spread the bit of clear that had come.

"Mm... grown as you are and you still go hard this easy," she said, like it was the most ordinary fact in the world. "Is it because you couldn't take it while you were sucking?"

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"Are you Mom right now or are you my lover?"

She paused. That pause was like a pane of glass going down between us, and then she smiled, sly and soft. "Both. Mom is your mom and your lover is your lover. Is that not allowed?"

She lowered her head and took me in her mouth, still tasting of milk. My waist went back against the couch and my fingers got the cushion edge, afraid to squeeze and make noise. Her lips were warm and wet, her tongue from the base to the head, and

then the head in her mouth and a gentle suck. It had the same instinctive rhythm she used to feed a baby with, only from a completely different place.

"Mm..." she hummed, like she'd tasted something herself. "You smell like milk down here too. Did you get some on you?"

Then she laughed at herself and the hum of it made me jump. She held the base and kept working, her tongue pausing deliberately each time it crossed the ridge, circling, then sliding down. My breathing went rough and stupid. I looked at her lowered lashes and down her nose to her half-open lips.

Her lips were stretched thin and a thread of clear ran out of the corner of her mouth and down her chin and left a dark spot on the collar of the loungewear. She looked up, wet in a way that only happens in bed, and mumbled, "It's... it's gotten bigger. Mom's mouth is sore from the stretch..."

"Then take it out of your mouth and use your mouth."

"Say what?"

"Tell me whose lover you are."

She let it out of her mouth with a thread and looked up, bright and soft. "I'm your lover and I'm your mother. The daughter of this house belongs to your father. The woman of this house belongs to you alone. Satisfied?"

She didn't wait for an answer. She took it in again, deeper than before, the soft of her throat closing on the head and nearly finishing me. I put a hand on the back of her head, no force, just there, her hair sliding through my fingers.

"Enough," I said. "Get up."

She looked up with her lips wet and her eyes puzzled. "What?"

"I want in."

She didn't say anything. She put her tongue out and licked the shine off her lips and stood, holding the arm of the couch, and bent and pulled the dress off her shoulders. It went down over her collarbone, her breasts, her waist, her hips, her legs, and pooled at her ankles like melted moonlight. Nothing under it, maybe never had been. Her body, made fuller by the birth, was laid out in the afternoon sun.

Her breasts were a size bigger with the milk and the areolas deep pink and a dried drop still at one nipple. There was warm soft flesh at her waist and the dark line down her belly hadn't faded, running from her ribs to her low belly like a mark I'd left. Her hips were wider and her thighs fuller and the curve of her backside like a peach with the skin stretched tight.

She stood there and didn't cover anything and didn't turn away. She just looked at me like something she'd waited a long time to open.

"Don't just look," she said, and there was a cloying sweetness in it she didn't hear. "Didn't you want in?"

I put her down on the couch and she lay back and her hair went over the cushions. Her breasts swayed with the movement, like two soft things in a bowl. I bent and took a nipple again and sucked and milk came at once and she tipped her head back and let a long sigh out like she'd given up.

"Mm... you bad boy... sucking again... sucking while you're pressed up against Mom's... you know exactly how to make a person lose..."

While I sucked I opened her legs with my hand. She was soaked. Her lips parted like a flower in rain and the little thing at the top stood out through the seam. I touched it and she shook and her legs closed and then opened slow.

"You're this wet and you say it's just the milk."

"The milk makes the rest of it tingle..." she gasped, muffled. "You're teasing me. Get in. Mom misses it."

I set the head against her. She lifted her hips and met me, open, waiting to be fed. I went in slow and she bit her lip and a run of small sounds came out her nose. Hot and soft, and because of the birth more supple and wet than before, like velvet in warm water, closing me in inch by inch.

"Mm... so full... so good..." Her head went back and her neck made a long curve. "You know, every time you come in, Mom wants to scream... wants the whole building to hear that you're fucking the one person you're not supposed to..."

Her voice shook and gave, like she'd found somewhere safe to put it down. I didn't answer, I put my mouth on hers. She opened and her tongue met mine and they wound together like two fish in deep water. Below, I held her hips and went slow and deep, pulling all the way to the entrance and grinding back in until the head hit the soft place at the back.

She couldn't make a whole sound, only pieces of *mm* and *ah* out of the corner of her mouth, and I swallowed them. She got my back with her fingertips and left shallow marks, like two lost animals staking out the same ground.

"Mom... you're so tight inside."

"Tight, isn't it..." She turned her head, eyes red, voice both coaxing and soft. "Because it's been so long since you touched me... now it's back in your shape... tight and hot, waiting to be filled..."

She put her thighs around my waist and her ankles locked behind my back. She lifted her hips with my rhythm to take me deeper. Milk ran from her nipples and down her chest and shone in the light. I bent and licked it up and she flinched and pushed her chest out for more.

"Tickles..." she complained, and the complaint meant *more.* "Sucking while you're inside Mom. Were you one of those kids who wouldn't wean?"

"And you? Are you the kind of mom who'd nurse her son?"

She paused and then smiled, tender and doting and a little annoyed at being found out. She hooked an arm behind my neck and pulled me down and whispered at my ear, "Yeah. Mom's the kind of mom who'll fill up and wait for you to come drink. If you want, every drop from now on is yours."

I got her waist and went hard. She finally let the sob out, a long thin cry like a bird caught in rain. Her walls clamped with every push and hot fluid ran and soaked the cushion. Her breasts jumped with each hit and milk sprayed off the nipples in small white streaks and fell back on her chest.

"Ah... ah... faster... Mom's going to come... going to get fucked inside..." she sobbed, hoarse. "You, shoot inside... shoot inside Mom... let Mom give you another one..."

That went down my spine. I looked at her red face and her wet eyes and the mouth that could still say *another one,* and pushed in as deep as she goes and came, wave after wave. She shook from the heat and her walls pulled at it, trying to get every drop.

Milk came out of her nipples and landed on her face and chest and the back of my hand at her waist. We stayed like that a long time until her breathing slowed and the spasms stopped. Then her legs came down and she looked at her chest and then at me and the corner of her mouth went up. "Look at you. You've sprayed Mom everywhere."

"You sprayed it yourself."

"You sucked it out." She propped up and kissed the corner of my mouth. "But Mom doesn't blame you."

She didn't hurry to wipe. She lay back, chest going, skin shining with milk and sweat, eyes shut, voice lazy. "Go see if Nell's awake. If she is, bring her. I'll feed her."

"Have you got any left?"

"You took some, but the other side is still full." She opened one eye, smiling. "Leave some for your sister. You wouldn't take it out of her mouth, would you?"

I smiled and got up and pulled my pants straight and went to the crib. Nell was still asleep, her fist at her cheek, the drool bubble bigger than before. I bent and wiped her mouth. Mom's voice came off the couch. "Your dad won't be home tonight."

I knew what that meant.

"What happens after Nell's asleep?" I asked.

She didn't answer. But I heard her get up off the couch and go barefoot into the bathroom and turn the tap on. The sound was like an agreement, silent and clearer than words.

Outside, the sunset slid across the room and threw a long shadow of the ivy, like a road quietly running into the night. We both knew where it went.

Chapter 15: Frantic

I turned the lock on the master bedroom door. Click. The whole world outside.

Moonlight came through the gap in the curtains and laid a silver band across the dark sheets. This was their bed. His reading glasses on the nightstand, a cup of tea gone cold, the charger he always looks at before bed. A little of his aftershave in the air, like an old stain about to be wiped out.

She sat on the edge with her back to me. The light gray dress hung off her shoulders, the straps already half down from the couch. The moonlight fell exactly between her nape and her shoulder blades and made the skin almost transparent. She tilted her head and looked back at me over her shoulder with her eyes crinkled, like a cat under the eaves.

"Did you lock it?"

"Mm."

"Then why are you standing so far away?"

She patted the mattress. His side, where he sleeps every night. I went and sat on the edge of it. The bed sank and she tipped toward me like a reed in wind. She reached out and put her fingertips on the back of my hand and drew slow circles, like practicing a letter she hadn't written in years.

"This bed of your dad's," she said. "I've slept in it with him for over twenty years. Tonight I'm going to be on it and you're going to fuck me until I forget his last name."

Soft and even, and it went into the hottest part of me like a needle. I took her chin and made her look up. The moonlight made porcelain of half her face and the water at the corner of her eye was bright in the shadow.

"Then don't get the name wrong," I said.

"How would I get it wrong?" She smiled. "If I forget him, I'll forget you first. I'll only remember you."

She laughed like it was a joke, but her hands kept going, up my arm, flat on my chest through the shirt, feeling my heart speed up. She put her forehead on my shoulder and her voice went muffled. "Mom's yours. Every hole is yours."

I got the back of her head and kissed her like I wanted to eat her. She made a soft *mm* and didn't pull away, she opened her mouth and her tongue came to mine and wound in. Deep and wet, exchanging something nobody else is allowed to know. She was panting, her hand already down my stomach, taking hold of me through the shorts, tracing the shape with a fingertip.

"Already this hard. Weren't you full from the couch?"

"That was an appetizer."

"And now?"

"Now it's the main course."

I pushed her down onto the marriage bed. Her hair went out on the dark sheet like water plants in moonlight. The neckline was completely open and her breasts, swollen with milk, came out of it and shook in the light. Milk ran from the nipples and left two shining streaks on the white of her skin. Her waist was fuller than before and the dark line was still faintly there, like a ring that marked what she'd grown. She lay on her back by his pillow with her legs a little open and the hem bunched at her waist, already soaked.

I put my mouth on a nipple and sucked hard. Warm milk came with the sweet fishy taste. She tipped her head back and let a long *mm* out of her throat and her fingers went into my hair and pressed my head in.

"Suck gently... don't, don't take all of Nell's food..." She laughed. "Leave her a bite. The rest is yours. You're worse than your sister about stealing."

I flicked the nipple and she shook and her back arched. I followed down her chest, past the faint line, past the small round of her belly, to her thighs. She was easy, legs

opening, giving up the whole wet shining landscape without a reservation. Her lips were fuller and thicker since the birth, like two halves of a ripe fruit splitting open, the little red thing out, red as a cherry about to run. I opened her with two fingers and clear warm fluid came and ran down to the sheet in a dark patch.

She looked down at it, soft and coaxing. "Look at that. Mom lies down on your dad's bed and gets this wet. The whole bed's going to smell of it."

That lit me up. I set the aching head against her and didn't go in, just rubbed it along the wet seam until she arched to chase it. She couldn't hold it in, her voice shook and there were almost tears in it. "What are you rubbing for... get in. My cunt can't wait..."

"Can't wait for what?"

"Can't wait for you to fill me up!"

I drove in. A long held-in moan came out of her throat, shaking, and it was very clear in the quiet room. Hot and soft, the walls of her like velvet in warm water, supple and tight, taking me all the way around and making my scalp prickle. Her toes curled and she still lifted her hips to get more of it.

"Mm... so deep... son, you're at my cervix..." Her head went back, her neck a long curve. "Right there... push harder... open me up..."

She's my mother. She was saying it on my father's bed with me buried in her, telling me to fuck her harder. I got her waist and went at it, all the way out and all the way back, and the mattress swayed and the glass of water on the nightstand rippled with each hit.

