Chapter 11 — "The Morning After"

The guest bed was built for a woman who weighed a hundred and twenty pounds and was coming to stay in May. James woke folded into it, the thin cotton blanket twisted around his shins and his face in the one pillow he'd carried down the hall at two in the morning. Jenna had been talking for a month about painting this room sage green before her mother's flight. The walls were still the builder's eggshell. There was a water stain on the ceiling shaped like Ohio.

He lifted his head, and his neck told him exactly how he'd slept, and through the wall beside the bed he heard his wife laugh.

It was the Sunday laugh. Low and sleepy and a little hoarse, the one that used to come out of her when he climbed the stairs at nine with two mugs and slid his cold feet against her calves to make her shriek. He hadn't heard it in months. He had assumed, without ever putting it into words, that it was still his.

The guest room shared one wall with the master bedroom. On the other side of it, eighteen inches of drywall and studs from his ear, stood his nightstand — his lamp, his paperback, his alarm clock — and beside the nightstand, his side of the bed. Where Ray Vogler had settled in at two in the morning with one of James's pillows behind his head, looked across the room at him, and said, *Guest room's down the hall.*

A rumble answered the laugh. Two or three words, thick with sleep, too low to make out. Then the bedframe groaned under a large shifting weight, the nightstand knocked once against the wall, and Jenna's laugh climbed into a squeal.

"Ray — no — you're *crushing* me—" Giggling. Muffled, like her face was in something. "You're a boulder. Get off. I can't breathe—"

"You're breathing fine." Ray's voice came through the studs clear enough that James could hear the gravel in it. "You've been grinding that ass on me for ten minutes. I'm just accepting the invitation."

"I have *not*."

"Nine minutes. I'm a generous man. I rounded up."

She laughed again, helpless, the real one. James lay on his back and looked at the water stain and felt his stomach go sour and slow — and under the blanket, under the thin cotton of his boxers, his cock thickened against his thigh like it had been waiting for its cue.

Get up, he told himself. *Go downstairs. Put your shoes on. Walk around the block until he's gone.*

He stayed where he was. *The floor creaks right outside this door. They'll hear you. They'll hear you creep down your own hall like a dog that got put out.* It was a reason, and a cowardly one, and he knew which kind it was while he was still telling it to himself. He lay there and kept listening.

Jenna hadn't slept until the window went grey.

She'd lain awake through most of the night with Ray's arm across her waist and the sheets drying stiff under her hips, listening for a sound from the guest room that never came. Somewhere after five she'd gone under for an hour. When she opened her eyes again the room was full of light, because the blinds were still up.

James had raised them last night at Ray's order. They stayed up. Behind the headboard the window ran almost the width of

the bed, and through it, twenty feet across the side yard, was the Dentons' upstairs window, the shade still raised, the room behind it empty and morning-grey. Last night it had been a lit yellow rectangle. She looked at it now with her cheek on the pillow and thought, distinctly, *anyone,* and the thought went straight down her body and settled between her legs.

The rest of the room was there when she turned her head. The office chair James had wheeled in from down the hall and sat in at the foot of the bed, five feet back, where Ray had pointed. Ray's belt coiled on the hardwood where it had dropped after he unwound it from her wrists. On the nightstand on her side, a bottle of lube with the cap off and the silver plug lying on its side beside the lamp. And next to them, small and white and knotted at the neck, James's condom. She'd tied it herself. She'd set it there and told him *that's where yours goes.*

At two in the morning that knot had made her feel sick. She'd lain in the dark replaying James's hands with the warm washcloth, how carefully he'd done it, the way he did every job carefully, and the pity had been so sharp and clean she'd been sure she'd found it at last: the bottom. Hers, not his. The place where watching him fold stopped being something she was learning and turned into something she couldn't carry.

Then the light came up and the house stayed quiet. Not a footstep. Not a knock. Not one husband standing at the foot of the bed finally saying the thing he'd been swallowing since the airport. Four months of chances and he'd been handed the biggest one yet — another man asleep in his place, his wife naked beside him, the door unlocked — and he was lying behind a wall eighteen inches away, taking it. The way he took everything.

The pity was still there. She could find it if she looked. It had gone cool overnight, and something else was growing in the space it left — harder, and warmer.

Ray's chest was against her back. He ran hot — he always ran hot — and the heat of him had soaked into the sheets on James's side and into her skin. His arm was heavy across her ribs. And his cock was against her ass, thick and stiff, lying in the cleft like it had been put there and forgotten. It pulsed once against her when he breathed.

She pressed back into it before she'd decided anything. A small roll of her hips, and the heavy length slid a half-inch in the crease, and her mouth opened against the pillow.

Only then did the reason come, the way it always came, a step behind: *If last night didn't get him through that door, let him hear what this morning sounds like. Let him lie in there and listen to what his silence buys.* She almost believed it. She believed it enough to keep moving. The room smelled like the two of them — Ray's sweat gone stale and sweet in the sheets, the salt of last night, and under it, rising fresh as she rocked against him, her own musk.

That was when he'd said *ten minutes*, and she'd squealed, and he'd hauled her across the mattress on top of him like she was a duffel bag.

Now she was on her back in the middle of the bed, and he was propped on one elbow over her, looking down. In the morning light he was terrible. His face was pouched and creased from the pillow, grey stubble coming in white along his jowls, his small eyes puffy, his hair standing up in damp tufts that showed the pink scalp. The chest above her was matted

grey, and his gut rested warm on her hip. He looked like a man who'd been woken up in a motel.

"God," she said. "You look awful in daylight."

"You've seen me in daylight."

"Not at eight in the morning, Ray. Not in *my bed*." She was smiling. She couldn't stop. "You look like you sleep in a car."

"I've slept in a car." He ran one thick finger down her sternum, down between her breasts, along her stomach. "Your husband's mattress has a dip on this side."

"Shh." She swatted his chest and tipped her head at the wall — the wall beside his side of the bed, the one James was behind. "He's *right there*."

"I know where he is." Ray didn't lower his voice even slightly. "I put him there."

The finger reached her landing strip and kept going, and she stopped breathing for a second while he found her.

She was sore. She'd known she would be — last night was in every muscle from her hips down — but his finger slid through her folds and her whole pelvis clenched, tender and greedy at once, and she gasped and grabbed his wrist.

"Wait, wait. I'm sore. Ray. You were in me for *hours*—"

"Mm." He didn't stop. He didn't push either; his finger just lay there against her, heavy, warm, pressed flat along her slit. "You're sore and you're wet. That's two things."

He pushed two fingers into her.

They went in slick and easy, too easy, and she knew why before he said it. She was still full. Last night was still inside her — nine days of him that he'd emptied into her at dead center of her week, and he'd held her open afterward and told James to look — and his fingers sank into it. When he drew them back

out, slowly, she heard it. A thick wet sound. She lifted her head off the pillow and looked down her own body and his fingers were glazed white to the second knuckle.

He held them up between them in the sun.

"Still got me in here," he said. Pleased. Almost tender. "Nine days' worth."

"Oh my God." She covered her face with one hand and laughed into her palm, mortified and burning, her cheeks going hot. "Don't — Ray, that's *disgusting*—"

"That's me." He pushed the fingers back into her, slow, all the way, and curled them, and the laugh broke off into something else. "And you're dripping on your husband's sheets. Again."

He worked her slowly, lazily, the way he'd stir a drink, two thick fingers turning inside her, pressing up, sliding out wet with both of them and back in, and each time they went in she heard it, and each time she heard it her face went hotter. Her thighs fell open without her opening them. The sheet under her was already ruined; she could feel the cool dried patches of last night and now the warm new wet spreading under her ass.

"Hear that?" Ray said. Low. Then louder — deliberately louder, his face turned an inch toward the wall. "Listen to how wet you woke up, Blondie."

"Ray—" She grabbed his forearm. "*Shh*. I'm serious. He can hear you."

"That's the idea."

"Then be quiet *about* it—"

"No," he said simply, and his thumb found her clit, and she arched off the bed.

In the guest room the headboard James couldn't see knocked once against the window frame, and his nightstand, on the other side of the wall, rattled against the drywall six inches from his ear. A wet sound came through the studs. Rhythmic. Small. He knew what it was. He'd made that sound with his own fingers in his own wife, through latex, a thousand times. It had never been that loud.

Listen to how wet you woke up, Blondie.

James's hand was flat on his stomach, outside the blanket. He kept it there. It was the one thing in the room he could control.

"Turn on your side," Ray said. "Face the wall."

She looked at him. He looked back, the small eyes steady in the creased face, waiting.

He rolled off her toward the middle of the bed to make room, and she slid over into the warm hollow he'd left — James's side — and turned onto her side with her back to him. In front of her was James's nightstand: his lamp, his paperback splayed open where he'd left it Friday. Past it, close enough to touch if she stretched, the plain white wall. A few inches of drywall and studs. Behind that, her husband.

Ray fitted himself in behind her. All of him: the gut warm against the small of her back, his chest hair rough on her shoulder blades, the hard heavy length of him sliding along the crease of her ass and under, between her thighs, the blunt head nudging up against her from below. He hooked one arm under her top knee and lifted it, opening her, and held her leg up against his forearm like it weighed nothing.

"Put your hand on the wall," he said.

"Ray."

"On the wall."

She reached out past James's nightstand and laid her hand on the drywall. It was cool. It was very thin. She could feel, or imagined she could feel, how little there was between her palm and the room beyond it.

He pushed into her.

The head was wider than the rest of him and it always took a moment. She was slick with him and with herself and it still took a moment — the blunt pressure, the stretch, her tender entrance holding him off for half a second and then giving, and the flare slid inside her with a thick, sucking sound she felt in her teeth. She made a noise against the wall. He stopped there, just the head in her, and let her feel it throb.

"Sore?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed.

He gave her another inch. "Still sore?"

"*Yes*—"

Another. Slow. The shaft dragging along tender places that had been opened all night and were swollen now and too sensitive, every ridge of him reading like braille, and the soreness was real and so was the heat underneath it. It hurt the way pressing a bruise hurt, and she pushed back onto him to press it harder.

"You call that sore?" Ray said into her hair. "That's a woman who wants more and wants to complain about it."

She laughed. She couldn't help it. It came out of her shaky and high, and he slid the rest of the way in on the laugh, and the laugh broke apart into a long moan as his hips met her fat ass and he was all the way inside her, deeper than she'd been ready for, with her leg held up and her hand on the wall.

He didn't hurry. He fucked her the way a man fucks when he has nowhere to be: long, slow strokes, almost all the way out and all the way back, and every time he sank in, the headboard nudged the window frame behind them and James's nightstand bumped the wall under her hand. *Tock.* A pause. *Tock.* She felt each one in her palm.

"Feel it?" Ray said.

"Yes."

"So does he."

Her pussy clamped on him so hard he grunted.

The sun was across the bed. She could feel it on her raised thigh and her hip and her breast, warm as a hand. The Dentons' window was behind her now, over Ray's shoulder, and she couldn't see it, and that was worse — the shade up, the empty room, the side yard between them, and Ray's bulk working behind her in full daylight with nothing to hide him. If Greg Denton walked into his bedroom right now for a sweater, he'd see the back of a fat grey man rolling his hips into somebody on the Whitfields' bed. He'd see a pale leg held up in the air. He might see whose.

"Ray," she whispered. "The window."