"Ah... ah... that's it... fuck Mom hard... fuck Mom's little cunt into your shape..." Her voice was completely loose and there were sobs in it and a satisfaction underneath. "If your dad heard his wife making this noise he wouldn't dare come home..."

The more she talked the more excited she got, and her walls pulled and squeezed like she wanted to take me all the way in. I bent and kissed her to shut her up and didn't stop below. Her legs locked around my waist with her ankles crossed and wouldn't let go.

"Mom... I want to come in your womb..."

"Then put it in..." She turned her head, eyes red, looking at me wet. "Give it all to Mom. Let Mom get pregnant again for you. Nell's lonely by herself. Give her a sister."

That did it. I pressed into the deepest part and the tingle went through my lower back and it came, wave after wave of it into her. She shook from the heat and her walls went wild, pulling and holding, not letting a drop past. We stayed joined until it

finished. Her legs came down and she lay on her back with her chest going and a drop of milk still on her nipple, shining in the moonlight. She looked down at her slightly swollen belly and pressed it and her voice was full of it. "Look. Mom's little belly is full again."

I was still breathing hard and I put my hand over hers. Under my palm her belly was warm and soft, like a secret that had just settled. She didn't get up, she lay still and let it stay in her. After a while she turned on her side and looked up at me and tucked a sweaty strand behind her ear and her voice was hoarse.

"There are two more holes."

"You're sure?"

"Didn't you say every hole?" She smiled, shy and tempting at once, like a cat that got at the cream. "Top and bottom are still empty."

She knelt up slow, her knees sliding along the sheet, and came up to my face. She bent and took it in her mouth, still covered with everything, and her soft warm tongue licked the rest off, taking the thing that had just finished but was beginning to rise again. Deep and slow, like she was tasting something.

"Mm... Mom just loves the taste of you..." she mumbled, glancing up. "The salt, the heat, it's all yours..."

She let it out, fully up again, with a thread at the corner of her mouth and her eyes wet. She turned around and knelt with her backside up and looked back at me. "My back mouth hasn't had you yet. Would you put some of that lotion on for me? Mom's afraid it'll hurt and look bad."

I took the bottle of lotion off the nightstand and put some in my palm. Under the light it was a light brown, the folds fine and close, like a bud. I put the lotion on and went in a circle and she went tight and then slowly eased. "Mm... slow... let Mom get used to it..."

When she was soft I set the head to it and went in slow. She put her face in her hands and let out a muffled breath and her back arched to meet me. Tighter and hotter than her cunt, a fine soft layer, holding every inch, pressure from all sides.

"Mm... so full... you're in... my son's cock is in my ass..." Nasal and muffled and reckless. "If your dad knew this happened in his bed he'd never dare sleep in it again."

I held her hips and went slow. She was narrower and needed care, but she loosened and took it. Her sounds went to low hoarse breaths that shook with my rhythm.

"Mom, your ass is so tight."

"Tight, is it... it's all things my son has used..." she said, into the sheet, embarrassed. "From now on Mom will let you fill every bed in this house with it... ah... there, there's so good..."

I sped up and she went like a fish in a wave. When it came again I was deep in her and let go. She shook from the heat and went down into the sheet with her shoulders going. When I pulled out, a thin line followed and ran from her.

She lay there a while and then turned over and lay on her back by his pillow with her chest heaving. Milk and sweat and everything else in the air of the whole bed. She looked at the ceiling, lazy and satisfied. "Look. Mom's top, bottom and back, all filled by you."

She lifted a hand and hooked it behind my neck and pulled me down and kissed me with her own taste in it, as tender as the woman who'd just begged to be fucked hard. Then she let go and sat up and looked at the mess of herself and her mouth curved.

"I'll wash the sheets myself tomorrow. Your dad won't find out."

She gathered her hair and pulled the dress back over her shoulders and looked at the dark water marks on the dark sheet and didn't wipe them. She smiled and turned the covers back and patted the mattress.

"What are you standing there for? Get in. You're not going anywhere all night."

Morning wasn't in the plan. There hadn't been a plan last night, and later there didn't seem to be much need for one. The moon had moved from the window to the back of the house, the pillow had gone from the head of the bed to the foot, the stains had spread, and the light gray nightgown was crumpled in the corner. Kitchen, couch, bathroom, and back to this bed we shouldn't have come back to. Two people who'd found water and neither willing to be the one who stopped.

Then the light came. A gray-white seam through the curtains, making the dark sheet gray and the wet patches obvious. I lay behind her on my side with the blanket at my chest and our skin stuck together like two rice cakes in hot soup. She was still breathing unevenly, legs together, my waist between them. I put my forehead on the damp skin of her nape.

"Mom, are you still awake?"

"I'm awake." Hoarse. "Your thing's still inside. How would I sleep?"

"Then leave it a minute."

"Mm... don't move..."

I didn't move. It felt like something alive in her, squeezing in slow circles, savoring the heat of the night. She hummed and shut her eyes and her fingertips went over the back of my hand and away.

"Are you hard again?"

"It woke up on its own. Not my fault."

"On its own?" She didn't turn, but she smiled. "Then why doesn't it come out on its own?"

I pinched the soft of her side and she flinched and laughed. "All right, stop it. It's light out. What if your dad comes back..."

"He won't be this early."

"What if?"

"There aren't that many what ifs." I kissed her shoulder, light. "Give me a little more."

She didn't answer. She reached behind and found me through the sheet and traced the shaft with a fingertip, like weighing an old branch she knew, and then blinked hard. "Hurry. Mom has to feed Nell."

"Okay."

Okay was a lie. I got her waist and pushed back into that warm wet place. She bit her lip and a very small *mm* came out of her nose, a sleepy murmur. Filled all night, every inch of her knew the shape of me and closed around it warm and slick, like a mouth that wouldn't let go. I moved slow. She hummed. The light in the curtain crack got whiter.

"Mm... don't, don't go too fast..." She put her face in the pillow, muffled. "What if somebody really comes back..."

"Won't."

As I said it, there was a very clear metal sound at the front door.

A key going into a lock and turning once.

The whole world stopped.

She froze with her breath caught. Her walls clamped all the way shut in a second, like a startled mouth biting. I lay behind her with my waist against the soft heat of her and didn't breathe. The lock turned again, clicked, and the door opened. Footsteps on the entry floor, heavy leather, carrying the chill of the early morning in off the street.

"Mom..." I whispered.

"Don't... don't talk..." Her voice shook worse than mine. "The blanket. Pull the blanket up."

I got the corner of it and pulled it over both of us to the shoulders. But I was still inside her, still hard as a pestle in the deepest warm part of her, and she didn't dare move either. Two rabbits in a flashlight beam in the same bed.

The steps came to the bedroom. He stopped in the living room. I heard him pause at the coffee table. Then the bedroom door handle went down and her walls clamped again.

"Don't move," she forced out between her teeth. "If you move, I'll..."

She didn't finish. The door opened.

Light came through the doorway and lit a big part of the dim room. Through the gap in the blanket I saw leather shoes and a pair of pressed dark blue slacks. He stood in the door and didn't come in, like the sight of it had stopped him.

"...Huh."

He paused and then seemed to work something out and chuckled.

"Why are you two sleeping in here?"

Gentle, half exasperated, half amused. I lay behind her with my forehead on her nape and my eyes shut, trying to make my breathing long and slow. She wasn't much better, her shoulders tight, her lashes fluttering, still trying to look asleep.

And right then, whether from fear or from the squeezing, I came.

The tingle went through my lower back and it went out of me in pulses, deep into her. She nearly came off the mattress. I held her and the blanket was thick so it only looked like she'd shifted in her sleep. She bit her lip hard and a very faint shaking sound came out through her teeth.

He stood in the door with no idea. He looked at the two of us huddled up and there was something wistful in his voice. "Look at you two. You're that close now, you're sleeping in the same room."

He said *a room* very softly, like he was describing something warm and safe. Her fingers dug into my arm under the blanket, nails in me, and she didn't make a sound.

"All right, all right, go back to sleep. I won't bother you." He chuckled. "I'll go look at Nell."

The steps went away from the door toward the nursery. The door stayed ajar. Only when the steps were gone did she let out a long breath and go down into the mattress like all her strength had run out. I lay on her back breathing hard with my own back soaked through.

"You..." Her voice shook and there was a sob in it. "Just now... you..."

"I couldn't help it."

"Are you insane? He was right at the door!"

"You were squeezing so tight, I really couldn't."

She was quiet for several seconds, swallowing it. Then she moved her leg and felt the warmth running out of her and her voice went hoarse and soft. "You... all of that inside? All of it?"

"...Mm."

"I can feel my stomach jumping. It's all yours."

She seemed embarrassed by her own words and put her face in the pillow. Then, muffled, "You bad thing. I was so scared and you still dared to finish inside me."

"Isn't it better when you're scared?"

"You dare talk back."

She raised a hand to hit me and her arm had no strength and she only tapped my forearm like swatting a mosquito. Her ears were so red they were nearly bleeding and there was sweat on her neck from how close I'd been. Her breathing hadn't calmed, her breasts going with it, the nipples still marked with milk. She wasn't wearing the nightgown. Only the corner of the blanket was over her waist.

"All right, get it out." She lowered her voice. "He's with Nell next door, he might come in a minute."

"You're squeezing so tight I can't get it out."

"You, you're blaming me!"

She tried to loosen. I came out of her slow and it followed, thick and white, running down her inner thigh into the dark sheet. She looked down and the red came back into her face and she pulled the blanket corner over the mess.

"The sheets. The sheets need washing again."

"I said I'd do it last night."

"You dare bring up last night."

She glared with embarrassment and annoyance both, and I shut up and watched her sit up and get the crumpled nightgown and shake it out and pull it on. The strap slid off one side and when she tipped her head to get it her whole shoulder came out, and there were red marks on the skin. She felt me looking and said, without turning, "Stop it. Put your pants on."

"Mom."

"What?"

"I haven't forgotten the bite you took when he pushed the door open."

She stopped and her ears burned again. She didn't answer, just pulled the strap back into place and tidied her hair. She stood barefoot by the bed and pressed the back of her hand to her cheek and took a breath and went to the door. She put her ear to the crack for a few seconds and then opened it a hand's width and looked out and called toward the living room:

"You're back? Why so early... Is Nell up? I'll go see her."

Her voice was back to its everyday gentleness. But before she stepped out she turned and looked at me fast, eyes still wet, mouth curved in a silent smile.

"Wash the sheets."

Then she went toward the nursery, her steps light as the morning. I sat on the edge of the bed looking at the half-open door and down at the mess of myself, and after a while my mouth curved too.

Chapter 16: Ordinary Days

My father probably never guessed that the safest place in the house was one he built himself.

From the living room came Nell's babbling. He was squatting on the play mat with the plush rabbit, doing a voice he'd never used on me or on Mom. "Nell, Nell, look here, Daddy's here! The bunny's here! Grab it, grab it!" Nell's feet kicked and her fists went and she couldn't get the rabbit. He wasn't in a hurry. He lay down on the mat and brought the rabbit to her hand and when she caught it he yelled, "Wow! Our Nell's so strong! Even Daddy can't hold it!" Nell laughed at him and drooled.

I stood in the kitchen door with a glass of cold water. He gives her at least half his patience. He used to complain about being tired when he got home, and now the first thing he does is wash his hands and pick her up and call her his little sweetheart. His happiness is real. Even the migraines he's had for years have eased off.

"Look at your dad," Mom said behind me. She was leaning on the counter with a dish towel, watching them. Her voice had something in it I couldn't name. "He never did that with you."

"I'm not so jealous I cried. I've been very big about it."

She smiled, lips pursed, and didn't answer. The sun came in on her face and made the lines at her eyes faint. Light cotton dress today, loose neckline, hair in a low bun with the neck showing. She'd just fed Nell, so her breasts were still full and held the fabric out in a curve you could see the breathing move.

I drank and made myself look away. "Dad's taking Nell out today. What are you going to do?"

"You?" Her voice dropped half an octave. "My breasts are full again. What do you think we should do?"

My throat went. I knew that face. A small smile, a wetness at the eye corners only I could read, a secret under the sun with the corner showing. She turned and went down the hall. "I'm going to the storage room for something. Come help. The box is too high, I can't reach it."

"Okay."

I put the glass down and followed. Passing the living room, Dad had his back to us demonstrating how a bunny hops and didn't see. I softened my steps and went into the storage room behind her. The moment the door shut she turned the lock behind her, a practiced movement.

"He just changed her diaper," she said, leaning on the shelf, still quiet. "He'll play with her a while."

"What happened to finding something?"

"Isn't this it?" She took a folded dry towel off the shelf and set it by the washer and stood up and lifted her skirt.

No underwear. Maybe she couldn't be bothered after feeding, maybe she'd planned it. Her lips were wet in the light, even the seam of them damp. She looked down at herself with a lazy smugness. "See. I haven't even had time to look for anything and I'm already wet."

"You're too..."

"Too what? Too convenient?" She smiled and took my wrist and pressed my hand to the soft of her breast. "Feel it. How swollen. It swells at the least thing. Nell's been too busy playing with your dad to eat properly."

Through the cotton her breast was warm in my palm. I pressed and she shook and let out a breath. "Mm... gently. It hurts a little."

"So do you want gentle, or do you want me to suck?"

"Stop talking nonsense." She went red and still pulled the neckline down and half a breast came out, the nipple already hard with a bead of milk at it. "Get some out of this side first. It's so full it's uncomfortable."

I bent and took it and she let out a long soft sigh like she'd found somewhere to put the tension. Warm milk came, sweet and fishy. One hand held my head and the other braced the laundry sink, her fingertips curling on the rim.

"Mm... yes, like that... harder... it feels good... I wish Nell sucked like you..." Already sticky, already with that something in it. She gasped in little bursts, afraid of being heard, and the fear seemed to make it worse. "Don't be too rough... the washer will knock the wall... gently, Mom'll hold you tight..."

She tightened around nothing, like a warm mouth, and reached between my legs and touched me through the pants and traced the shape. "Look at you. Hard the second Mom feeds you. Do you like sneaking around?"

"It's better when it's sneaky."

"So how does Mom help you?"

I had nothing. She laughed and knelt and unzipped me and took me in her hand and rubbed the head with her thumb and spread what was there and lowered her head and took it in. Her tongue went around the ridge and the tingle shot from my lower back to the back of my head. I got the washing machine and clenched my teeth.

She held it in her mouth a while and let it out, lips wet. "Damn it. Mine's itching now too."

She turned and braced on the washer and arched her back and the wet of her showed under the skirt. She looked back, soft and shining. "Get in. While he's still with her."

I got her hips and set against the wet seam and went in slow. Hot and tight, soft flesh in warm water, closing me in inch by inch. She tipped her head back and pushed a long moan down into a nasal sound. "Mm... so full... full at last..."

"Keep it down, he's in the living room."

"You went in that deep straight off, how would I keep it down?" She laughed first and the laugh got cut off by a push. "Ah... don't be rough... the washer's going to hit the wall and make noise... gently, Mom'll hold you tight..."

She tightened on purpose, a warm small mouth, and I held her waist and softened into a slow deep grind. She shook and bit her hand to keep it muffled. Right then Dad laughed in the living room. "Nell, grab it again! Daddy's putting the bunny up high!"

Her body went tight all at once and her walls clamped hard enough to finish me. She turned her head, startled and shining, her voice shaking. "You... did you hear that... he's playing with her... and we're right here, one wall away..."

"Then squeeze tighter so he can't hear."

"Don't put it on me... mm..." She put her face down again and her shoulders shook. "You bad thing. You bully Mom."

I didn't answer, I pushed deeper. She bit her hand and her toes curled inside her slippers. After a while, like she'd got used to the rhythm, she said, low, "Later... if you get married, will you still do this to Mom?"

"Ask me that again and I'll stop moving."

She had nothing for that either, snorted, and moved her hips. "You dare stop and I'll move myself."

I held her hips and pressed in deeper. She made a muffled sound and went quiet. Only the wet, soft noise of us and the held breathing in the storage room, and out in the living room Dad going up and down with his voice, holding the normal world away from us.

Some time later her body shook and I felt the waves start. She bit her lip and pressed her climax down into a small whimper. I got there too and let out a low breath and finished deep in her. She shook all over and took a while to relax and straighten, leaning on the sink.

"You came so much again..." She looked down at the cloudy white running on her thigh, hoarse and smiling. "It's all coming out."

"We'll do it again tonight."

"You certainly organize things," she said, and took a tissue off the shelf. She wiped me first and then bent and wiped herself, quick and practiced, like she'd done it a hundred times. She balled it up and threw it in the trash and straightened her skirt and turned and came up on her toes and kissed the corner of my mouth. "You go out first. I'll wash my face."

I pulled my pants straight and opened the door and pretended to have found something. Dad was carrying Nell around the living room making airplane noises and Nell was laughing and drooling. He turned. "Where's your mother?"

"She's putting something away. She'll be out."

"Oh." He bent and kissed Nell's forehead. "Nell, look how helpful your brother is, helping Mom with the chores."

I laughed dryly and sat on the couch and picked up the remote and pretended to change the channel. Mom came out of the hall with a damp face and water at her temples like she'd just washed. She came in and sat next to Dad and looked down at Nell. "She's happy today."

"Course she is. Dad's here." He bounced her and then seemed to remember something. "By the way, you've been looking better lately. Is that the recovery?"

Her eyes crossed my face quick and went back to him. Her lips curved. "Probably. With somebody helping with Nell, it's much easier. A better mood does that."

"That's good, that's good." He smiled and rubbed his nose on Nell's cheek. "Our daughter really knows how to pick her timing, coming when neither of us is busy."

I sat next to them holding the remote, thinking the channel buttons were going to wear out.

In the afternoon Nell went down.

The sun came in on her crib and warmed the corners of the blanket. Dad sat in the rocker beside it with a hand on the rail, staring at her with no thoughts in his head. Mom stood in the door a moment and then eased it shut and turned and ran right into me.

"Your dad's watching her." She looked up, very quiet. "He won't be out for a while."

"You say it like it's a crime."

"Doesn't it look like one?" She smiled and took my hand and led me to the guest bathroom at the end of the hall. She opened the door and checked it and looked back at me.

"Didn't you say you wanted another?" She was already inside with her hand on the knob, her eyes sliding off my face. "Nell's asleep and your dad's with her. Are you coming in?"

I followed her and the door clicked. The bathroom isn't big and our shoulders touched. She leaned on the sink and pulled my collar down and put a hot kiss on my mouth.

"I was in the storage room and I still haven't had enough." Her breath on my lips. "Your dad took such good care of Nell today, Mom was so happy, and when she's happy she wants you."

"Is Mom going to reward me?"

"Mm. This is the reward." She kissed me again and her hand went down. "Feeding Mom is the reward."

I put my hand under her skirt and she was wet again. She looked down at herself and said softly, "Perfect. The last of it's still in there. Add a little more, it won't be too much."

I helped her up on the sink and she opened her legs and let the skirt go to her waist. I set against her and she took a breath and lifted her hips and swallowed me slow.

"Mm... this is better than standing at the washer..." Her head went back against the mirror and her voice went nasal. "You're pushing in... my uterus is so hot from you... numb and swollen..."

"Does Mom like it?"

"I like it..." She moved her hips. The mirror shook gently behind her and the steam began to make a white film on it. "Every time you finish inside me I feel like... like I really could give you another."

I held her waist harder and she bit her lip and kept it down. A murmur of sleep came in off the window and Dad's hushing drowned it. She shut her eyes and opened them and they were shining. "Once she's properly under... he might fall asleep in the rocker too. Then we'll go somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Your call." She smiled. "We know this house inside out anyway. Every corner of it."

The steam got heavier. She leaned on my shoulder, low. I felt the fine rhythm of her starting again and she felt it too. "It's happening... you, harder... Mom's close... if she wakes up he'll come knocking and we'll have to stop..."

I knew. We took the last of it before the door could open. She couldn't keep the last sob in and her walls went wild and I finished deep in her again. She leaned on me, breathing, and took a long time to lift her head. "All of it in again?"

"Mm."

She looked down and didn't wipe, just pressed her lower belly, feeling the weight and heat of it. Then she smiled. "Tonight. After he's asleep."

She got down and straightened her skirt and fixed her hair in the mirror and smoothed her collar. The woman in the mirror, shoulders back, eyes soft, looked exactly like a good wife and mother who'd just got up from an afternoon nap. She smiled at herself and turned and, going past me, her fingertips brushed the back of my hand like a message only the two of us can hear.

"The water's boiled in the kitchen. I'm making Nell a bottle," she said. "If your dad asks, say you were washing fruit for me."

I stood in the door and watched her go and heard her push the living room door and heard Dad, sleepy, ask if Nell was up.

"No, I'll make the bottle first so I'm not scrambling when she is."

"You think of everything."

"Course. You're in charge of playing with her, I'm in charge of feeding her." She paused and added, "We've each got our jobs."

I stood there and looked down at my still-open zipper and sighed without sound. Then I zipped it and turned the tap on and washed the heat off my fingers.

The division of labor in this house had changed completely somewhere and nobody had said when.

The mall was worse than I expected on a Saturday. Sun came down through the skylight onto the fake palms in the atrium and made them very green. A love song by somebody nobody knew was playing over the speakers, sweet enough to hurt, mixed with popcorn and coffee.

Nell sat in the stroller kicking and pointing and babbling. She was in the pale yellow bunny onesie Mom picked out, two ears standing up on the hood, like a walking dumpling. People kept looking twice at her.

Dad pushed the stroller with his back straight and smiled at everybody. New light blue polo today, hair combed, like he was taking her to a pageant.

"Nell, look, a big dinosaur!" He bent and pointed at a plush dinosaur in a toy store window at full volume. Nell looked where he pointed and her mouth made a round *oh* and both hands went out, *want it, want it, want it.* He took it like a royal decree and pushed the stroller at the door, muttering, "All right, all right, Daddy'll buy it, Daddy'll buy you anything."