"What about 'em."

"They're still up."

"I know." He drove in deep and held there, grinding, and her toes curled against the sheet. "Your husband put them up. I'm not about to undo his work."

She turned her face into her own arm and moaned, and the moan was half a laugh, and she hated how much she loved that he'd said it.

He let go of her knee. His hand came down over her hip, flat on her belly, then lower, and his fingers found her clit and pressed — not circling, just pressing, holding it trapped against his thick fingertips while his hips did the moving, so each stroke rocked her clit against his hand. Her breath went ragged. Her hand slid on the wall.

"You know what you shouted last night?" Ray said.

"Don't."

"You were on your back. Your husband was in his chair, five feet away. I had nine days in me and you were begging for every one of 'em." His voice was close to her ear, conversational, his hips never stopping. "And at the end, you looked right at him. And you told me you loved me. *Te amo*. Loud enough to wake the street."

Her face went hot from her collarbones up. At two in the morning those words had terrified her. She'd lain in the dark with them, turning them over, afraid to look at what was under them. In the sun, with him inside her and his hand on her clit, they only made her wetter, and that frightened her more than the dark had.

"You're making me say it again," she breathed, "because you like hearing yourself win."

"I like hearing *you*. Say it in the daylight. Say it so the wall hears it." He drove in. "Who do you love fucking you in this bed?"

She hesitated. One second. Her hand on the drywall, the thin cool skin of it, James on the other side. One second of the old Jenna, the one who'd filed a complaint against this man on company letterhead.

Then Ray hit the deep place, the flared head pressing up into her belly, and the second was gone.

"*You*," she said. "I love you fucking me, Ray. I love it. You're the only one who — *ah* — who opens me up like this, you're so big there's no room for anything else in my head—"

"Louder."

"I *love* you fucking me!"

James heard it clean.

I love you. Three words he'd said to her every night for years without decorating them, because decorating them would have cheapened them. She'd put them in a sentence with *fucking me* and aimed them through his wall at eight in the morning in another man's voice.

His hand moved inside the waistband, around his cock, which was already wet at the tip and so hard it ached, and the first stroke was so good and so shameful that he pressed his face into the pillow to keep from making a sound.

Knock on the wall. His head said it in plain words. *Bang your fist on it. Walk in there and tell him to put his pants on.*

And then what. Then she'd look at him from that bed and ask *why now, James* — and every true answer to that question started at an airport gate in November. He couldn't stop Ray without explaining why he'd let Ray in. Why he'd let Ray in so many times.

His fist moved anyway. In time with the knock of the nightstand on the wall. *Tock.* Stroke. *Tock.* He hated it. He hated that it worked.

"C'mere," Ray said, and pulled out of her.

She whimpered at the loss — sharp, involuntary — and he was already rolling, pulling her with him, settling onto his back

on James's side of the bed with his head on James's pillow. He took her by the hips and lifted her over him like she was a sheet he was folding.

"Up," he said. "Sit on it. Look out the window while you do."

She straddled him, facing him, and over his head was the whole width of the window — the blinds up, the bare March trees, and the Dentons' house twenty feet away with its empty upstairs room and its raised shade. Kneeling up over him, she was framed in it from the waist up. Naked except for the chain at her throat. The sun was full on her.

"Ray, I can't—" She was laughing again, nervous, her hands braced on his chest. "Anyone could look—"

"Then give 'em something." His hands came around and spread her ass, both palms, the thick fingers sinking into her. "Sit down, Blondie."

She reached between her legs and found him — wet from her, standing up off his belly, too thick for her fingers to close around — and held him up and lowered herself.

The angle was different. Steeper. Her own weight did the work, and she felt every inch of him go up into her, and when she sat all the way down on his thighs the head was so deep she put her hand on her belly, below her navel, like she could feel it there. Maybe she could.

"Oh my God," she said to the window.

"Ride it."

She did. Slow at first, lifting and sinking, her thighs burning from last night, the sun on her breasts and her stomach. Then faster, as the soreness folded into the heat. She found the angle — leaning forward, both hands gripping the top of the

headboard under the sill — where the head dragged against her front wall on every lift and pressed deep on every drop, and the bed answered, the headboard knocking the window frame in her rhythm now, not his.

Under her Ray made a low pleased sound, watching. She knew what he was watching. Her tits swinging over his face in the sunlight, the gold word jumping at her throat; her stretched pink around his dark shaft when she lifted; the white of last night coming out of her on every lift and coating him, slick and obscene. She heard the wet clap of her ass on his thighs and the sucking drag of her pussy on the upstroke, and the sounds were so loud in the quiet house she could hear them echo off the bedroom door.

"That's what I wanted to wake up to," Ray said. Low. Almost to himself. "That right there."

His thumb found her clit, and she gasped and rode down onto it.

"Tell me what you want," he said, louder now. "Tell me loud enough the guy down the hall hears how his wife starts her Sunday."

A hot thrill ran down her spine. She knew James. If he was awake in there he was hard, and hating it, and listening to every word. She tipped her chin up toward the ceiling so her voice would carry.

"I want you to fuck me in our bed," she said. Clear. Warm. Filthy. "I want you to fill me up where he sleeps. I know he's in there listening, Ray — I know he's hard — I know he's lying in that little bed with his hand in his boxers listening to you stretch his wife open—"

"Whose bed is this?"

"Yours—"

"Say it right."

"This bed is yours!" Her voice cracked high on it. Her hips were moving on their own now, fast, grinding down onto him and his thumb at once. "It's yours, Ray, it's yours, I'm coming — *papi* — I'm coming on you—"

It took her from the inside out. She clamped down on him so hard that he cursed, and the orgasm rolled through her in long pulling waves, her hands locked on the headboard, her forehead almost touching the glass above it, her mouth open. Wet heat spilled out of her around him and ran down onto his balls. She shook. Across the yard, the Dentons' shade hung up in its empty window, and she came looking straight at it.

Ray held her hips through it. He held her down on him, all the way seated, and let her pulse around him, and she could feel the effort it cost him in the tremor of his thighs under her and the hiss of his breath.

"Christ," he said through his teeth. "Don't move. Don't you move."

She didn't. She sat on him, gasping, and felt him throb inside her, hard and right at the edge, and then felt him back away from it by inches.

This bed is yours.

James's hips jerked into his fist twice. Right there. A third stroke would have been the end of it — he felt it gathering at the base of his spine, the heat, the pull — and he tore his hand away.

He lay rigid in the narrow bed with his cock throbbing against his stomach and pre-come cooling on his fingers, and the sour salt smell of himself rising out from under the blanket.

His teeth hurt. He had come to the edge on her saying it. On that sentence. In that voice.

Through the wall, the bed creaked. Then a slow wet sound, and her soft whimper.

"You're still hard," she said. Lazy, purring, surprised. "You didn't even come."

"Saving it." Ray's voice, winded. "Get up. We're taking a shower."

"Carry me."

A smack — an open palm on bare skin — and her squeal. "Ow! Okay, okay. God. My legs are shaking."

"Grab the plug and the lube off your side. That thing's getting rinsed."

"I wore it half the night, Ray—"

"And you'll wear it again." Heavy bare feet on the hardwood. "Bring it."

The lube bottle knocked the lamp. Metal clacked on wood. Her quick steps followed his, and the bathroom door on the far side of the master bedroom clicked half-shut, and then the pipes in the wall shuddered and roared as the shower came on.

James lay there and listened to the water run through the copper over his head.

He told himself he was getting up to go downstairs. That was all. Coffee. The paper. Get out of the house.

He wiped his palm on the sheet and stood in his grey t-shirt and boxers and opened the guest room door without letting the latch click. He stepped over the board outside the door that always creaked. He knew which one it was. He'd been meaning to fix it for three years.

At the end of the hall the master bedroom door stood six inches open. Through the gap, over the drum of the shower, came Jenna's laugh bouncing off tile, then a wet slap of a palm on skin, then her yelp.

The stairs were to his left. He went right.

He eased the door the rest of the way with two fingers, and the hinge, which also needed oil, was lost under the noise of the water.

The room hit him through his nose first. Ray's night sweat, thick and musky, gone into everything; the salt of sex dried on cotton; and under it, sharp and fresh, his wife. The fitted sheet was torn off the corner on his side, the striped ticking of the mattress showing, and the middle of the bed was a map of dark stains in the sun. His office chair sat at the foot of the bed where Ray had pointed, five feet back. Ray's trousers lay in a heap on the floor with the shirt and the shoes, the belt that had been around Jenna's wrists coiled beside them like it had crawled there. Her black bodysuit was a tangle of straps by the dresser, one stocking draped over the chair's armrest.

On his nightstand, on top of the paperback he'd left splayed open Friday night, sat Ray's wristwatch.

On hers, beside the lamp, two sticky rings on the wood where the lube and the plug had stood. And the condom. His. Knotted at the neck, small and white and shrunken now, a little dried-out balloon next to the ruined bed.

From the en suite came the hiss of the showerhead, the smell of Jenna's jasmine body wash drifting out on the steam, and Ray's voice echoing off the tile.

"Hold still. You're wiggling."

"It's *cold* on that side—"

"It's a hundred and ten degrees in here, Blondie. I'm being boiled alive."

Don't go in there, James's head said. And his bare feet carried him over the threshold.

He stopped beside the footboard and put his hand on it. The bathroom door stood half open across the room, and through it, at an angle, he could see the long mirror over the double vanity. The exhaust fan was pulling steam out through the door; it had cleared a band across the middle of the glass at eye level while the edges stayed fogged. In that clear band, reversed, was the walk-in shower. Frameless glass. And inside it, his wife.

The water was scalding. She liked it that way. She'd always liked it that way — James complained every time he got in with her that she was trying to poach him — and she stood under it with her eyes shut and her face tipped up and felt the heat beat down on her breasts and her stomach and the tender swollen place between her legs, and she sighed so deeply it was almost a moan.

"You do this every morning?" Ray said behind her. "On purpose?"

"Every morning."

"No wonder your skin's like that." His hands came around her. He'd soaped them, and the bar of her soap had disappeared somewhere in one fist, and his palms slid wet and slick over her belly, up her ribs, and closed over both breasts. They covered them. That still startled her, every time — that a man's hands could just *cover* them. "Like you've been cooked."

"That's not a compliment."

He squeezed, and the soap foamed between his fingers, and her nipples went hard against his palms. "*This* is a compliment."

She leaned back into him. All of him. The wet hairy heat of his chest, the soft heavy gut against her lower back, and lower, his cock — still hard, still slick from her, lying thick against the crease of her ass. Water ran between them and down. His thumbs rolled her nipples and she arched, and the arch pushed her ass back against him, and he made a sound in his throat.

"Wash lower," she said. Warm, teasing. Her eyes still shut. "You left me a mess down there, *papi*. The least you can do is clean it up."

His left hand slid down. Over her stomach, through the soap, down over her landing strip, and she widened her stance on the wet tile to let him. His right hand came down her back and gripped one cheek and pulled it wide, so the hot water ran down into the cleft of her ass and over her tight puckered asshole and she gasped at it.

He had no intention of washing her.

He pushed two fingers into her from behind, with no soap on them at all, and she slapped her palm against the tile.