I walked behind with Mom's canvas bag: bottle, diapers, bibs, an open pack of cookies. She walked beside me with her fingers trailing along the shop windows. Light blue floral dress today, the neckline buttoned to the second button out here, just a hint of collarbone, hair curled at the ends and moving in the draft.

She looked in the windows like she was shopping and she wasn't. Her fingertips curled the hem of her skirt and her steps slowed until she was a few behind him and the stroller.

"Your dad's in a good mood today," she said, low, under the noise.

"Not just a good mood. He's been rejuvenated."

She smiled and didn't answer. Her profile in the light was transparent enough that the tiny mole by her nose showed. She felt me looking and turned her head a little, a shine going through her eyes and away.

"Mom."

"Mm?"

"Are you thirsty?"

She paused. Her lips moved without sound, like she'd swallowed something. She looked down and then up and her voice was even softer. "A little."

"Then I'll get you some water."

She nodded and said nothing. I sped up to Dad. "Dad, stay here a minute. Mom and I are going to get a drink and use the restroom."

He was squatting in the toy store door going through a rack of new baby toys. "Go, go. I've got her. Take your time, we'll get lunch."

"Got it."

I stepped back. Mom was already at the escalator with a hand on the rail, not looking at me, her feet already headed for the restrooms. The escalator carried us up and she stood one step ahead with her shoulders moving. The blue hem lifted and showed her calf. I looked at the thin silver chain on her ankle for a few seconds. I gave it to her for her birthday last year.

On the second floor she turned into the corridor and at the fork she didn't hesitate, she went straight at the accessible restroom door and looked back with wet in her eyes.

"What are you standing there for?"

She went in first.

My heart started. I checked the corridor, empty, and went in and shut the door and turned the lock. It clicked like a coin into a piggy bank.

The room isn't big, light gray tile, a sink with a low counter, a changing table beside it. Warm yellow light and the exhaust fan going, a soft blanket over the outside noise.

She leaned on the sink with her back to the mirror and her hands on the counter, looking up at me. The neckline was loose now, half her collarbone out. The light came down and there was sweat on the side of her neck like she'd walked a long way.

"Your dad's looking at toys with her." Much lower than usual. "He can do that for half an hour."

"You called me in to tell me that?"

She smiled and put a fingertip in my collar and pulled me half an inch closer. It was nothing, and my legs were cotton. She looked up, eyes crinkled. "You were on the escalator staring at my hem the whole way. Don't think I didn't know."

"You've got the wrong guy."

"Wrong or not, you know it." She leaned in and sniffed my collar. "You smell like coffee. If your dad knew you did this in a mall restroom he'd think you'd lost your mind."

"Then why'd you call me in?"

"Because I've lost mine too." She even sounded amused.

She reached for my waist and found the button and it came loose and her fingers went inside the zip and found me through the cotton, already restless, and squeezed, like weighing something. "Oh. Energetic already. In the corridor?"

"That's how it looks at you."

"Should I apologize to it?" Her fingers traced the shape from base to head through the fabric and pressed. "Look at it jumping the second I touch it."

"Of course it jumps. You're touching it."

"Don't be glib." She squatted. The blue floral dress spread on the tile like a faded flower. She looked up, bright and soft, all mother and a little malice, and pulled the edge of my underwear aside and it came out and shone in the yellow light.

"Hm. Good spirits today." Her thumb rubbed the head and spread the drop. "Mom'll give you a reward."

Her lips came on and my back hit the door with a thud. Her lips parted and took the head and her tongue went around the ridge and then deeper, unhurried, like she was tasting something expensive, or like she was making sure I knew this wasn't home and I couldn't be stupid about it.

I looked down at her profile, a strand of hair across her forehead and brushing the back of her hand. She took it deeper without hurrying, like she meant to make syrup of every second in that little room. I put a hand on the back of her head with no pressure. She looked up smiling and a blush came up out of the kiss.

"Mm..." she hummed, as if to ask what.

"Mom, don't. I'll be quick."

She let it out, wet, with a thread. "Quick is fine, there's time. Your dad's busy picking out toys. He's got no idea his son's got his mouth full in a bathroom." She laughed at herself and lowered her head and flicked the little cord under the head with her tongue.

My back went. She felt it and took the base and went faster, her tongue scraping the seam on every pass. I gritted my teeth and pushed the groan back into fast breathing.

"Keep it down." Mumbling, reminding me or teasing me. "The soundproofing's bad. Somebody walking by hearing you pant will wonder what's wrong."

"How am I supposed to be quiet with your mouth on me?"

"Then bear it." She went deeper, and her hand slid from the base to the sac and cupped and kneaded it twice. My scalp went and the heat came up out of my feet.

"Mom... I can't..."

She didn't let go, she held harder and her tongue curled and sucked. My head went empty and a low hoarse sound got out of my throat and it came, into her mouth. She didn't flinch, her throat moved and she swallowed it and licked twice more to be sure. Then she came off it and straightened and wiped the corner of her mouth and smiled sweetly.

"That's a lot. Saving up for days?"

I leaned on the door. "Your fault for never giving me a chance."

"Isn't it because I've been with my parents every day and there's been no chance?" She looked at a small wet spot on her skirt and took a tissue off the sink and dampened it and wiped it very carefully, like evidence. Then she threw it in the trash and turned and braced on the sink and bent, pushing her backside out from under the skirt.

"That was an appetizer," she said, low, with something more in it. "You haven't started eating."

A hand lifted the skirt to her waist. Light cotton underwear today, thin, the dark showing through the middle like it had been soaked. She hooked a finger in the edge and pulled it down and the full soft of her came out into the yellow light. Her lips were parted a little, the seam wet, the light breaking in small pieces on it.

"Look. Mom doesn't even need touching and it's already dripping." She turned her head, a thin flush on her cheeks, steady. "When you gave it a drink just now, do you think it was thinking about you?"

I didn't answer. I came up behind her and got an arm around her waist with my palm on her lower belly and my fingers down. The wet met them and she gasped and her waist dropped half an inch.

"Mm... your fingers are cold... you, get in first..." She pushed back and the soft of her rubbed the ache of me. "Put it in."

I set the head at her and she was impatient and pushed back and took half of it. Warm, tight, soft on all sides. Soaked through from before, every inch of her sticking and pulling. She murmured with her forehead on the mirror. "Mm... so full... it fills up the second you're in..."

I went in to the end. She breathed, shoulders shaking, her voice thick with satisfaction. "Look. It's like Mom kept this spot for you. It knew you the second you came in."

"So I'll come every day."

"In your dreams." She moved her hips and her backside bumped my stomach. "But today you can have all you want."

She lay over the sink being pushed slow with soft muffled sounds coming out of the corner of her mouth. The mirror held her parted lips and her red eyes. The room was quiet enough that even the fan seemed loud, and every wet sound and every shift of skin was clear. Then steps came up the corridor, slow and steady.

Her walls clamped like a startled mouth. I froze half in her and didn't move. The steps came to the door and stopped. A woman's voice, the cleaner's: "Hey, why's this one locked? Anybody in there?"

She bit her lip hard and went tight as a wire. I didn't move either and felt her clenching in waves that meant *don't move, don't make a sound.* My forehead was on her nape and her skin was hot and the sweat dampened my lips.

The cleaner waited and then muttered, "Probably changing a diaper," and the steps went off.

When it was gone we both let the breath out at once. She lifted her face off the mirror, red-eyed, hoarse. "That nearly killed me. We almost got caught."

"You were squeezing so tight I nearly finished at the door."

"Is there a difference between finishing at the door and finishing inside?" She laughed in spite of herself and the laugh shook her where we were joined and she put her head down. "You're still in. Don't move. Let me breathe."

But I got harder. She felt it and bit her lip and didn't try to get away. After a while, quietly, "Are you also scared of being overheard, and then excited?"

"Aren't you?"

She didn't answer, but her waist shifted, tiny, like a test, or a confirmation that the lock was as good as she'd thought. Then she straightened and put her hands on the wall and dropped her waist further. "All right, let's finish. Dad's waiting."

"Rush me and I can't hurry."

"Figure it out. If Nell cries he'll call."

As she said it her phone buzzed in the canvas bag. A text from him: *Nell's found a singing penguin and won't move. Take your time, no rush.* She looked at the screen and her lips curved and she turned the phone face down on the sink. "See. He's more anxious than we are."

The tension broke into something hotter. I got her hips and went again, bolder, harder, each push putting her forward until her nipples brushed the tile through her dress. She flinched, itchy and numb both, and dropped her waist further to take more.

"Mm... you, you're harder today... I can't hold it..." Broken into pieces, warm and sticky. "You've rubbed it raw... numb and swollen..."

"Then why are you moaning like that?"

"Because of you... you made Mom feel good... that's why Mom's moaning..." She got embarrassed and dropped to a nasal whisper. Her walls were pulsing in waves, telling me she was close.

"Mom, I'm close too."

"Put it inside..." She turned her head, red-eyed, shaking. "There's no condom in here. Don't do it outside, if it leaks they'll know. Inside..."

I hit deep a few more times and it came, wave after wave. She shook from the heat and bit her hand and pressed a long moan down into a breath. After a while she loosened and leaned on the wall breathing, her back going.

When I pulled out, warm cloudy fluid ran down her thigh. She took two tissues and caught it behind her and wiped carefully and pulled her underwear up and let the skirt fall. The whole thing as composed as if she'd rehearsed it. Then she turned and squatted and wiped me clean and tucked me in and zipped me up.

She stood and fixed her hair in the mirror and put a couple of damp strands behind her ear and checked her collar. Then she ran the tap and rinsed her hands. She looked up at me in the mirror, soft and bright.

"Are my lips red?"

"A little."

"Tell your dad I had a hot coffee." She turned the tap off and pressed her lips together in the mirror like she was pressing a trace back in. Then she opened the door and the cold corridor air came in and moved her skirt. She looked back. "Come on. Don't keep him waiting."

I followed her out. The corridor was bright and the damp, ambiguous air seemed to blow off us and disappear. She walked ahead of me with the blue dress moving and her steps unhurried, like she'd gone to the restroom and was coming back.

At the toy store door Dad was squatting by the stroller with the singing penguin. Nell was waving her hands and laughing and drooling. He looked up. "You're back. Where's the coffee?"

"All sold out. He looked everywhere." Mom said it flat, took the cookies out of the bag, opened them, and handed one to Nell. "Nell, here. Have a cookie."

His eyes went between the two of us and he shook his head, smiling. "You go off for ten minutes and come back looking like you've been up to something. Your faces are all red."

My ears burned. Before I could say anything she said, "It's hot in the mall. Of course your face goes red walking around." She squatted and squeezed Nell's hand. "Nell, don't you think Daddy's the biggest nag?"

Nell said "Ah," like she agreed. He burst out laughing. "All right, all right, I'm a nag. Let's go eat." He stood and put the penguin in the bag and pushed the stroller toward the escalator. Mom followed and after a few steps turned her head and looked at me with her eyes crinkled. She didn't say anything, just patted the seam of her skirt like she was brushing off something invisible.

I stood there watching her hair move in the light, the zipper pull under my cuff still warm. I closed my fist and opened it and followed.