"*Ah* — Ray—"

He curled them. Hooked them against the front wall of her, right where she was swollen and tender and still pulsing from the bed, and pressed. And rubbed. The heel of his left hand found her clit from the front at the same time. She was caught between his hands and she couldn't do anything about it except push back onto his fingers, and she did. Shameless. The wet sound of his fingers working in her echoed off the tile louder than the water.

"Right there," she breathed. "Oh God — *right* there — Ray, I'm going to — I'm going to come on your hand—"

"No you're not."

He pulled his fingers out.

She actually cried out at it — a small, indignant, desperate sound — her hips chasing his hand back through the air. He brought the hand up under her nose, and covered her mouth. She smelled herself on him, sharp and salty through the jasmine steam, and her stomach flipped.

Then he slapped her ass. Open palm, hard, and the crack went off the tile like a shot. She yelped and jumped forward against the wall.

"You're *mean*," she said into his hand. Laughing. The sting spread warm across her cheek.

He took her by the shoulder and turned her around to face him under the spray. "Get on your knees."

She looked past his arm.

Through the blurred glass of the stall and the half-open bathroom door, she could see the double vanity, the cup between the sinks with two toothbrushes in it. James's blue one. Hers. A month ago this was where she and James stood side by side in the mornings, brushing their teeth, bumping hips, him doing the thing where he talked with a mouth full of foam to make her laugh.

And three weeks ago she had walked into their kitchen from Ray's apartment with Ray still on her tongue, kissed James good morning, and told him her mouth belonged to Ray now. That if he wanted it, he'd have to ask. She'd invented it on the spot. Last night James had asked. Out loud, in their living room, to Ray's face. And then he'd had thirty seconds of

her mouth through an extra-tight rubber while Ray fucked her bare.

"Ray." She laughed — a small nervous laugh, her hand on his wet hip. "Not on my knees in here. The door's open. If James comes in for anything—"

He slapped the other cheek. She jumped against his belly.

His fingers went into her wet hair at the nape and closed, gently, all the way.

"Leave the door open," he said. "He hasn't had that mouth bare in a while. He asked me for it last night, and he got it in a rubber, and he knows whose it is." He tilted her head back with his grip so she was looking up at him through the water. "Get down there and show me how my Blondie says good morning."

At the footboard James heard every word over the water.

He hasn't had that mouth bare in a while.

He couldn't remember the last time. That was the truth of it. Before the conference she hadn't gone down on him in what felt like years, and after it there had been a few weeks — the dirty talk, the airport, the dirtiest stretch of their marriage — and then Ray had come back into their lives and she'd come home one Monday morning and told him the rule, and since then there'd been nothing until last night. Thirty seconds of muted pressure through latex while Ray drove into her an arm's length above his head.

He ground his hand down on his cock through his boxers. His other hand dug into the oak of the footboard until the edge bit his palm.

In the mirror, a pink flush climbed the side of her throat. She let out a breath. And she sank down out of the clear band of glass, to her knees on the wet tile between Ray's hairy legs.

"Only for you," she whispered, sitting back on her heels.

His cock was right in front of her face. In the bedroom she'd felt it; here she could see it, under the bright bathroom light with the water sheeting off his gut and running down it in streams. Dark with blood. The heavy vein along the underside like a rope under the skin. The head flared out past the shaft, blunt, purple, already leaking — a clear bead swelling at the slit that the water kept washing away and he kept replacing.

She wrapped both hands around it at the base. Her fingertips didn't meet. They never met. She looked at the gap between them and laughed and put the back of her wrist to her mouth.

"God. I still don't know how this goes in my mouth."

"Same way it went in last night." His hand rested on top of her wet head, heavy as a hat. "Start at the bottom."

She leaned in between his thighs. Under the spray the smell of him was close and thick — male sweat, soap, and her. Her own musk, from the bed, all over him. She opened her mouth and took one of his balls onto her tongue, heavy and loose and coarse-haired, and sucked it gently into her mouth and hummed. His hips jerked against her chin. She let it slip free and dragged the flat of her tongue all the way up the underside, base to tip, slow, following the vein, and caught the bead at the slit on the very end of her tongue before the water could take it.

Bitter-salt. Hot. Him.

"You taste like my body wash," she said, looking up at him. "Mostly you taste like me."

"Time to taste more." His fist tightened in her hair. "Open."

She opened. Wider. Wider than that, until the hinges of her jaw ached, and leaned forward into the pull of his hand.

The head filled her mouth by itself. Her lips stretched taut around the flare and went thin and pale with it, and she breathed through her nose and took more, the thick shaft sliding over her flattened tongue, the head bumping the soft back of her palate and then pressing past it, into the tight entrance of her throat. Her throat closed on it. *Glk.* Tears jumped into her eyes. Spit and shower water spilled out of the corners of her stretched mouth and ran down her chin, over the gold letters at her throat, and dripped off her nipples.

She pulled off gasping. A thick rope of spit swung between her lip and the head of him. She looked up through her wet lashes and he looked down at her, water running off his heavy face, his mouth slack.

"Again," he said.

She went down again. Deeper. Her palms on his hairy thighs for leverage, and she pushed her face forward onto him until her nose was buried in the coarse wet grey hair under his gut and her throat was full and working around him, swallowing on nothing because there was no room to swallow, and he groaned — low, open, a sound that went all the way down into her.

Ray had turned side-on under the spray. In the mirror James watched the side of his wife's wet blonde head moving between Ray's thighs. Ray's gut hung over her upturned face. His hips rocked forward, shallow and steady. The hollow wet gagging carried out of the bathroom over the water, and under it, her moaning.

"Christ," Ray said. His head tipped back into the spray. One of his hands rested on his own belly, watching himself disappear into her. "Eyes running. Choking on it at eight in the morning like you can't breathe without it. Your husband's lying in that little bed down the hall listening to the pipes, and you're down on his tile begging for mine."

He thought James was down the hall.

James's jaw locked. He watched her surge forward every time Ray pulled back — on her own, nobody's hand pushing her — slurping, hollow-cheeked, taking him back down until her wet hair slapped her shoulders.

Walk out, his head said. *Turn around and walk out. You've seen enough.* He had seen enough months ago.

She pulled off with a loud wet pop and gasped for air, her face hot, her breasts heaving under the water. She turned her cheek against the hot underside of him and kissed it. Licked the vein. Her right hand went to the base and worked him with sloppy wet strokes.

"You know this mouth is yours," she said against his skin. Her voice was raw from his cock. "He got a rubber for thirty seconds and you get my throat whenever you want it. Put it back in. Please. Fuck my face."

"Since when do you say please?"

"Since about Dayton." She smiled up at him — the smile was crooked and wet and absolutely filthy — and took him back in.

He held her head and used her for it. She let him. She opened her throat and let him find the pace and the depth, and the white quiet started to come down over her, the good quiet, the one where she didn't have to decide anything. Her own

hand slid down off his thigh and between her spread knees. Her fingers found herself — swollen, slick, aching — and went straight to her clit in tight fast circles, and she moaned around him so hard he felt it.

"Uh-uh." He saw her shoulder moving. "Hand off. You don't come on your knees by yourself."

She whined around his cock. She didn't stop.

He pulled her off him by the hair. His cock slid out of her throat in a long shining streamer of spit and she gasped and swayed on her knees. He hooked both hands under her arms and hauled her straight up off the tile, her wet breasts dragging up the length of his belly.

"*Why*," she said — breathless, half laughing, her throat raw. "I was *right* there—"

"Because we're coming together," he said, "I want your tits on that glass." He turned her by the hips to face the clear wall of the stall. "So you can see yourself the whole time."

He walked her forward until her breasts met the glass.

It was cold. After the scalding water it was so cold she gasped, her nipples crushed flat against it, her breath fogging a patch in front of her mouth. She braced her palms high on either side of her head. She could see herself, faintly, in the glass — a blurred pale shape with dark eyes and a gold chain — and past her own reflection, out through the glass and the bathroom door, the bedroom she couldn't quite make out. The shapes of it. The bed in the sun.

Ray reached down behind her and took her left thigh in one hand and lifted it. Up, high, until her foot found the tiled corner bench and she was standing on one leg with the other planted on the bench and her pelvis split wide open to him.

"That stretches my—" she breathed.

"Good."

She felt him slide between her thighs from behind, the length of him scalding after the glass, and she moved her standing foot an inch wider on the tile to give him the angle. She tilted her fat ass back against his gut. She was so wet the water made no difference.

He dragged the head of him up and down through her slit. Once. Twice. Notched it.

"Keep those tits on the glass," he said. "Anybody walks in that bedroom, that's the first thing they see."

He drove into her in one heavy stroke, all the way.

The angle put him somewhere new. With her leg up and her body bent forward onto the glass, the head of him went past her front wall and up into a deep unguarded place she'd never felt touched, and she cried out — high, shocked — and her forehead dropped against the glass. Her inner walls started pulsing around him before he'd even moved. His gut settled against her perfect ass. His coarse thighs pressed against the backs of hers. She was pinned between the heat of him and the cold of the glass and filled so completely she felt it in her stomach.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned. "Ray. You're so deep from back here. I can feel you in my *stomach*—"

He gripped her waist in both hands and started to fuck her.

The vanity mirror gave James all of it.

His wife's breasts mashed flat on the shower glass, her nipples crushed against it, her palms high. One leg up on the bench. Ray's huge pale body behind her, his hands locked on her waist, driving into her. The meaty *slap-slap-slap* of his gut

and thighs into her sloppy wet ass came out through the bathroom door over the water, and under it the thick sucking sound of him in her. Her breasts squeaked an inch up the glass on every stroke and slid back down.

James's hand left the footboard and went into his boxers, closing around his cock, which was slick at the head and so hard it hurt, and he stroked in time with Ray's hips. *Slap.* Stroke. *Slap.* He could see her face in the mirror, in profile against the glass. Her mouth open. Her eyes shut.

He hated himself with a clarity that was almost peaceful. He kept going.

"*Sí — sí, así* — Ray—" She pushed off the bench with her raised foot and shoved her ass back into every stroke. "I can hear how wet you've got me — harder — fuck your Blondie—"

"Listen to that ass slapping on me." His voice was in her ear now, wet and hot, his hips cracking into her hard enough that the glass panel rattled in its chrome track. "In his shower. Waking up on my cock wasn't enough for you."

"No—" Her right hand came off the glass and went down between her legs. Two fingers on her clit, right above where he was stretching her open, and she could feel the wet skin of him dragging past her knuckles every time he pulled back. "I'm touching myself — Ray, I'm close again—"

He hooked his thick left arm across her chest, under her collarbone, and hauled her upright off the glass.

Her back slammed wet against his chest. Her head fell back onto his shoulder. The long pale line of her throat was laid open in the steam above the gold chain, and his face came down to it.

"Hold still," he said.

She felt his stubble scrape the high left side of her neck, just under the hinge of her jaw. Two inches above the letters. And she knew.

"Wait — no — Ray, not my neck." She twisted her chin down, trying to cover it. Her hips kept moving on him. Her fingers kept moving on herself. "I have Meridian tomorrow — a collar won't cover that high—"

"Good." He tightened his arm, pinning her arched against him, and drove up into her. "Let the fourth floor look at what you did all weekend."

His mouth sealed over her pulse.

He sucked. Slow, hard, a deep pulling pressure that drew the thin skin of her neck into his mouth and held it there, his teeth just grazing, the wet noise of it filling her ear. And in one bright flash she saw it: walking onto the fourth floor tomorrow morning with Ray Vogler's mouth printed on her throat above her collar. Diane's eyes across the desk. The juniors on the walkway. Everybody who'd ever watched her walk down that hall knowing that someone had held her down this weekend and marked her like livestock.

She should have fought him. She reached back over her shoulder instead.

Her wet hand went into the grey hair at the back of his head, and she dug her nails into his scalp and pulled his mouth *harder* against her throat.

"*Sí, papi* — right there — mark me — suck it hard — mark me — I'm yours, I'm *yours*—"

The orgasm took her right through the middle of it. Harder than the bed. Her cunt clamped down on him in long violent pulls, her thighs shaking, her raised foot slipping on the bench,

and the sting of his mouth on her neck burned and burned and she rode it, rubbing her clit through the waves with her fingers, holding his face to her throat with her other hand like she'd die if he let go.

Her clenching broke him.

She felt it happen. His whole heavy body locked rigid behind her. His cock swelled inside her, thicker, impossibly — and jerked. The first pulse hit deep and hot. He tore his mouth off her neck with a wet pop.

"Fuck — *take it*—"

He slammed her forward against the glass and emptied into her. Two. Three. She felt every one — scalding, deep, a heat that spread through her belly and kept spreading — and she ground back against his gut through the aftershocks while his hand mauled her breast, and she felt herself fill up again until it had nowhere left to go.

At the footboard, *mark me, I'm yours* went into James's chest and stayed there.

In the mirror he had watched her hand go back over her shoulder. He had watched her pull Ray's mouth into her throat. Into the exact place under her jaw where James had kissed her ten thousand times, the place she tipped her head for when she was half-asleep. And when Ray pulled his mouth off with a pop and shoved her forward onto the glass again, her head lolled sideways against the pane and James saw it come up. Dark red, raw, swollen. Already going purple at the center. Two inches above the gold word.

Behind her in the glass, Ray's shoulders shuddered through four, five deep hard thrusts as he emptied himself into her. Her face had gone soft and stunned against the glass.

James's cock throbbed in his fist, and he took his hand away from it, and it throbbed anyway.

Ray reached out and shut the chrome lever off. In the sudden quiet, he drew his hips back and pulled out of her with a thick wet sound, and before his bulk shifted across the view, James saw his wife's swollen pink entrance stay open — and a slow glossy rope of white well up out of her and slide down the inside of her standing thigh.

"God, Ray." She was panting against the fogged glass. She looked down between her own trembling legs and watched it run down her thigh, hot and thick. "I thought you were *saving* that."

"I had plenty." His voice was rough and pleased. His cock hung half-hard and glazed, shining with both of them. He reached past her to the corner bench, where he'd rinsed the plug under the spray and set it down beside the lube when they got in. "And we're not wasting it. Stay there. Leg up."

She looked back over her shoulder at the silver in his hand and the lube coming out of the bottle in a thick clear ribbon over the bulb. "Ray — the plug, *now*? I had that in for hours last night. I'm so tender back there—"

"And now I want you walking around this house with both. My plug in your ass and my come in your pussy." He pressed the cool slick tip against her rim and spread her cheek wide with his other palm. "Right under his nose all morning. Reach back here and open yourself up for me."

A small helpless sound came out of her throat. Then she reached back with her right hand and hooked her fingers into her own wet cheek and pulled herself open for him, and exhaled a long shaking breath.

He pushed.

The steel was cold and the stretch was huge — she was sore, she hadn't lied — and the widest part of the bulb opened her rim to the edge of what she could take. Then she gave around it and it slipped past with a soft wet pop, and the flared base settled snug between her cheeks.

"*Oh* — God—"

Her toes curled on the bench. The bulb sat deep inside her and pressed forward through the thin wall onto everything he'd just put in her pussy, and the pressure pushed more of it out. She felt a thick warm glob of him squeeze out between her lips and drip down her thigh.

"It's pushing you out of me," she said. Half shocked, half laughing, her forehead on the glass. "It's so big it's pushing your come right out of me. I'm all plugged up, *papi*."

He didn't let go of the base. He held it between his thumb and finger and turned it, slow, inside her, and drew it an inch out and pushed it home again, twice, while his other thumb rubbed lazy circles through the white mess on her swollen lips and her clit, smearing himself over her.

"Greedy little ass," he said. "Took it right back."

"Don't twist it — *ah* — both of them are so full—"

He gave her hip a satisfied swat and slid the glass door open.

"Towel," he said. "Dry me off."

She stepped out onto the bath mat on shaky legs. Every step moved the plug inside her. She took the towel off the hook, and then she did something he hadn't told her to do: she sank down to her knees on the mat at his hip, her back to the half-open bathroom door, and pressed her lips to the wet, soft-

ening head of his cock. A slow, open-mouthed kiss. She felt it twitch and start to thicken against her lips.

"Mm. You're already getting hard again," she murmured, and laughed against him, and began rubbing the towel over his thighs and his belly and his chest. "And I can feel you running down my leg."

Ray's back blocked the mirror now. But the bath mat lay square in the gap of the half-open door, and James could see straight through it to his wife kneeling with her back to him: the silver base of the plug catching the light between her cheeks, the dark pink of her rim stretched tight around its neck, a white streak shining down the inside of her thigh. Every time she leaned in to kiss Ray Vogler's massive cock, the plug winked.

His stomach dropped.

He backed up two steps to the threshold without a sound and went out into the hall.

At the top of the stairs he told himself to go back in there and end it. He stood with his hand on the newel post and the purple mark above her gold chain burning behind his eyes, and he went down the stairs instead.

Downstairs, the living room still smelled like last night. Ray's sweat in the couch cushions. Sex in the leather of James's armchair, where Jenna had straddled him in her stockings and slid down between his knees and asked whether he didn't have someone to ask first. Her black dress lay where she'd stepped out of it, a pool of fabric on the hardwood beside the chair. Her coat was over the arm of the couch.

And in James's ears the bathroom upstairs kept going: the wet pop of the steel going into his wife, her breathless *I'm all*

plugged up, papi, the soft sound of her mouth on the head of Ray's cock while she knelt on the bath mat and dried him.

He took a pair of grey sweatpants off the folded pile on the dryer, took his running jacket off the hook, stepped into his sneakers without socks, and let himself out the front door into the cold.

The cold slapped his face. It was barely eight-thirty, the sky pale and cloudless, frost still white along the shaded edge of the lawn. At the bottom of the driveway behind Jenna's sedan sat Ray's rented Buick, salt-crusted along the wheel wells, parked in the exact spot where James backed out every weekday morning.

Next door, twenty feet across the strip of dead grass between the driveways, a screen door banged.

Greg Denton was coming down his front steps in a fleece vest with a travel mug in one hand and the leash of his old golden retriever, Barnaby, in the other. For five years Greg had been the neighbor who borrowed James's extension ladder every October and traded two sentences with him over the Sunday paper about the Buckeyes' offensive line. Greg's upstairs bedroom faced the side of the Whitfields' house. Last night, when James raised the blinds, that window had been lit yellow, the shade up.

James's stomach knotted.

In James's head, Greg and his wife had been lying in bed at one in the morning with their own lamp off, listening across twenty feet of frozen side yard to Jenna's voice coming out of the Whitfields' lit window, high and unmuffled, while something in there banged against a window frame for twenty minutes straight.

Greg reached the bottom of his driveway just as James bent to pick up the paper in its blue plastic sleeve.

"Morning, Greg," James said. His voice came out thin.

Greg stopped. Barnaby wandered two steps onto the frosted grass and nosed a dead dandelion. Greg opened his mouth to give his usual Sunday nod — and paused. He blinked once, as if checking that it really was James who had come out of that front door. His eyes flicked up, past James's shoulder, to the corner of the second floor where the master bedroom window faced his own, its blinds still standing all the way open. Then down to the salt-stained Buick behind Jenna's bumper. Then back up to the window, a second time, before he caught himself.

A dull red climbed Greg's neck above the fleece collar. And standing there with Greg four strides away — certain the man was seeing Jenna behind that glass with whoever owned the Buick — James felt a sick, humiliating pulse of heat go straight to his groin. Greg looked down at the leash instead of James's face.

"Morning, James," Greg said, clipping it short. "Quite a night, huh?" A pause that went on one second too long. "Supposed to — supposed to warm up by Tuesday."

"Yeah," James said. His ears burned so hot in the thirty-degree air they felt blistered. "Looks like it."

"Well. See you around." Greg gave the leash a tug, turned his back before the dog had finished with the dandelion, and walked briskly back up his front path without getting his own paper.

James stood by the curb with the newspaper crushed in his fist. He read the top-fold headline about a municipal water

bond three times through the plastic without a single word going in. *Quite a night.* Five years of gutters and offensive lines, and that was what they'd have now. He stayed out on the concrete until his toes went numb in his sockless sneakers, and then he made himself walk back up the driveway.

At the kitchen sink, Jenna moved her bare feet an inch wider on the warm tile, and the plug moved with her.

It was a slow, heavy drag deep inside her, and it pressed forward through the thin wall onto everything Ray had left in her upstairs, and she gripped the edge of the sink and held very still until it settled. A warm slip of him escaped her anyway and ran down the inside of her thigh. She let it.

She was rinsing last night's wine glasses. Her hair was twisted up in a tortoiseshell clip, still damp, and the coffeemaker was gurgling through its last cycle behind her. On her way down the stairs she'd seen James through the sidelight beside the front door, walking down the driveway toward the mailbox in his running jacket. She'd thrown on one of her old plaid flannels straight out of the bathroom — soft, faded, unbuttoned from collar to hem, nothing under it — and carried Ray's clothes down in a bundle and dropped them on the couch, because he'd said he'd go after coffee. Every time she reached for the sponge, the cotton slid across her bare nipples, stiffening them.

The kitchen was full of sun. The white marble island. The yellow walls. The herb pots on the sill above the sink. On Tuesday she'd stood at that island in cutoffs with flour on her hip, rolling pasta, telling her husband *Saturday night is yours, James*. Now she stood ten feet from it in an open shirt with Ray Vogler's steel in her ass, his cum running down her leg, his

mouth printed on her neck, and every breath she took tugged her stretched rim around the narrow neck of the plug, and the plain domestic filth of it — dish soap, coffee, morning light — had her pulse beating heavy between her legs.

Heavy bare feet crossed the tile behind her.

Two enormous rough hands slid in through the open sides of her flannel, spread over her ribs, and came up to fill themselves with her breasts.

He crowded against her back. The heat of him came first, and the animal smell of his skin over the coffee. She looked down and saw dark blue terrycloth sleeves on the arms around her and laughed out loud.

"Is that James's *robe*?"

"It was on the hook."

"It doesn't close on you."

"Nothing closes on me, Blondie." His thumbs found her nipples. "I gave up on closing a long time ago."

It hung open down his front, the belt dragging on the floor behind his heels, and his gut pressed her into the lip of the sink. And his cock — bare, already thick again, ten minutes after he'd emptied himself into her in the shower — pushed into the crease of her ass and nudged the flared base of the plug. The bulb shifted in her. She gasped over the running tap.

"Mm — Ray, God." She laughed, low and breathless. "You were in me ten minutes ago. Stop, you've got me so full I can barely stand still, and James is outside, he's going to walk in any—"

"Let him." His breath was hot on the fresh mark on her neck. His left hand slid down her wet forearm, closed around her wrist, and lifted her hand out of the water.