The love song over the speakers hadn't finished when my phone went in my pocket. I got it out. Two words from her. *Tomorrow?*

I looked up. She was bent over putting a bib on Nell, her profile under the mall lights, gentle and ordinary. I locked the phone and put it away and caught up and walked on the other side of the stroller. Dad was talking to Nell with his head down. "Nell, do you want steamed egg for lunch?"

"Course," he chuckled, "your brother's more sensible now, he knows how to look after the family." I smiled and didn't answer.

Sun came down through the dome and threw our four shadows long and short on the tile. The plush penguin, forgotten in the bag, had bright knowing eyes that seemed to have it all worked out and wouldn't say a word.

Chapter 17: Another Honeymoon

This is my second time at Moonview Lodge.

The first time she was the only one with me. This time there's a father pushing a stroller and a baby girl in it pointing at the sky and saying "sea, sea." The sun is the

same sun, the bamboo is the same bamboo, and the weathered wooden sign is exactly the same. The road under my feet isn't.

"Ah, this place is so much better. Even the air's different." He pushed the stroller up the stone path and took a big breath, loose in a way he isn't at home. "Nell, look, that's the ocean! Daddy's taking you to see the ocean, aren't you happy?"

Nell slapped the stroller arm and kicked twice. "Sea! Sea!"

"Yeah, yeah, the sea."

He grinned wide enough to hurt and turned to Mom. "You've got a good memory. You said you wanted to come back here again. This trip wasn't wasted."

She answered softly, "Yeah. Come often if you like."

I walked half a step behind her, looking at the same hair tie, the same pearl earrings. Light blue cotton dress today and the hem moving in the sea wind and showing the thin silver chain at her ankle. She felt me looking and slowed a little without turning, and only tipped her face to put a few windblown strands behind her ear, which is a string being plucked in my chest.

The clerk took us to the new building. The Moonview Annex, right next to the old Plumeria Villa. The wooden door opened on a refinished suite, wood floor, a low platform with half a mat, a sliding screen between the front room and the bedroom. A big bed with white bedding and a small crib by the window. Dad put Nell in the crib and she stood right up holding the rail and pointed out the window. "Sea! Sea!"

"All right, all right, sea, Daddy'll take you down to the water." He looked at me. "Son, you and your mom get settled. I'll take her for a walk on the beach. First time she's seen the ocean, she needs to enjoy it."

"Should I come?"

"Is your mom hungry? You two take a break. We'll divide it. You stay with her, I stay with the little one." He bent and put a small sun hat on Nell. He probably thought it was the most natural arrangement in the world. Father and daughter, son and mother. There was a little yellow duck printed on the hat and Nell reached up to touch the brim and laughed and drooled.

Mom stood by the door with her fingers on the wooden frame, watching his back go down the bamboo path with Nell. There was a smile on her mouth and her eyes were a long way off, like she was looking at his back, or through it at something else. Only when he turned the corner did she let a small breath out and turn and put her eyes on me.

"Your dad's over the moon about this trip," she said, soft. "He's talked about it for a year. He wanted to bring her to see the sea."

"Good. As long as he's happy."

"And you?" She tilted her head. "Are you happy?"

I looked at the window. The bamboo moved and somewhere off there was his voice teasing Nell, mixed into the waves, indistinct. I looked back at her. "I am."

She smiled a little and didn't answer. She bent and pulled a jacket out of the suitcase like she was tidying and left her fingers on the collar. I went over and took the jacket and folded it and put it back. She didn't move, standing very close, close enough for the shampoo in her hair. Then, softly, "Do you remember that room? The one we had last time?"

"I remember."

"I dreamed about it last night." She kept her eyes on the suitcase. "I dreamed we were sitting out on the wooden deck looking at the moon. You asked me if I ever regretted marrying your father."

"You didn't answer."

"Can I answer now?" She looked up, eyes curved like a new moon. She seemed about to go on, and then the wind chimes at the door rang, and she turned her head and her voice went back to normal at once. "Let's unpack. Nell needs changing when she's back."

She turned toward the bedroom and took two steps and stopped with her back to me. "They'll probably nap when they're back from the water this afternoon. If you're tired, lie down too."

Then she pushed the door and went in. She didn't close it. It stayed a hand's width, like it was waiting.

The afternoon was quiet. When the sun began to go down he carried Nell up from the beach. Her face was pink from it and her eyes were nearly shut and she was still saying "sea, fish." He put her in the crib and patted her and her little snore started. He yawned himself and said, "I'll lie down too," and lay on the bench in the front room, and inside a minute he was snoring.

I stood in the bedroom door with the light coming through the half-open gap in a thin rectangle on the floor. I pushed it.

She sat on the edge of the bed with her head down, taking off an earring. She set the pearl on the nightstand and tidied her hair, and when the door opened she didn't look up. "Is Nell asleep?"

"Yeah. He's asleep too."

"Then you should lie down as well." She lay down on her side facing the window first and left most of the bed open. "There's room."

I went and sat on the edge. The mattress dipped and she swayed with it. She didn't turn, but her voice was very clear in the quiet. "The last time you were here, this bed was in that other room. I remember the sheets. They were dark gray. They smelled like us."

My hand went to her waist. Through the thin cotton I could feel the warmth and the curve. She let a breath out like she'd waited all day for it and turned over slowly and looked up with soft bright eyes. "Your dad took her to the sea. They won't be back for a while. Don't you want to do something?"

"What do you want to do?"

She didn't answer. She put an arm behind my neck and pulled me down and kissed me. The first kiss of the day, light, like a petal off the water, and once I had it I didn't want to let go. I braced on one hand beside her and slid the other under her skirt and up the inside of her thigh. She was already wet, a small dark patch in the middle of the cotton underwear, like water had been spilled.

"When did you get wet?"

"When I watched your dad carrying Nell on the beach, I thought, if only you could carry our daughter like that..." Her voice dropped and went hoarse. "But that's absurd, isn't it. Thinking about it and then... don't ask, just get in. All right?"

She lifted the skirt to her waist herself and pulled the wet underwear down. Her lips were shining in the afternoon light, parted by it, like a flower after rain. She opened the seam with her fingers and showed me the little thing standing out. "Look. It's thinking about you."

"Mom, your mouth."

"What's wrong with Mom's mouth?" She curled her lips. "Mom's mouth is going to be eating something else in a minute. Why are you talking so much?"

I had nothing, so I bent and took it in my mouth. She shook and let a long thin moan out and bit the rest off. Her fingers went into my hair and pressed, guiding the angle. My tongue worked the little swollen thing and then went down the wet seam and

into the warm opening. She was so wet that my fingers were swallowed at once, layers closing, unwilling to let them go.

"Mm... you, your fingers are so deep... it feels like you're really fucking me..." she gasped. "But it's... yours is better... get in, already..."

I straightened and took off my shirt and shorts and it came out, a drop at the tip. She looked down, eyes bright, lazy. "Hm. Still so energetic."

"It's always energetic when it sees you."

"Then hurry up and feed it." She opened her legs and hooked her ankles behind my waist. I pushed the blue skirt up a little and held her knees and set the head to her. She answered it and took a little of it and let out a soft "ah." Hot and tight, exactly as I remembered.

"Mom, you're still so tight inside."

"Tight, isn't it... it only knows you..." she gasped, eyes red. "Your dad barely sees me once a year, it's forgotten everybody else... it only remembers your shape..."

I went in slow and every inch was pulled and scratched at. When it was all the way in we both breathed out at once. Her eyes were shut and her chest was going and the flush had gone from her cheeks down her neck.

"Mm... so full... I want to be filled like this every day... but I can't come back to you every day... so I have to hold out... hold out until it's wet and itching..." Her voice broke up because I'd started to move. I held her waist and went slow and deep, nearly out and then all the way back. She bit her lip and breathed through it, and her eyes never left my face.

"You... you're deeper today..." she finally said. "Is it because... you were thinking about the place next door to where we stayed?"

"I remember you sitting on me and moving yourself that night," I said, and pushed again. "And I remember you crying out and telling me not to stop."

"You, you... ah... don't lift so much... Nell's sleeping over there, what if she wakes..." But her waist was moving with me and her walls kept tightening. The waves came in off the water, one after another, keeping time. She loosened up and got louder and I had to put my mouth on hers and take the sound into it.

She moaned into the kiss and her body went like a fish in water, gripping and getting hotter with every breath. Her walls finally started to pulse. I felt it and couldn't hold on, and pressed into the deepest part and poured it in. She shook from the heat and her legs went tight and only eased after the last of it.

I lay on her, breathing. She didn't move, she stroked my back like she was soothing me. After a while I felt her take the still-buried thing gently in her hand, and then she rolled slowly and slid out from under me and knelt by the bed. Before I could react she had her head down and the half-hard, still-wet thing in her mouth.

"Mm..." I got a breath out.

She didn't look at me, only lowered her eyes and licked the rest off the shaft like a small animal, then sucked the head gently, working for the last of it. Slow and careful. It rose again in her mouth and she held it and swallowed the new bit mouthful by mouthful.

She let it out and wiped her lips with a fingertip and licked the fingertip. "See. Mom cleaned you up perfectly."

Then she let out a small burp and covered her mouth and her ears went bright red. "...I drank too fast. I'm a little bloated."

"Who told you to drink it all at once?"

"You." She glared with no force in it, still with that shine at the eye corners. "That much at once, and Mom couldn't stand to waste it, so I had to swallow."

She burped again, small, like her stomach really was full. I put a hand out and helped her up and she came into my arms and put her face in my neck and laughed. "If your dad knew his daughter was asleep next to him and his wife's breath and face smelled like his son... he'd think this family had gone crazy."

"So do you think it's crazy?"

She didn't answer. She held on tighter and after a while said, quiet, "I'm not crazy. I'm just a little full."

Dinner was at the beachside restaurant. He sat across from me with Nell in his lap. She had a little yellow jacket on and pointed at the last of the sun on the water and said, "Sun sleep." He laughed and said, "Yeah, the sun's off work, and you're off work soon too. After she's done talking she should sleep."

Mom sat next to me with her head down over a bowl of soup, quiet enough to miss. She took a bite of rice and chewed and then put a hand to her mouth and let out a very small burp, like someone who'd choked on water. He looked up. "What's wrong? Went down wrong?"

She swallowed and lowered her hand and gave a mild smile. "Nothing. I drank the soup too fast."

He didn't think anything of it, just said "Oh," and went back to Nell. I held my water and looked out at the sea. Under the tablecloth she put her fingertips on my knee. She didn't look at me, she took another spoon of soup and drank it slow, and as her throat moved she burped again, almost inaudible. Then she put the spoon down with the corner of her mouth curved, like she'd swallowed something she'd never say out loud. Outside the window the sky went dark and the water went to deep blue velvet. She sat up and picked up her glass and touched it to his, very softly.

"This is the first time Nell's seen the sea," she said, her eyes curved into crescents.

She lifted the glass to her lips like she was holding down another one. Her throat moved and she put the glass down and wiped her mouth with a tissue and folded the tissue in thirds and set it on the corner of the table like a marker only we knew about. I turned to the window. The evening wind broke the water into silver. And that sweet, faintly fishy taste of her, which exists only in my memory, seemed to still be on my tongue.