He turned it over in the light. Ran his rough thumb across her fingers. Across the diamond she'd worn for eight years and the gold band beside it.

"Take 'em off," he said.

Her smile slipped. She looked down at her own hand in his — the wet gold, the stone throwing little bright chips of light onto the window — and her fingers curled in against his palm by themselves.

"Ray, no." A nervous laugh. She tugged her wrist toward her chest. "I don't take my rings off. I don't take them off to shower. I don't take them off to roll *dough*. He's literally at the front door—"

"I didn't ask what you do with dough." He held her wrist two inches above the little porcelain soap dish beside the faucet and rolled his hips forward against her, slow, and his cock pushed the base of the plug, and the steel shifted inside her with a soft wet slide that went straight through her front wall. Another warm trickle slid down her leg. "My name around your neck. My cumin your pussy. My plug in your ass." His thumb hooked under the gold band. "In this kitchen you're Blondie. Take 'em off."

"Ray — *ah* — that's pushing it so deep—" Her lower back arched into his gut whether she liked it or not. She looked back at him over her shoulder and tried a smile, the coaxing one. "Come on, *papi*. At least let me keep them on for coffee. Just till he goes back upstairs."

His thumb pushed the band a quarter-inch up her finger toward the knuckle. His grip on her wrist didn't move at all.

"Off," he said. "In the dish. Now."

Her pulse was hammering under the bruise on her neck. She looked at the gold band James had put on her finger seven Octobers ago. The man who'd lied to her face for four months. Who'd walked out of their bedroom at two in the morning carrying his own pillow without saying a word. And she felt the steel inside her and the heat of the man holding her wrist, and she told herself: *this is the next notch. If he walks in and sees my rings in a soap dish with Ray's hickey on my neck and his load dripping out of me and still says nothing, then nothing will ever make him talk.* She half believed it. And she knew, even while she was thinking it, that the rush flooding hot between her legs had nothing to do with what James would or wouldn't say. It was Ray's voice. It was *off, now*, and her hands wanting to obey it.

"You're a bad man," she whispered, and a shaky laugh came out with it, and her fingers went loose in his grip. "Okay. Okay. I'm taking them off for you."

She slid her wet thumb under both rings and pushed them together over her knuckle. The gold dragged tight across the joint. Then it gave, and the base of her finger was suddenly light and bare in the cool air. She held them for half a second over the dish.

She opened her fingers.

They landed in the dried soap scum with a bright tiny *clink*.

"Good girl," Ray murmured. His thumb stroked the pale dent at the bottom of her finger. Then he reached past her and shut off the tap.

He turned her around by the waist in her open flannel and walked her backward two steps until her spine met the granite counter beside the stove. His naked belly pressed into hers

between the open plaid. His cock lay hard and hot against her stomach.

"God, my hand feels naked," she breathed against his chin, and she slid that bare hand up into the thin grey hair at the back of his neck and held on. "Making me do that — I clenched on your plug the second they hit the dish."

He covered her mouth with his. His tongue pushed thick between her lips, and his hands went down under the tail of her flannel and took both plump cheeks of her ass and spread them, and his knuckles knocked against the base of the plug. She moaned into his mouth. She tasted coffee on him, and salt, and sucked on his lower lip, and down the hall the front door opened and clicked shut.

"*Mmph* — Ray—" She broke the kiss by half an inch, lips wet. James's sneakers on the hall runner. "He's—"

"Keep that mouth open," Ray said, and kissed her harder.

On his way down the front hall James passed the living room and saw, on the couch, a pair of dark trousers and a charcoal shirt folded over the arm, a sport coat on top of them, a pair of wide black dress shoes side by side on the floor below. They hadn't been there twenty minutes ago.

He stepped into the kitchen archway.

The morning sun came in over the sink and lit the whole room. The island in the middle. The sink to the right, with its window and its herb pots and its little soap dish. The coffeemaker and the toaster on the counter just inside the arch, a foot from his hand. And on the left, against the counter beside the stove, side-on to him, Ray Vogler had his wife pinned.

Ray was wearing his robe.

The dark blue terrycloth one Jenna had bought him two Christmases ago. It strained across Ray's back and hung open in front like a pair of curtains, and between the curtains, against his wife's bare stomach, Ray's cock jutted thick and dark and wet.

And in the soft old plaid flannel she wore on their slow Sunday mornings — the one she'd worn to make him pancakes, the one with the frayed cuff she chewed when she was reading — Jenna had her bare breasts crushed against the grey hair of Ray's chest and her tongue in his mouth.

It was not a polite kiss. Her head was tilted back and her mouth was working against his, open and wet, the soft slick sounds of it carrying across the room. Spit shone on her chin. Her hand was in the hair at Ray's nape, and her hips were rocking against his thigh, and both of Ray's hands were shoved up under the back of her flannel, spreading her bare ass apart in his palms. James could see the shift of his knuckles grinding against something between her cheeks. She whimpered into his mouth.

Say something, James's head ordered. His fingers cramped into the blue plastic sleeve of the newspaper. He stared at her throat. At the bruise. High on the left side, under the hinge of her jaw: dark crimson going purple at the center, swollen, two inches above the gold word. He'd watched it come up in the mirror fifteen minutes ago. In the kitchen light it was worse.

His cock swelled heavy against the front of his sweatpants.

Jenna broke the kiss by an inch. A thread of spit stretched between their lips. She looked sideways through her lashes at James in the doorway, and she giggled — warm, breathless — against Ray's mouth.

"Mm. Ray, behave. James is right there with the paper."

"I've got both hands full of exactly what I want," Ray said against her lips, and gave her ass one slow heavy squeeze that lifted her onto her toes before he let her mouth go with a smack.

She stayed tucked against his naked hip, her breasts rising and falling fast between the open plaid, and licked the shine of his spit off her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. Then she rose up on her toes again and kissed his rough jaw, fond and quick, the way she kissed James's cheek going out the door to work. She reached her left hand across the counter to lift the glass carafe off the warmer.

James's eyes went to her hand. And stayed there.

It was bare.

A pale narrow dent circled the bottom of her ring finger where the gold band had lived for seven years. Where the diamond had sat beside it — the diamond he'd spent four months of nights and weekends saving for. He found them without meaning to look: three feet to her right, in the little soap dish beside the faucet, both rings lying in a puddle of dried suds, catching the sun.

His left thumb found his own ring and pressed it. Blood rushed in his ears. He remembered the overlook in Hocking Hills, the wind so loud she'd made him ask twice. He remembered his hands shaking a year later, sliding that band over her knuckle in front of her mother. And now it was lying in soap scum, and she was standing in an open shirt with another man's pet name hanging at her throat and another man's mouth printed above it.

Pick them up, his head said. *Walk over there, pick up her rings, and throw him out of your house.*

His cock gave a hard, brutal throb against his sweatpants.

Holding the carafe in her bare left hand, Jenna turned her head toward the archway. The corner of her swollen mouth curved up. She tucked a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear with two fingers, the gesture she made when she was pleased with herself — and it was so warm and so easy, with Ray's hand still on her ass and Ray on her breath, that James's throat closed.

"Morning, baby," she said. "Coffee's ready. Come get a cup while it's hot."

He stood in the archway. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Thanks," he said.

Ray picked up a mug off the counter by the stove — James's mug. The heavy white stoneware one from the pottery stall at the farmers' market, the one he'd reached for first every morning for three years. Ray took a long swallow of black coffee out of it and set it down with a solid clunk. His other hand slid deeper under her flannel and hauled her back against his naked thigh by the hip.

"Leave the pot, Blondie. He can pour his own," Ray said. "Come here first. I want one more taste of you before I hit the road."

Color ran down her throat and over her chest. She set the carafe back on the warmer and glanced at James and then up at Ray, and her bare fingers came up against his hairy chest — a gesture that might have been the start of pushing him away.

"Here?" she murmured. Her hips stayed pressed to his thigh. "Ray — you just finished in me upstairs. James just walked in. He hasn't even poured his coffee yet."

"He's about to." Ray hooked both thumbs inside the collar of her flannel and pushed it off her shoulders.

"Mm." Her eyes closed for a second. "Okay, *papi*."

She let her arms slide out of the sleeves. The plaid shirt dropped in a soft heap on the tile by the stove. And she turned out of his arms and faced the archway.

The sun from the window over the sink fell straight across her.

His wife was standing in the middle of their kitchen without a thread on. And James's mouth went dry — even now, even with all of it, because she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and she always had been, from the night in Austin when he put his drink down and never picked it back up. Her breasts in the cool air, full and high, the nipples tight and pink below the gold chain. The bruise above the chain like a thumbprint in wet paint. The flush running down from her throat over her stomach to the dip of her waist and the flare of her hips, down to the neat blonde strip and the swollen pink lips below it, still wet and shining. A slow white trail on the inside of one thigh.

And she knew. She stood there and let him look. He saw her see his eyes go down her body and lock on the bruise and drop to her thighs, saw her see his sweatpants tent in front, and something lit in her face that was half triumph and half pure hunger. She tipped her chin up and shifted her weight onto one hip, and the smell of her drifted across the six feet of tile between them.

Ray hooked one thick finger under the gold word at her throat and lifted it off her skin.

"My chain on her neck," he said, rubbing the letters with his thumb, and glanced at James. "My cum in her pussy. My plug in her ass."

"*Ray*. Stop showing me off." She laughed, breathless, and her dark eyes held James's and then dropped, deliberately, to the front of his sweatpants. "Although. Looks like he likes the view."

Before James could draw a breath Ray pulled her back against his chest, bent his head over her shoulder, and took her left nipple into his mouth. His right hand slid down over her belly and cupped her between the legs. James watched two thick fingers part her and drag through her.

"*Ah* — Ray—" She arched, pushing her breast into his mouth. Her bare left hand gripped his forearm. Her eyes stayed on James, sideways, through her lashes.

Ray lifted his mouth off her shining nipple with a wet smack. He shrugged, and James's robe slid off his shoulders and pooled around his ankles on the tile. Naked, in full morning sun, beside the toaster. The heavy pale overhang of his gut. His cock jutting out from under it thick and dark, a clear bead at the tip catching the light. The smell of his sweat reached James at the coffeemaker.

Ray kept his fingers between her thighs. With his other hand he pointed at the counter just inside the archway. At a second white stoneware mug beside the coffeemaker — the other half of the pair James had bought at that stall. A foot from James's hand.

"Pour yourself a cup, James," he said. "And hold it. Both hands. Give those hands a job so you're not standing in the door twitching."

No. His head said it plainly. *No. You don't do this one. Tell him to get his hands off her. Tell him to get dressed.*

James's jaw ground. His palm pressed down flat over the hard outline at the front of his sweatpants. Across the kitchen Ray watched him with his heavy brows up, patient, his fingers moving slowly between Jenna's legs. Waiting. The same way he'd waited at the bedroom chair last night, and the washcloth, and the lube.

James took three steps from the archway to the counter.

He set the paper down. He picked up the carafe and poured. His hands held the glass steady when he wanted them shaking, and he wrapped both palms around the hot mug, and he understood with complete cold clarity that Ray Vogler could hand him small household chores six feet from his naked wife for the rest of his life — and his cock would make his hands do every one.

"Good boy," Ray said.

He pulled his wet fingers out of Jenna and set her on her feet with a little push at her hip toward the island.

"Now get over that island and open up for him, Blondie. Let him see what I put in you after I filled you."

A shiver ran down her back. She went on her own. Two slow steps to the island, and she looked back at James over her shoulder, and the corner of her wet mouth lifted.

"Hold that coffee steady, baby," she murmured. "I bet you were peeking upstairs anyway."

She leaned forward over the marble until her breasts flattened on the cold stone, her head toward the sink and her hips toward the stove, her right flank three feet from where James stood at the coffeemaker. She braced her left forearm on the marble. Her bare ring finger curled over the edge of the stone less than two feet from the soap dish. She set her feet wide on the tile and arched her back, tilting her ass up into the sun, and reached back with her right hand and sank her fingers into her own cheek and pulled herself open.

Three feet from him.

In the clear daylight his wife held her own ass open with her own hand: the tight dark pink of her rim stretched taut around the narrow steel neck of Ray's plug, the round silver base seated deep between her cheeks and throwing the sun back at the ceiling. And just below it, her pussy — swollen, glossy, and leaking. A pearl of white welled at her opening while he watched and slid down onto her thigh.

The smell of her open body came across to him over the steam of the mug. His cock strained so hard against his sweatpants it hurt.

"Look how full you've got me, *papi*," she breathed against the marble. Her cheeks were red. "The plug's holding everything you put in me upstairs. Every time I breathe I feel it move. Please, Ray. Don't make me wait."

"See that, James?" Ray stepped up behind her spread thighs, the robe dragging off one heel, and rested his broad hand on the small of her back. He looked straight across her hip at James. "Best view in Columbus. Your wife on your kitchen counter with my load in her and my plug up her ass."

James's throat worked. "Jenna—" It came out thin and cracked, a warning with nothing behind it. "The window—"

"What, that?" Ray barked a laugh and pressed his thumb down on the silver disc between her cheeks. "Nobody's looking through those trees, James. If you're going to talk, talk. Otherwise drink your coffee."

"*Ah* — God, Ray—" Her toes curled on the tile as the steel rocked inside her, and James heard it, the wet shift of the metal in her rim. "Stop playing with it. When you move it like that my whole pussy throbs. Feel how wet I am. Please."

Ray slid two fingers down off the plug and through her. He brought them back glossy with her and with the white remains of the shower, and spat into his palm, and slicked the dark blunt head of his cock with both. Then he set the head at her and dragged it, slowly, up and down through her slit, so the underside of his shaft bumped the cold base of the plug with a faint click of steel on every pass.

He pressed in half an inch. Drew out. Pressed in again. Drew out.

"Don't *tease* me like that." She pushed back after him. Her breasts slid on the marble. "Put it in. I'm aching for it, Ray. I need it in me."

"Hold on." He looked sideways across her hip at James. "Tell your husband why your rings are in the soap dish, Blondie. He's standing there with his coffee looking confused."

She turned her hot cheek on the stone until her dark eyes met James's from three feet away. Her lips were parted and swollen. Her breath was coming fast. Ray's cock was sitting at her entrance and his thumb was on the plug, and James

watched the last bit of hesitation go out of her face. It went the way a heavy bag goes when you finally get to set it down.

"Because you told me to take them off," she said. To Ray. Looking at James. Her voice husky and unashamed, her lower back arching to press herself back onto the tip of him. "And because this morning I'm just your Blondie, Ray. Nobody else's. *Please*, *papi*. Stop teasing. Put it in me and let him watch you use me over our counter."

Nobody else's.

It went through James's chest like cold iron. His fingers cramped around the hot stoneware until it burned his palms.

Ray took her hip in his left hand and set the head of his cock just below the silver disc.

Put the mug down, James's head ordered. *Step forward. Take his arm.* The head pressed into her swollen lips. *Do it now.* His sneakers stayed where they were. His palms stayed on the mug.

Three feet from his eyes, Ray pushed.

The head was wider than the shaft behind it, and with the plug filling her ass there was almost no room left. James saw her stretch around it. Her lips went taut and shining just under the steel flare and then opened, slow, and the blunt head pushed into her, and Jenna's mouth fell open on the marble.

Ray sank in. All the way. The thick bare shaft churned through the wet of her and the leftovers of the shower, and a ring of white squeezed out around the base of him as he bottomed out against her ass, and the sound that came up off the island was obscene.

"*Oh* — James—" Her eyes flew to him. Her voice was shaking and drunk. "Look how deep he is. *Ah* — I can feel him rub-

bing on the plug — there's no room in me and he's opening me up anyway—"

"Fuck," Ray groaned. "Feel that plug squeeze it." His hand locked on her hip. His other thumb held the steel base pressed down into her. "This is the tightest you've ever been."

He started to fuck her.

Long heavy strokes, the slow drag of her clinging to him on the way out, the meaty smack of his damp gut and hairy thighs into her ass on the way in. The smell of sex came up thick over the coffee. Every stroke shoved her forward across the marble — her breasts sliding on the stone, the gold word swinging on its chain below the purple mark, the silver disc of the plug tipping and shifting in her stretched rim every time his shaft drove in beneath it. James could see the steel move. He could see the white froth at the base of Ray's cock each time it came back out of her.

"Look at your wife taking all that before breakfast, James." Ray's florid face was shining with sweat. He was looking straight at James across her bucking hip, grinding his thumb down on the plug so it pressed back against his own cock inside her.

She turned her face sideways on the stone. Her mouth was open. Her eyes were bright and fixed on James three feet away, and she shoved her hips back into the coarse hair of Ray's thighs.

"Look how hard my husband is, Ray," she said. Warm and filthy and breathless. Her eyes dropped to the front of his sweatpants, where a dark wet spot was spreading in the grey cotton. "He can hear how wet you've got me. *This* is how I want to be fucked. Give it to me harder."

"Yeah?" Ray slammed in to the hilt. Her breasts squeaked on the marble. "One load in the shower wasn't enough for this greedy pussy. I'm right on the edge, and I'm putting a second one in you."

James saw her eyes go wide.

Her bare left hand shoved hard against the stone. She twisted her head back over her shoulder, trying to brace against him even as his hips kept coming.

"Wait — Ray, no. Not inside me again." Her voice jumped, real panic in it, as the head of him punched deep. "It's still my week. You already came in me last night and in the shower and there's *nothing* in the house — *ah* — pull out on my back, *papi*. You can't put another one in me bare—"

At the coffeemaker James's heart slammed his ribs.

She's telling him no. His head grabbed at it. *She's telling him no. This is it. Say something.* And at the same instant the raw dirty terror of it — Ray Vogler emptying a third load into his wife in the middle of her week — went straight to his cock so hard he let out a ragged breath.

Pinned over the island, Jenna twisted her neck and found his eyes. Across three feet of sunlit tile. Her lips were trembling on the plea.

She was looking at *him*.

He didn't set the mug down. He didn't open his mouth. His palms stayed wrapped around the hot stoneware.

He watched her eyes drop from his face to the mug held steady in both his hands. And he watched the panic die in her face. Her shoulders sank. Her hand stopped bracing against the stone. And slowly, deliberately, she pushed her hips back into Ray's next stroke.

"Don't pull out," she said.

She said it to James. Looking at him. Her voice had gone low and steady.

"Don't pull out, Ray. Come in me."

Ray's palm cracked across her right cheek. The flesh rippled and bloomed red. He slapped his other hand down flat on the marble beside her forearm to brace himself — two feet from her rings in the soap dish — and jammed his thumb down on the plug.

"Attagirl," he said. He was looking at James. "Every drop. Right up this pussy, while he holds his coffee. Now push back and milk it out of me in front of him."

At the sting, and the shove of steel against the cock inside her, something wild opened up in her face.

She planted her toes wide on the tile. She braced both forearms on the marble. And she took the rhythm from him.

She drove herself back onto him, faster and harder than he'd been fucking her, slamming her ass into his thighs, rolling her hips at the bottom of every stroke in a hungry grinding circle that crushed the plug against his cock inside her. And she held her husband's eyes the entire time.

"Yes — *God, yes* — give it to me—" The wet smack of her ass on his thighs, louder and louder. The gold word jumped below the bruise. "Don't pull out. Breed me right in front of him. Fill me up again — *ah — sí, papi*, give me all of it — I'm coming — I'm coming on your bare cock—"

Her whole body went taut over the island. James watched it take her: her bare left hand clawing at the marble, her hips still driving back onto Ray through it, her pussy clamping down on him right under the silver disc. Her dark eyes on James the

whole time. Coming on another man's bare cock with her rings in the dish, looking at her husband.

She's begging him to get her pregnant, James's head said, uselessly, over and over. *She's begging him.* He hated her. He hated himself. And his cock pulsed in his sweatpants and spread the dark wet circle wider.

Ray's shoulders locked. He buried himself all the way into her and held there, and a low raw groan came up out of his chest, and James watched him start to empty into her — four, five, six deep jerking thrusts, his hips twitching against her ass, the plug pinning her tight around him while he pumped.

"Oh God — I feel it." Her voice was breathless, ecstatic. She rolled her ass back in slow, greedy circles against his gut, drawing it out of him. "I feel you coming in me again. So hot. Don't pull out. Give me every drop—"

"Take it all, Blondie." Ray's fingers dug into the reddened flesh of her ass. He held himself tight against her, still pulsing. "Right in front of your husband. Look at him watching me fill you up."

When Ray finally stepped back half a pace his softening cock slid out of her with a loud wet pop, and the sharp bleach-and-salt smell of fresh cum rose into the coffee-scented air.

With the plug still in her ass, there was nowhere for it to go but out or deeper in. Her stretched pink lips stayed open under the steel, and a heavy glossy flood of white welled up and spilled out of her in a thick steady stream. It ran down the inside of her left thigh, and it dripped. James heard it. *Pat. Pat. Pat.* On the kitchen tile. Beside his blue Christmas robe.

He stared at the pool spreading across his kitchen floor two inches from the robe's lapel.

Jenna stayed bowed over the marble for a long moment, thighs open and trembling, letting both of them look at what was pouring out of her. Then she pushed herself up slowly. A deep red flush covered her chest below the chain and the bruise. She looked down at the white streak sliding past her knee, and then back up at Ray, and laughed — soft, dazed, half shocked at herself.

"God. Look how much you put in me again." She pushed a damp strand of hair off her cheek with the back of her bare wrist. She left the come running down her leg alone. "Two in twenty minutes. It's pouring onto the floor."

Ray stood naked beside the island, the shine of both of them drying on his shaft. He laid one heavy palm on her ass — a slow, possessive squeeze, right over the base of the plug — and half-turned to pick up James's mug from the counter behind him.

He drank. Let out a long breath. Reached up with his thumb and rubbed the swollen bruise on her neck.

"Man," Ray said. Easy as a man standing at a grill. "I'll tell you, Blondie, going back to that beige box behind the dry cleaner on Fourth tonight is going to feel like a crime after this."

Jenna turned into his side. She felt a fresh warm trickle slip down the inside of her calf, and the plug shift deep when she pressed her breasts against his chest. Past his shoulder she could see James at the coffeemaker, still holding the mug in both hands, the dark spot on his sweatpants. A pang of pity went through her for him, aching and real. Right beside it, just as real, a hot jolt at the sight of him standing there doing what he'd been told. She slid her bare left hand over Ray's ribs and looked up at him.