It was past eleven and the annex was as quiet as if it had sunk.

Nell went down around eight. He'd had her in the water all afternoon and she'd hopped in the shallows barefoot for an hour and hardly ate any dinner, her head bobbing. He put her in bed and she rolled over and hugged the rabbit and was gone. He yawned hugely and said, "I'll lie down too," and muttered something going into the far room. There was a rustle, the screen slid, and then nothing.

Mom was in the bathroom a long time. When she came out she had the light gray cotton dress on and her hair up in a loose bun with strands down her neck. She went barefoot across the wood floor to the end of the front room and pushed the screen onto the deck.

Sea air came in, salty and familiar. She stood in the doorway with the skirt moving against her legs. She turned and looked at me and said nothing and tilted her head.

That's very familiar to me. Exactly the same as the first time.

I put my water down and went out.

The deck is wood, with short broad posts holding a narrow eave, and bamboo growing along the side of it and moving in the wind. She went to the rail and turned her back to me and put her hands on the wood and looked up at the moon. The moonlight lay across the whole sea like a white road from her feet to the horizon.

I went and stood behind her. She didn't turn, she took a small half step back and put her back against my chest.

"Do you remember. The moon was like this last time," she said.

"I remember."

"You weren't as bold as this then." A small smile. "You stood there for ages before you took my hand."

"You weren't this good at flirting then."

She laughed under her breath and didn't argue. The moonlight was on her nape and made the skin almost transparent. Her hair had come loose and a strand blew across her collarbone and she reached for it and couldn't get it and let it go.

"When your dad had her in the water this afternoon..." She paused and went lower. "...you were at it so long on that bed my legs are still sore."

"Then why are you out here getting air?"

"Because my legs are sore and I can't sleep." She turned around to face me and put her hands on the rail and tipped her head back. The moonlight came in sideways and made a fine fan of her lashes. "And then I thought, this place is wonderful. It's like another world the minute you get here."

"Which world?"

"No your father. No Nell. Only you and me." She said it without flinching, watching my face. "Like that time. There's only the two of us."

She took my hand and put it on her chest. Under the cotton I could feel the warmth and her heartbeat. She pressed my hand in, flat against the soft curve of it.

"Listen. It's going so fast."

My throat closed. "You never wear a bra with a dress."

"You just noticed?" Her eyes crinkled. "I wore this all day. The fabric rubbed my nipples and I've been out of sorts all afternoon. While your dad was talking to me I was thinking about when you'd touch it."

Soft, like it was nothing. But her fingers had already gone down the back of my hand and my stomach and into my waistband. They were cold, and when they found the half-hard thing waking up fast she made a soft "hmm," like confirming that something lost had been returned.

"Look. More honest than you are."

"When it's honest you say it's not respectable."

"So is it respectable or not?" She squatted. The wind lifted the skirt and let it down. The moonlight was on her upturned face and lowered lashes, like a photograph held very still. She worked the elastic down and it came out with a drop at the tip. She didn't rush, she put her tongue out and licked the slit.

"Salty," she said. "It tastes like the wind out here today."

"You're picking the flavor?"

"Course I'm picking." She opened her mouth and took it in slow. Warm and wet, her tongue around the ridge and down the shaft to the base. Shallow, and very careful, like a dessert that has to be appreciated slowly. My legs went tight and my fingers got the rail.

"Mom..."

"Hm?" Muffled, not looking up, still going around the top.

"Stop taking your time. If you keep it up I'll..."

She let it out and wiped her lip and looked up. "You'll what? Your dad's asleep next door and she's asleep too. Are you worried somebody'll see?"

She stood and turned to the moonlit water and braced on the rail and lifted her backside. The skirt moved and showed her thighs. No underwear, maybe never. Her lips were wet in the light, parted, like a flower with night dew on it.

"From behind," she said, turning her head, sweet and unaware of it. "Gently. Don't make the rail creak."

I went over and held her waist and set against her. She took a breath and leaned back half an inch and let the head in. Hot and soft, like jade warmed all day, layers pressing and pulling. We both breathed out at once.

"Mm... so full..." Her head went back and her neck pulled taut and her voice was muffled by the wind. "You're in... it feels like this again... like being back in that room."

"You stood on the deck last time too."

"You held me from behind last time. I remember."

I stopped talking. I held her waist and went slow. She bit her lip and pushed everything down into breaths. The deck boards did creak, but the wind was strong and the bamboo covered it.

After a few minutes she pressed the hand on her waist and whispered, "Listen."

"What?"

"Your dad sounds awake."

I went rigid all over. Her walls tightened at the same instant, a warm small mouth all around me. I gritted my teeth and held my breath. A thin line of light showed through the curtain behind the screen, from the nightlight in the far room. Then soft feet on the wood floor. I felt myself throb inside her and she didn't dare move either.

The steps stopped in the front room. A few seconds. Then the screen slid.

"Hey? What are you two doing sitting out here?"

His voice, hoarse with sleep. He must have got up, seen the screen not shut, and come to look. The moonlight came down and he stood in the doorway in a jacket with his hair a mess and his eyes half open.

The whole world crumpled up like paper.

Her body went stiff for less than half a second. Then she turned her face to him with a mild smile, easy, steady. "Couldn't sleep. Came out for air."

"You two are out here in the middle of the night looking at the sea and talking?" He yawned, kind and fatherly.

When he said *talking* his eyes went from her face to mine. I was sitting on the rail with her across my lap, her skirt spread like a dark flower and covering where we were joined. My heart was a drum and I didn't dare shift, barely breathed. She seemed completely unaffected. She even reached up and put a strand of hair behind her ear. "Mm. It's a rare chance to come this far. I wanted to see the moon again."

"That's true." He nodded and came out onto the deck and stood beside her and leaned on the rail and looked up at it. "Was this the view when you came last time? I remember you talked about it for a long time after."

He paused like something had occurred to him and asked, smiling, "When you came last time, did you two sit out here talking like this too?"

He asked it without knowing. And the second it was out of his mouth her body sank a little. I felt her walls contract, like she was answering him. And I couldn't help it, I moved up inside her, very slightly, like a man adjusting his seat in a cold wind. Her breath caught and she turned it into a soft cough. "Mm... last time too... we talked late, too."

"I remember." He nodded, wistful. "You were in such a good mood after that trip. I hadn't seen you so happy in a long time. This place must do something for you."

"Mm," she said, and it shook.

"We can come here often, then," he said, and stood a while longer, and then probably got cold from the wind. "Don't stay too late. You've got her on the beach tomorrow. Don't catch anything."

"All right. You go to sleep first."

He answered and went back in. The screen slid shut behind him. He didn't look back.

We let the breath out only when the steps had gone behind the far door. The wind came in off the water and I could feel her fingers shaking on my shoulder.

"...He's gone?" Like she was confirming it.

"He's gone."

She let out a long breath and went limp, all of her, and stayed sitting on me. Her forehead came onto my shoulder, muffled. "That nearly killed me. I almost screamed when he pushed the screen."

"You pinched me."

"That wasn't pinching, that was being scared." She laughed at herself and hummed. "But when you moved a little while he was talking, I nearly screamed too."

"You held it."

"I held it." She looked up, shining in the moonlight, still wet. "And you? Did you hold it?"

"Almost."

She smiled. She didn't say anything, she straightened slowly and put her hands on my shoulders and began to move again, a little bolder, still quiet, only the softest water sound from very close. The wind took it away. Her breathing was shallow and uneven and her clothes were perfectly straight. From outside nobody would suspect a thing under the skirt.

"You know..." she asked, during another slow pause, "What were you thinking when he asked if we sat out here talking last time?"

"That he wasn't wrong. We were talking. Just a different way."

She laughed, breathy from holding it. "Your different way is fucking Mom until she can't talk, is it?"

"You're the one who can't talk right now."

"I can still talk." She dropped down hard and drove it in deep like a wedge and I went tight and nearly finished. She put her mouth at my ear. "How much longer can you hold it?"

"You've done this to me, I might..."

I didn't finish. The wave was already coming up my spine.

"Then put it inside." Very close, whispering. "All of it inside Mom. Don't you want Mom to give you another one? Put it in. Make Mom's little belly swell up again."

I couldn't hold it. I got her waist hard and pushed a few times and it went out of me, deep, wave after wave, and it seemed to go on forever. She bit her lip and shook and her walls pulled in pulses, trying to get every drop deeper. It took a long time to ease. She went down into my arms breathing and after a while lowered her head and pressed her lower belly through the skirt with her fingertips.

"Look... all full. It's bulging," she said.

The moonlight was on her slightly pushed-out belly. She kept her legs together and didn't get up. She reached up and smoothed her hair and pulled the skirt straight, hiding the bulge in the folds so it looked like she'd only sat crooked. She looked down at me, her eyes full of something.

"I have to go back," she said. "Your dad's waiting."

"Can you walk like that?"

"Why couldn't I? Just squeeze." Her eyes crinkled. "However deep you put it, I'll find a way to keep it in."

She stood, very quiet. The moonlight was on her calves and there was a shine at the top of her thigh that her legs pressed together hid. She stood by the screen and looked back. In the light her face was mother and lover and something sly.

"I'm going to go ask him if he wants another one."

"Mom. You're really going to ask?"

"Didn't you say all three of you were happy?" she said, soft, and didn't wait for an answer, and slid the screen open and went in.

I sat on the deck and watched her go down the front room. The screen didn't close all the way. I heard her steps cross and stop at the far door. She stood there a moment and pushed it open and went in.

A slice of warm light showed through the gap.

Then his muffled voice. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Mark." Her voice had a softness in it, like after a spring tide, and an earnestness. "Nell's almost two. I've been thinking. Should we have another?"

"Huh?" He sounded half awake. "Why... why bring that up now?"

"I just think she's lonely by herself." She paused. "It'd be livelier at home with another one."

"You're not young anymore..." he muttered, but it wasn't a no.

The light in the gap shifted like somebody turning over. Her voice was low, with the quality only nights have. "Didn't you say last time you wanted a son?"

"I was saying that after a couple of drinks..." He laughed, then paused. "We'll talk tomorrow. Go to sleep."

She didn't say anything else. The light in the gap dimmed to a sliver of silver. After a while, very light steps came from the far end of the front room. I sat on the rail in the cool and saw a piece of skirt in the moonlight in the doorway.

She stood there with her hand on the frame of the screen and gave me a small smile. She didn't come out. She just pulled it gently shut. The last of the light went and there was only the night.

In the morning, before Nell was even up, he was already on his phone looking at things to do.

I squatted by the entry thinking about the conversation that hadn't finished. "Dad, should we take her to the aquarium today? We'll eat at the hotel tonight." I stood up and tried to make it sound ordinary.

"Sure! She loves fish best!" He agreed at once and bent to Nell in the stroller. "Don't you, Nell? Let's go see the big fish in a bit!"

Nell was chewing a little rubber fish and her eyes lit at the word and drool came off her chin. "Fish! Fish!"

Mom stood at the counter rinsing the bottle in warm water without looking up. But I saw her finger stop on the bottle, like she was waiting. I went over and picked up the tea gone cold and lowered my voice. "About last night. He didn't actually say yes."

"Mm."

"Today's the last day. We have to get him to settle it."

She finally looked up, her eyes going from the bottle to my face and around, like she wanted to say something. Nell's babbling from the front room made her swallow it and she only smiled. "Then go ask the desk if they've got anything around here I can use to make a tonic."

She said *tonic* low, with an understanding at the end of it. I paused and then smiled.

Nell was beside herself at the aquarium. He carried her the whole way and stood in front of the big tank pointing at a manta. "Nell, look, that's a manta ray! It swims like it's flying!" Nell said "Wow!" and put both hands on the glass like she wanted to stick to it.

Mom stood next to me with her head tipped, watching her with a soft smile. The light blue dress again, and the sea air from the covered walk outside lifted the hem. She didn't press it down, she just turned her head and looked at me. It was the most natural glance in the world, like checking I hadn't fallen behind. But I knew what it was. And I knew what she was waiting for.

Back at the resort in the afternoon she put Nell down and he dozed off on the bench in the front room. I went to the desk. The kid behind it smiled with two big canines. "Aloha. What can I do for you?"

I glanced around and lowered my voice. "Could you find me one of those tonic things? You know. The kind that gives a man some energy."

He paused and then gave me a knowing look, the smile going sly. "Yeah, we've got a local ginseng and antler cordial. A small cup does it. Want some?"

"A small cup's fine."

He turned and took a dark brown bottle out of a cabinet under the counter with a red label on it. I took it and said, "Find me something to put it in so nobody can tell."

He laughed again and handed me an opaque thermos. "Use this. Guaranteed nobody can tell."

I thanked him and put the thermos in my jacket pocket and walked back. The wind came out of the bamboo, damp and a little salt. Something in me was winding tighter.

Dinner came up from the restaurant. It was lavish, and he was loose enough that she could push him. "Nell had such a good day. Have a drink too." She poured, and I quietly swapped his glass for a bigger one. He said the wine was good and a couple of glasses wouldn't touch him. Of course I didn't tell him it was the kind of wine that puts you under faster.

She and I traded a look. She bent and fed Nell a spoon of steamed egg like she'd had nothing to do with it. But her spoon tapped the rim of the bowl twice, a rhythm only I could hear.

Later, as expected, he drank until his face was red and he got talkative. "It'd be good if my wife had another one," he said. "My daughter's too lonely by herself." And, "If she really had one, I'm not too old to look after a kid."

She sat beside him patting his back. "I know. Lie down a while."

He never made the bed. He went down like a felled tree and started snoring. Nell was out in the crib with her face pink. Mom sat up and looked at him and then at me. The light was on her profile and under the gentle smile something was moving.

"He's finished," she said.

"Mm. That's about it."

She looked at the empty bottle and then up at me, soft. "Did you drink anything out of that thermos?"

"Not yet. Should we?"

She didn't answer. She came over and took the thermos and unscrewed it and smelled it and handed it back. "Drink it. You need the energy tonight."

I took it and put it back in one go. It was sharp and herbal and burned down into my stomach, and then something rose out of my stomach and turned warm and bright.

She stood in front of me with her arms crossed, watching, a small smile. "How is it?"

"Hot."

"That's right." She turned toward the bedroom and after a couple of steps looked back. "He's out cold and she's asleep. Come in first."

I followed her in. The curtains were shut and there was only the warm yellow nightlight. He lay on the dark sheet by the window snoring soft, sleeping like a kid. She stood by the bed and looked down at him and reached up and took her hair tie out. It came down like a satin ribbon onto her shoulders.

She didn't stop. With her back to me she unbuttoned the dress. The blue cotton slid off her shoulders and down her back and she bent and took it to her ankles and stood up in only a very thin pair of light underwear. The moonlight came through the curtain and traced silver on her outline, her waist, the fullness of her hips, her two straight legs, and my throat closed.

I went over and put an arm around her waist and the other under her arm and got the soft of a breast through the thin fabric. No bra. The warm flesh moved in my hand and the nipple was already hard and very obvious.

She turned her head and met my mouth. The kiss spread like warm water and she leaned her whole weight into me. Her breathing changed, shallow and fast, like somebody who'd walked a long time along water and finally saw the shore.

"Has the tonic... started?" she asked against my lips.

"What do you think?"

She laughed low and reached between my legs through the sweatpants and traced the shape with a fingertip, lazy. "Hm. It's up. And so hot."

I carried her to the edge of the bed and she lay on her back and looked up at me. He was snoring on the other side. Her eyes came over her own chest and landed on my face and her eyes crinkled. Then she deliberately opened her legs and pulled the underwear aside and showed me the wet of her, already shining.

"Get in," she said. "He's asleep."

I set the aching head against her. She took a breath and arched and let the head in slow. Hot and soft, like warmed jade, closing all around. As I sank in she bit her lip and a very soft moan came out of her nose.

"Mm... so full... you're so hard tonight..."

"The tonic's working."

"Then use it to put a second one in Mom." She laughed at herself and there were thin tears in her eyes. "Your dad's right there. Let him 'see' the dream for himself."

I held her hips and went slow. Her body rose and fell with the rhythm. The nightlight laid a warm gold film on her skin. Her breasts had spread a little with lying down, the

nipples standing, dark as fruit. She turned her head to check on him and then turned back, wet and bright.

"Mm... you, slow... don't wake him yet..." she whispered, her hands going behind my neck. "When he does wake up, let him see as much as he wants..."

I bent and took a nipple in my mouth. She shook and let a whimper out. Her walls clamped at once, like the bite had woken them, hot and tight around me. The mattress creaked soft with each movement, mixed with his snoring.

Then, some time later, the snoring stopped.

I froze. She did too, her mouth half open, not breathing. We stayed joined and didn't move. The nightlight was dim and there was just enough moonlight in the curtain gap to see the shapes in the room. He turned over, facing us, his eyes a little open.

He looked over, blurry. Her back was bent like a bow under me and my forehead was wet. But he didn't say anything surprised. He half shut his eyes again, like he was still working out what was in front of him in a dream.

"Hm..." Something indistinct.

She said, very close, whispering, "He's talking in his sleep."

My heart was going. Then he turned over with his back to us and muttered, "Weird dream," and started snoring again. He hadn't seen anything. He didn't know it wasn't a dream.

She let a long breath out and went down into the mattress. She put the back of her hand on her forehead and breathed a while and then laughed, in a voice only I could hear. "He thinks it's a dream."

"Mm."

"Then what are you waiting for?" She put her legs back around my waist. "While he's still dreaming, keep Mom company until morning."

The tonic was a fire in me. I got her knees and went hard again, unrestrained this time, each stroke grinding on the spot. The mattress creaked and her muffled sobs went around the room. Her fingers got the sheet. There were tears in her voice and satisfaction under them. "Ah... that's it... you're so good tonight... you've got Mom all numb and hot inside..."

"Mom, I'm going to come."

"Put it in." She turned her head, wet, her voice a thread. "All of it in Mom's womb. Not a drop out. Let Mom's little belly swell. Give me another one."

I pressed into the deepest part and it came, and it felt like pouring into a well, endless. She shook from the heat and her walls pulled and swallowed, trying to get it deep. He was snoring beside us and didn't know whose any of it was. In the dark there was only her and me and the hot, silent tide.

After the first time it only went soft for a minute before it was hard again. She climbed onto me herself and set it at her entrance and sank down slow with a long soft sigh. She rocked her hips on me and her breasts moved and the moonlight ran down her skin. Her head went back and her voice melted. "You... so much energy tonight... you've made Mom go soft and you're still hard..."

He turned over now and then and mumbled, but he never really woke. He thought it was a dream where he was being tender with his wife and having another child. And next to him we were doing all of it.

At the end I lay down on the mattress and she came onto my chest breathing. After a while she got up with her legs pressed together, stepped off me, and lay back down beside him slowly. She didn't clean up. She pulled the corner of the blanket over the mess.

"Leave it," she said, hoarse and slurred and satisfied. "So he can see it tomorrow."

I lay on the other side of the bed and went under.

In the morning the sun came through the curtain and stung. He rubbed his temples and sat up and looked at his pajamas and then at her and then down at the sheets, and stared for a long while.

The sheet was a sight. Several damp patches of different shades on the dark fabric, and by her side a small dried white mark like a spill of cold porridge. She lay on her side with the blanket at her waist and half a bare shoulder out and a few faint red marks on her back. She seemed to have been woken by him moving and her eyes were open, and after a while, like she'd just come to, she murmured, "Mm."

His back stiffened. He coughed. "Last night... did I...?"

She didn't look at him. She looked at the pillow, hoarse. "You drank too much and you kept going on about having another one."

"I... did I say that?"

"Didn't you?" She turned her head, reproach and grievance in it. "You had me on the bed in the middle of the night saying you wanted a son and Nell was too lonely. You forget as soon as it's done?"

He sat there stunned. He probably had some vague, strange pieces in his head that he didn't dare examine. He looked at the marks and at her bare leg outside the cover and hesitated. She didn't hurry him. She stretched and sat up wrapped in the blanket and her voice went softer. "If you don't want to anymore, forget it. It's only just started. There's still time."

"Who said we don't want to!" He cut in, suddenly awake, clearer than he'd been all week. "I meant it! Nell's a daughter, and another one, boy or girl, would be a blessing for this family!"

She didn't speak. She looked down and her fingers stroked her lower belly and stopped there like she was confirming something. Then she smiled, soft. "Good. I was afraid it was just the wine talking."

"How could it be the wine!" He got more serious, and seeing her gentle, half-reproachful face he softened. "Then it's settled. We'll have one. If you don't want to, we won't, but if you do, I'll look after you, and when it's here I'll love it as much as I love Nell."

She looked up and the smile came over her mouth like morning. She didn't say anything more, just patted the back of his hand. "You sweated a lot last night. Go shower. I'll see if she's up."

She got out of bed wrapped in the blanket and stepped barefoot onto the floor. She stopped at the door and looked back at me sitting on the other side of the bed with my hair a wreck, like she'd just got up. She didn't say anything, just gave me a very small smile, and went out.

I sat on the edge while he got up groggy and went to shower. The sun through the window lay on the ruined sheets like a stamp on the night. From the next room, her voice teasing Nell: "Nell, sweetheart, Daddy says he's going to give you a little one to play with today. Aren't you happy?"

Nell babbled twice. I looked down at myself. There were red scratches on me from her nails. I pulled my shirt collar up over them and stood and went to the bathroom. Going through the front room, she was standing in the morning light with Nell. She saw me and her lips curved, and instead of good morning she said, "Porridge'll be ready. Go call your father to eat."

"Mm."

Going toward the bathroom I heard her add, soft, behind me, "Today should be a good day."

The sun came in and bathed the whole front room in gold. Nell put out a hand and grabbed a fistful of air and patted it on her mother's face, beaming. Mom was

startled and then laughed out loud and lifted her high in the light and Nell giggled like a bird learning to sing. He was humming in the bathroom, off key, a tune I'd never heard in that house. I went to the door and knocked. The humming stopped and his voice came through damp. "Coming, coming."

I turned and she was looking this way. She didn't say anything, just pulled Nell in closer and lifted her chin at me a little, like, *see? It's all right.*

I turned and went to the table and pulled out his chair.