"You don't have to go back tonight," she murmured. "If you don't want to."

"Eight o'clock call with Chicago in the morning. Then I'm in Cleveland through Wednesday for the regional review." Ray took another sip. His fingers slid back between her cheeks and played idly with the base of the plug. His half-hard cock rested warm against her hip. He looked past her at the kitchen — at the clean mitered trim James had put up around the cabinets, at the cedar fence outside the window that James had rebuilt board by board — and the look on his face was appetite. "Been thinking, though. Once Ashford Phase Three wraps up in a couple of months, there's no reason for me to go back on the regional rotation. I'm going to tell Braddock and my people at Cortec to make the Columbus transfer permanent."

Past Ray's shoulder, Jenna watched the color go out of James's face.

"Matter of fact," Ray went on, his arm settled around her bare waist, his fingers cupping her ass around the plug, "driving over here last night I passed a nice little brick colonial with a *For Sale* sign out front. Two streets over. On Sycamore, right by the park bridge."

Sycamore. James ran past that bridge every morning of his life.

"What is that, five minutes on foot?" Ray dipped his head and kissed Jenna on the mouth — slow and warm, a boyfriend's kiss — and then lifted his small sharp eyes over the top of her head and held James's across the kitchen. "Picture it, Blondie. Me strolling down the sidewalk at eight on a Sunday in my robe and slippers with a travel mug, waving at your neighbors over their lawnmowers on the way to your side door. Hell. Clear out

that top drawer upstairs so I can keep some clothes here. Give me a key. I won't even have to pack a bag."

She let out a small startled breath against his chest. Her bare fingers curled in his chest hair. She glanced toward the hall and the stairs. "A *drawer*?" A nervous laugh. "Ray, slow down. You'd be five minutes away. You don't need a drawer in our bedroom if your house is two streets over."

"Saves me carrying a toothbrush back and forth when I stay over," Ray said fondly. His thumb drifted from the gold chain up to the bruise. His eyes never left James. "And it lets everybody in the house know which side of the bed is mine on the weekends. Tell me you don't want me walking in that side door every time you get lonely."

With her rings in the soap dish three feet away and another bead of him sliding down her calf, Jenna looked up into his small sharp eyes, and in one flash she saw it. Ray's black toothbrush in the cup beside hers in the master bath. His folded shirts in the top drawer. Ray on a stool at this island on a Tuesday night while she cooked, his big hand on the back of her thigh. And as she pressed her breasts tighter against his ribs and put her cheek to his chest, her own real laugh came up out of her — the bubbling, sleepy Sunday-morning one. She heard how warm it sounded. She tipped her chin up and pressed her lips to his skin.

"Five minutes away?" she murmured, smiling against his collarbone. "God, you'd be over here every night. I'd never get any work—"

A deafening *CRACK* exploded into the yellow drywall three feet from Ray's head, caving the paper face into the studs

and splashing warm black coffee in a wide fan across the paint and Jenna's shoulder.

A dozen jagged white shards rained across the granite and skittered over the tile as James's empty right hand came down shaking at his side.

Jenna shrieked. She stumbled two steps back from the island, snatched her flannel off the floor by the stove, and clutched it bundled against her breasts — which left her hips and thighs bare in the sun, the silver plug still seated between her cheeks, Ray's come shining down the inside of her leg. The smell of spilled coffee and fresh semen now hung in the air together.

Ray flinched half a step back toward the stove — naked, his mug still in his hand, his pale gut jumping, his wet half-hard cock swinging against his thigh — and his head snapped around as a piece of white glaze slid past his foot. His hand shook hard enough that coffee slopped over the rim onto his knuckles. His small eyes were wide. He stared at James's fists, and then at the caved-in drywall bleeding dark roast.

"Get the fuck out of my house!"

It ripped out of James at full volume, hoarse, loud enough to rattle the glass in the cabinet doors. His eyes were on Ray.

"James — what are you *doing*?" Jenna had gone white. She backed against the island with the flannel crushed to her chest.

Ray looked at the dent in the wall for one more second. Then his shoulders settled. His mouth twisted into a scoff, and he shook his head with a short laugh.

"Jesus Christ, relax, James." He set his mug down on the counter. "What the hell's the matter with you? You've been sitting in your little chair with a hard-on all weekend, and she's

walking into Meridian tomorrow with my mark on her neck. Figured you'd be grateful."

"Get out!" James took two fast steps toward him, sneakers crunching through the shards. **"Put your fucking clothes on and get out of my house right now!"**

Ray held his eyes for two seconds — measuring the distance, measuring the shake in James's shoulders — and then raised one thick palm in mock surrender.

"Alright, alright. Keep your shirt on." He stepped over the puddle of James's robe on the tile and walked out through the archway into the living room.

From the living room came the rustle of cloth, the rasp of a zipper, the scrape of dress shoes, a phone sliding into a pocket. In the kitchen James and Jenna stood six feet apart with the broken mug between them. The only sound was coffee dripping off the baseboard. Less than two feet from her elbow, her rings sat untouched in the soap dish. She stared at the gouged wall with her jaw locked. James kept his eyes on the white streak drying on her thigh.

Then Ray came back in with his shirt buttoned wrong and his sport coat over one arm. He crossed toward the island and reached for Jenna's chin.

"Don't," James said.

Ray's hand stopped an inch from her face. For a second nobody moved. Then he let it drop and smiled, the closing smile, and looked at Jenna instead of touching her.

"Settle your husband down, Blondie. Call me when he's got his head screwed back on."

She was looking at the hole in the wall.

Ray walked down the front hall, and the front door clicked shut behind him.

By the time Ray turned the Buick onto Sycamore, the coffee on his shirt cuff was already stiffening, and his right hand was still shaking on the wheel.

Fifty-three was the wrong age for a shot of adrenaline at nine in the morning. His waistband bit into his gut. His pulse was thick in his neck, and there was a sour taste of coffee and copper at the back of his tongue. The heater blew the smell of her up off his fingers and his lap — jasmine, and the musk of her — and for the first time since November the smell didn't settle him.

He'd been in plenty of rooms where a man lost his temper. Usually you saw the shoulder drop before the swing. The kid hadn't given a single tell. One second he was standing by the toaster holding the mug in both hands the way he'd been told, and the next it went into the studs three feet from Ray's ear hard enough that Ray felt the wind of it. And when he'd reached for her on the way out, the kid had said one word, and Ray's own hand had stopped. He couldn't remember the last time his hand did that without asking him. He'd kept his eyes on Ray's throat until the door latched. And Jenna, an inch from his hand, had been cold as a tile, staring at that hole in the wall like a woman who'd heard a roof beam crack.

On the left, just before the park bridge, the brick colonial sat behind its *For Sale* sign in the frosted grass. Last night in the headlights it had been the funniest joke in Ohio — five minutes from James Whitfield's back door, close enough to stroll over on a Sunday, have the man's wife over the island, and walk

home by kickoff. In the flat morning sun it looked like the exact moment a salesman got greedy and talked right past the close.

At the light on Elm he tossed his phone onto the passenger seat.

The screen stayed black.

For four months everything he'd done had rested on one certainty: *James adjusts.* Push the husband past a line, give him ten seconds to choke on it while his cock overrules his pride, and he sits down in whatever chair you point at and swallows his tongue while his wife swallows a bigger cock.

This morning the chair broke. Ray sat at the intersection with his fingers cramped around the top of the wheel and felt a cold knot tighten behind his ribs. What he'd told Jenna three weeks ago at his kitchen table was the version where he'd offered her husband a clean choice. The rest of it was on James Whitfield's phone, inside a house Ray had just been thrown out of.

The light turned green. A pickup behind him tapped its horn. Ray's thumb hit the wheel once, hard, and then he signaled and merged onto the arterial toward the highway. "Talked right past the close, you dumb bastard," he told the windshield.

Until that black screen lit up, he had no lever to pull and not the faintest idea what was happening in the room he'd just left.

Black coffee dripped off the yellow baseboard onto the tile, one slow drop at a time. The refrigerator motor kicked on.

White fragments littered the floor between the stove and the island. Jenna stood barefoot beside the stone with her damp hair still clipped up, the flannel clutched against her

breasts, Ray's second load of the morning cooling down the inside of her thigh. Uneven color climbed from her collarbones to the plum-dark mark under her jaw.

She looked from the broken plaster to James, six feet away in his running jacket.

"*Now* you throw a mug at the wall?" Her voice came out high and sharp. "*Now* you act like a husband? After four months of sitting in a chair with your hand in your pants?"

His right hand was still tingling from the throw. "You didn't seem to want a husband last night."

"Don't you dare put last night on me." She took a step and her bare foot crunched a flake of glaze. "You let him sit on our couch. You let him into our bed. You opened the blinds onto the Dentons' for him, you brought him a warm washcloth and wiped his cock so he could put it back in me, you carried your pillow down the hall without one word — and *now*, because he says the word Sycamore, you put a mug through the drywall?"

"I brought the washcloth because he told me to, and you lay there in his belt and watched me do it," James said, his voice raw. "Right after you left the side door off the latch and ambushed me in my own living room."

"Because I was waiting to see if you had a floor!" She stepped up to the island, her eyes dry and bright. "I was waiting to see how far you'd let that man go before you finally opened your mouth and told me the truth."

James went still. He'd picked the broken handle of the mug up off the counter without noticing; it was wedged in his fingers.

"What truth."

She laughed — short and ugly.

"You know I wasn't with Diane three weeks ago," she said, watching his face. "You know I went to Ray's apartment. What you don't know is why. In January, on our couch, Ray said I should have worn the anniversary set *you* bought me. I never told Ray you bought me that lingerie. I only ever wrote it down in one place — in the texts to my husband from that hotel room in November."

The blood went cold in his hands. He thought of last Tuesday morning: Jenna on her toes by the front door in her trench coat, kissing his cheek on her way to the car. Already knowing every word.

She knew.

"I sat at his table and made him show me his phone," she said. "He took my phone for thirty seconds at the opening dinner at the conference and switched your contact names."

"Jenna, let me—"

"Every text I answered across both nights was him pretending to be you." Her free hand came down flat on the marble. "And when I asked him about the splice Anand found on the first video from the conference, he said he'd cut about ninety seconds off the front. The part where you *hesitated* before you started touching yourself. He said he cut it out of *mercy*. And I know what he sent you at 5:52 the morning I flew home."

Her voice broke on the time.

"He told me he gave you a choice. Tell me the truth — that I'd been tricked by the man I filed against after Dallas — or clean my phone while I slept and be the husband who asked for it. And you picked the lie so you could get laid."

"You think that's what happened," James said.

"You met me at the gate in the blue shirt I bought you and let me *thank* you!" she fired back. "You let me sit in that mediation in January and call myself a flirt and call you insecure, when the whole thing started with him stealing my phone. Every *I love you* since the airport. Every condom. Every lie at that sink when you came back from Erie and swore Ray only called to ask if you were comfortable with Dayton. I tore up my own Dayton lie at that sink because I refused to be Laura Reeves, and you stood right there and kept lying because you wanted to watch him fuck me. That's what last night was, James. I wanted to see what it would finally take to make lying cost you more than telling me."

She stopped, chest heaving under the flannel, waiting for him to fold.