While he hummed and went out to the balcony for the laundry, I stood at the counter pretending to pour water. The cup was already full and overflowing onto my hand and I didn't move, because my eyes were on her back.

She stood by the crib bending to tuck back the blanket Nell had kicked off. The morning light through the window made the pale pink nightgown almost transparent and showed the shape of her legs under the hem. She straightened, felt me looking, and didn't turn. "The water's full."

I came to and turned the tap off and grabbed a tissue for the table and my ears burned. He put his head in from the balcony. "Is she up?"

"She's up and playing." Her voice was soft. She came over and took a bottle off the shelf and bent to fill it, as ordinary as if nothing had happened. But her fingertips tapped the counter twice. That rhythm. Today I had to move.

After breakfast he took Nell to the beach. He was unusually eager, and she clung to him pointing at the door and saying "sea, sea." He pushed the stroller off happily. At the door he turned back. "Take your time getting ready. I'll let her play a while."

"Okay. Don't let her get too much sun."

The door shut and the house went quiet. The waves came in through the bamboo fence one after another like a countdown. I stood in the entry and listened to the stroller wheels on the stone path get fainter until they were gone. When I turned, she wasn't in the front room. The bedroom door was ajar with a line of light in the gap.

I went and opened it. She sat on the edge of the bed with a strap pulled off her shoulder, looking down at the pale strap mark on it. She didn't look up, but her voice was low. "He said he's taking her to build sandcastles. At least until noon."

"Then we've got about two hours."

"What can you do in two hours?" She looked up with a hint of a smile. "Is that enough for you to fill Mom's cups?"

I went and knelt in front of her and looked up. The morning light behind her put a warm gold edge on her whole face and lit the fine down on her cheeks. She reached out and her fingertips went down my brow, over my nose, and pressed my lips.

"Mom thought about you all night," she said. "Your dad was asleep like a log next to me and all I could think about was you on that deck."

"Then why didn't you come and get me?"

"She woke up once in the night. After I fed her I didn't want to bother again." Her fingers slid from my lips to my chin, like she was petting something she liked. "Now she's not here and he's not here. Aren't you going to move?"

I got her waist and pulled her down. She lay back obediently, hair spreading, the hem sliding up her thighs and showing a stretch of white. No underwear today. The seam was already wet, her lips full and a little open, like a flower the dew had just opened. She reached down and touched it herself and showed me the little thing already out. "Look. More eager than I am."

"Mom, you're so wet."

"It's been wet all morning." She smiled wryly. "While your dad ate breakfast I sat with my legs crossed under the table the whole time wondering when you'd finally get it in."

I bent and took the little thing in my mouth. She hissed and arched and her fingers went into my hair and pressed and guided. When my tongue worked it she let a soft held-back moan out; when my teeth touched it she shook and her legs closed and opened, like begging off and asking for more. I went down the wet seam and into the warm opening and the soft closed on my tongue like a small mouth.

"Mm... you, don't just lick... Mom wants yours... get in..." she gasped, a little slurred. "If she starts fussing he'll bring her back... and then there's no time..."

I straightened and took off my shirt and shorts and it stood out with a bead at the tip. She looked down, her throat moving, her voice hoarse. "Why so much energy today... is it because you know you have to get Mom pregnant before you leave, so you're putting in the effort?"

"The job's not done until your belly's full."

"Then get in." She lifted a leg and hooked her ankle around my waist and offered herself. "Mom's waiting for you to turn in your homework."

I set the head against the seam and went in slow. Hot and tight, velvet in warm water, taking me deeper and deeper. Her head went back and her neck made a long curve and her voice came out long and soft. "Mm... so full... every time you come in, Mom feels... the whole of her filled up by you..."

I held her hips and went slow. She breathed under me and her eyes never left my face. I put both her legs up on my shoulders and went deeper and she let out a soft "ah" and got the sheet.

"Yes... like that... all the way in..."

"Mom, this time it's all going inside."

"Put it in..." She smiled with wet in her eyes. "Mom wants all your seed in her womb to take home. Even if your dad backs out when we get back, it'll already be in my belly."

She lifted her hips and let the head go deeper. Her walls began to pull and clench, urging me or asking me to stay. I got to the end of it and pushed a few more times and came deep in her. It came in waves and she shook from the heat. Her legs clamped to keep it all. It took a long time to ease. When I pulled out, white ran down her thigh. She put a hand over herself at once, hoarse and satisfied. "Don't waste it. Leave it a while."

She lay about ten minutes and then got up slowly with her legs together and went to the bathroom to clean up. When she came back she stood in the door with her eyes still red and said, lazily, "They won't be back for about an hour. Do you want to go again?"

Looking at that satisfied, greedy face, it would have been a disservice not to put her against the wall and do it again.

In the afternoon he took her for a nap again, as expected. Nell rolled over in the crib biting her hand and went out. He yawned and lay on the bench in the front room and the even snoring started.

I came out of my room and she was at the end of the hall with her back to me holding a jacket like she was going out. She heard me and turned her head and said, low, "I'm going out to hang the laundry. Help me."

The line is on a small platform at the back by the private beach. A row of bamboo poles, the noon sun warm on the boards, the salt wind moving the wet cloth. She stood at the poles on her toes hanging a shirt, and the movement pulled the skirt up and showed a small patch of sun-reddened skin behind her knees. She worked at it a

while and the shirt wouldn't hang straight. She dropped her hand and turned. "What are you watching? Help me."

I went and took the hanger and hung it. She stood behind me and didn't move away. When I turned she was very close, close enough for the wind in her hair.

"Mom, why don't you rest?"

"I can't sleep." She pushed a loose hair off my forehead, gentle. "I've had something on my mind all day and I can't put it down."

"What?"

She didn't answer. She took my hand and put it on her lower belly. Through the thin cotton I could feel the warmth of her and the small rise and fall of her breathing. She looked down at the spot under my hand, soft. "It feels like something's already settled in there."

I knew she only meant a feeling. The feeling still made my heart jump. I bent and kissed her and she came up on her toes and kissed back, quick and deep. She reached down and unzipped the side of the dress and the light fabric slid off her shoulder and a full soft body came out into the sun and the wind.

"Hurry," she said. "He's asleep and she's asleep, but who knows for how long."

I had her hold the bamboo pole and went in from behind. She was hotter than in the morning, like holding a mouthful of hot spring, layers pulling and pulsing, and it went down my spine. She bit her lip and pressed her voice into breaths and the wind and waves covered everything. The sun was on her back and sweat ran down the line of it and shone like beads.

"Mm... you know... if your dad woke up now and came back here and saw us..." She turned her head, red-eyed, deliberately mean about it. "What would he do?"

"He'd think he was still dreaming."

"Then in the dream... get Mom pregnant..." She laughed at herself and then her voice shook with a push. "Ah... no, not so rough... I'll scream..."

I told her to squeeze and she did. I told her to hold on and she bit her lip and held. When it came I was deep in her and she went limp and nearly slid down the pole. I got her waist and pulled her into my arms and felt her take the heat in little by little.

"So much..." She looked down, hoarse and satisfied. "It's all in. Feel it. Your belly's a little bulging."

She took my hand and put it on her lower belly. The skin under my palm was warm and soft and did seem a little more full than before. Whether it was real or not, something hotter than the tonic went up through me.

In the evening he had a little wine again, said his back ached from the sand all day, and wanted a good night's sleep. Nell went down early too, her face in the pillow, hugging the rabbit. Mom settled her and tucked him in and slid the far door shut.

I sat by the window looking at the dark water. The moonlight laid a silver road out to the horizon. About half an hour later the door pushed open a crack.

She came in and locked it. A very thin slip dress, like a layer of mist with nothing under it. She came to the bed but didn't get on. She stood in front of me looking down, her eyes shining in the moonlight.

"He's asleep," she said. "She's asleep too."

"I know."

"One more night." She bent and her fingertips rested on my stomach. "We leave tomorrow afternoon. Tonight you can at least help Mom a few more times."

I pulled her down onto the bed. She straddled me and looked down at me already up and laughed. "Why so much energy tonight? We've done it all day and you're still this hard."

"Because the chance is nearly gone."

"It's not like we'll never see each other again."

"But here it's only us, and there's one night left."

She paused and then bent and put her lips on my forehead, soft. "Then don't leave anything behind tonight."

That night I truly didn't. I had her on her back and from behind and on her knees and flat on her front, and finished deep in her every time. She was like a cat in lukewarm water, letting me do as I liked, sometimes whispering for deeper, sometimes biting her fingers and swallowing her sobs. Her lower belly was a little swollen from it and I touched it and it was full of me, warm, mine. She looked down and pressed it and smiled. "You really wanted Mom pregnant tonight."

"Mm."

"Then Mom will take it home." She tipped her head back. "If it takes, I'll say it happened here. When the doctor asks, the date will line up with your dad's 'dream' that night."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we find another chance when we're back." She looked at me, bright. "Mom's body is yours, and her womb is yours. Whenever you want to put one in, Mom will do it."

The last time it was already getting light. She climbed off me with her legs weak and leaned on the wall a minute and then went into the bathroom. The water ran. She came out in the pale pink nightgown with her hair up, like nothing had happened. At the door she looked back. "Can you still manage today? We've got to drive to the airport this afternoon."

"We'll manage or die trying."

"Then Mom will brew you ginseng tea." She smiled. "You'll need the strength to drive back."

She opened the door and went out. From the end of the hall came her tiptoes in the kitchen and the kettle starting to heat. I lay there watching the sky get lighter and felt my heart slowly come back down into place.

That morning he took Nell to the beach to look for shells. Mom said she hadn't slept well and needed to catch up, so he didn't think anything of it and went out with her in his arms. The second the door shut I pushed the bedroom door and she was already turning the covers back. "Aren't you coming? I've been waiting all morning."

"You said you hadn't slept and needed to catch up."

"Catching up on sleep is nothing next to catching up on planting." She pulled me onto the bed. "She leaves this afternoon. You've got one chance left. No, your last few."

That morning we didn't get packed until he called to say he was bringing her back to shower. Mom changed the sheets and opened the window for air and sat at the dresser putting on lipstick in the mirror as if nothing at all had happened.

In the afternoon, while we packed, he waited at the door with Nell in his arms. Mom stood in the middle of the room and looked around the place we'd had for six days, and then bent and took the shell out of the nightstand drawer where she'd hidden it and held it in her hand a long time. She turned and came to me and took my hand and put the shell in my palm and closed her hand around mine and pressed.

"Keep this," she said. "It's our luck."

I opened my hand and the shell shone pearly in the afternoon light. The same one I'd found on that beach the first time. She'd put it back in this room sometime. She closed my hand again and turned and called out to him in the door, "You're here. Let's go."

He stood in the light with Nell, smiling at her. She went over and took Nell easily and bent and kissed her forehead and turned her head away with her eyes crinkled, hiding something only we knew.

She put Nell in the stroller and pushed it toward the door. Passing me she didn't stop, only said, very quietly, "You can touch it when we're far enough away."

I held the shell with the sharp edge biting my palm until it ached, and it was a while before I loosened my grip. It still had the warmth of her hand, like a bit of moonlight that had just settled there.

THE END