James's thumb found the jagged edge of the handle and pressed until it bit. He set it down beside the toaster. And a short, ugly breath of laughter came out of his nose — a sound he hated the second he heard it.

Her eyes widened. "What is *funny* to you right now?"

"He told you he gave me a choice." His voice was shaking. "He told you he cut out my *hesitation*. Out of *mercy*. And you believed him?"

"He showed me the thread on his screen, James!"

"You want to know what he cut off that first video?" He came to the island and braced both hands on the marble so she wouldn't see them shake. "I called you that night at ten-thirty. The call you've picked up every trip for seven years. It rang into nothing, because my number was sitting on silent under some other contact. I opened the laptop at almost eleven because I

was worried about you, and I saw my wife on her knees in our anniversary lace with Ray Vogler in her mouth."

Her lips parted. Her arms locked around the flannel.

"It wasn't hesitation." His voice went rough. "I went cold. I thought I was watching you cheat on me because you wanted to. I said your name out loud at my desk — you mustn't have heard me. My hand went out to shut the laptop and stopped halfway. That's what he cut. He overwrote the original so it starts after my hand dropped. Me already hard. The part where I came before he did, he left in."

"You—" Her voice went to a whisper. "You were calling out to me? You reached to close it?"

"Yes."

Her hand came up over her mouth. She took a half-step back, and her heel bumped the cabinet.

"Wait here," James said.

He walked out toward the stairs. She yanked the flannel shut across her breasts, shoved two buttons through the wrong holes, and followed him to the bottom of the stairwell as he took the steps two at a time.

"Even if he cut that out, you still cleaned my phone while I slept!" she called up after him. "You still took the lie!"

"I'm getting my phone," he said from the landing, unlocking it with his thumb on the way back down.

She backed into the kitchen ahead of him. When she reached for his sleeve by the stove he said, "Don't touch me," and slammed the phone face-up on the marble hard enough to crack the case.

She crossed her arms over the misbuttoned flannel and wouldn't look at the screen.

"That morning, after I'd watched him hold you down on the second night while you begged him to pull out, he sent me the two options," James said, scrolling. "I called him. I told him I was going to the police and I was telling you everything before your flight. And on that call he walked me through what the police would see."

"What would they see?"

"The texts. And that cut video — you on your knees in 914, and me at my desk getting off from the first frame. Everyone at Meridian. Our families. Or I could clean your phone and meet you at the airport and let you believe we'd done it together, and you'd come home whole." His thumb stopped. "Nine days later he texted me that he'd recorded the call."

"*Stag and vixen* was your word, James!" she cut in. "Four nights after I got home you came to bed and gave it a name. A whole fantasy where you were the husband who sent his wife out and took her home again. You fucked me every night for a week and a half while I whispered about him in your ear. Don't tell me that was to save my career."

"I made up a word so I could look in the mirror without throwing up," James said. "Yes. I got hard. I hated every second that it worked. That's why we sat at this table and swore *never again*."

"And then you invited him to dinner in January! He told me the dinner, the red dress, Dayton — all of it was you—"

"Read the screen." He shoved the phone two inches toward her. "He pitched you that dinner, and you brought it home to me. I saw what he was doing and texted him that Saturday afternoon. Read what he sent back."

She looked down. At the top of the thread, under Ray's number, James's message in lowercase:

> *i know what you're doing ray. you can come to dinner. nothing else happens. don't push anything saturday.*

Fifty-three minutes later, Ray:

> *You are going to be a gracious host. Help me get her warmed up. You get in the way of anything I say or do, you cancel, you are weird in any visible way, and I drop everything on her Monday morning. I still have our phone call, James. I still have the texts. No clever moves. Host.*

The breath went out of her. She read it twice. Her head came up.

"He threatened to drop it on me, and so you just — *hosted*? You poured his wine and sent me upstairs to get out of my jeans for him instead of warning me in our own hallway?"

"Warning you at seven o'clock on a Saturday meant handing you everything with him sitting on our couch," James said. His voice cracked. "Keep reading."

He scrolled down to the Wednesday after the dinner. "The plugs. When you told me about Dayton at the sink, you said you gave him the ass I trained for us. Look who told me to buy them."

Ray, gloating about James's face when his finger went into her at dinner, how she'd pushed back instead of pulling away — and then a shopping list.

She just needs someone to get her ready. Plugs. Start small. Graduated set.

Thirty seconds later, James:

stay the fuck away from her
thats mine. not yours. dont fucking talk to me about her body

She gripped the edge of the island. "He wrote the instructions," she whispered. "And that night you asked me—"

"Because if I didn't, he'd be the only man who ever touched you there, and I was stupid enough to think if we did it together it'd be *ours*." His thumb shook on the screen. He opened his voicemail and hit the speaker. "You caught me lying at the sink about the call before Dayton. This is what he actually left me. Right after you told him no at dinner."

Ray's voice came out of the phone tinny and flat, an ice machine humming in a hotel corridor behind him.

"James. Your wife's going to call you in about ten minutes. She's going to tell you I asked her to come to my room tonight. She said no at dinner. You should tell her yes. Here's why. Braddock's probationary window runs eight weeks. One piece of hallway gossip triggers a second review. Sandra pulls the file back out. Someone asks you, on the record, whether you encouraged your wife to have sexual contact with a vendor representative. Whether you suggested she go to his hotel room at a conference. Whether you sat in your own armchair and watched. Because I can make that meeting happen with a few rumors. People love to talk."

It clicked off.

"And the texts after," James said, swiping back. "Before you called me."

go fuck yourself ray. Ray laying out the easy version — she comes up in something pretty and gives him ten minutes with her mouth, and nobody ever sits in front of Sandra again. James calling him a piece of shit. Ray: the hard version is your wife finding out you've lied since the airport. And at the bottom:

> *The irregularity is real. Ask your wife — she ran the reconciliation herself. I just know when to surface things.*
>
> *it stops at the bj. nothing else. she keeps the outfit on the whole time. you dont push past what she offers.*
>
> *and ray. if it goes further than that — even an inch further — i blow this whole thing open... but you lose her, ray. forever. completely. and we both know thats the worst thing that could happen to you.*
>
> *She keeps the outfit on. She does what she wants with her mouth. Then she goes back to her room. Deal.*
>
> *Deal.*

When she reached the bottom her voice dropped into the cold, clipped one she used on the fourth floor for vendor reviews.

"*It stops at the bj. She keeps the outfit on the whole time.*" She looked up at him. "You negotiated my mouth by text, James. Ten minutes before I called you to ask what to do, you and Ray

Vogler were deciding what I was allowed to suck and what I'd be wearing. Like equipment you were leasing him for the hour."

His mouth went tight. "He had a gun to your career, Jenna. Drawing a line at your mouth and threatening to blow everything up if he crossed it was the only lever I had left."

"And when I called, you didn't say *he's threatening us*. You said *what if you went*. You were horny. And asked me to film it."

"Because the first thing you'd have asked was what he had on me!" He stabbed a finger at the screen. "Look at the line above. *The irregularity is real. I just know when to surface things.* He didn't take one impulsive swing in November and leave the rest to me. He moved to Columbus for you. You ran that Dayton reconciliation. Did that Friday-morning flag that stole our Saturday look like an accident to you?"

She stared at Ray's sentence and saw Diane's January email welcoming her onto the Ashford team — sitting in the middle of a trap Ray had built from the Cortec side out. And for one sick half-second, with his plug still in her and his load cooling on her thighs, heat pulled low in her belly at the size of it. That he'd moved cities and steered a whole client account onto her floor to get her under him.

Then nausea came down over it, cold and sour at the back of her throat.

Her legs went. She sat down hard on the stool beside the island and pressed her hand over her mouth. He'd played her in that beige apartment exactly the way he'd played her in Room 914. And she had thanked him. And spent three weeks torturing her husband on Ray Vogler's behalf.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "James. In his apartment he looked me in the face and swore he gave you a free choice. He

said everything after the hotel was you. I thought you *wanted—*"

"Stop."

James gripped the marble on either side of the cracked phone. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Don't you try that," he said, low and uneven. "Don't sit on that stool with his mark on your neck and his come running down your leg and pin four months on what Ray Vogler told you three weeks ago."

She flinched. "I didn't know about the texts—"

"What didn't you know the first night?" he said. "When I fixed your phone after the airport, I read the whole thread before I deleted it. He pushed you to the bar. He pushed you to invite him up in the anniversary lace. And when you wrote *just my hands, nothing else, nothing past that*, he agreed. In writing."

Her throat closed.

"Nobody texted you to suck his cock. You opened the door, took one look at it, and broke your own line in ten seconds. You got on your knees in the lace I bought you, you swallowed, and in the middle of it you picked your phone up off the nightstand and took a selfie with his cock on your cheek. Because you wanted to."

"I told you that myself last night," she said thinly. "On the couch."

"I've known it since the night you flew home!" he said. "Just like I know nobody blackmailed you into lifting your skirt at the bookshelf in your office the week where I was humiliated at the mediation, showing him our plug, begging to suck him, and knocking his hand away so you could swallow and kiss me goodnight ten hours later. His voicemail made me tell you to

go up to 714. It didn't pack the medium plug in your bag at six that morning."

"And when you came home from Erie I *told* you about Dayton!" she fought back. "And the office! While your lie was still working! We sat at this table and made a rule — you'd always know, before or not long after. And until three weeks ago, I kept it."

"Did you?"

He leaned across the island until his face was two feet from hers.

"The benefit, Jenna. A week before you went to his apartment. You didn't know a thing about the phone switch yet. As far as you knew I was still the husband who'd asked you on Thursday for a boring Saturday home by eleven."

She went rigid on the stool.

"You came down from Suite 14 with an eleven-minute voice memo of yourself gagging on him and jerked me off in the car into a rubber," he said, watching her pupils go wide. "And you told me you gave him your ass to keep your fertile week safe. Dead center of your week."

"James—" Barely air.

"Two o'clock that Sunday morning, while you slept, I opened your clutch on the dresser. The *Blondie* necklace was in it. The one I had to pretend I was seeing for the first time last night. With his come dried on the *B*."

A small strangled sound came out of her. Her hand flew to the gold at her throat.

"Then I picked your black underwear up off the bathroom floor. They were heavy, Jenna. Soaked from the inside. That doesn't come out the front of your underwear from anal. You

put a condom on me in that car and tied it off and dropped it in the cupholder and lied to my face about keeping your week safe — when you'd just let him fuck you bare."

The tears she'd held back all morning broke at once. She folded forward on the stool with both hands over her face. Four weeks. That same Sunday morning she'd climbed naked into his lap with Ray's night still between her legs and whispered *it's okay to want this* — and he'd gone dead still under her and asked nothing. Because he already knew.

"Tell me what happened in that suite." His hand came down on the marble beside her elbow. "Out loud. Without the car-ride version."

She lowered her wet hands, lifted her chin, and delivered it to his face the way she delivered a bad number in a review.

"I offered him my ass because I knew what week it was. He said no. He told me he'd been tracking my cycle on an app since November. And that after the meeting with Braddock he'd followed my car up 315 to a gas station in Powell and watched me take my coat off for a stranger two pumps over. And I was so sick and so thrilled at how badly he wanted me that I didn't walk out."

His jaw went slack. "He told you he was *following* you and tracking your *ovulation* — and you let him fuck you bare?"

"I put him in myself," she said, barely above a whisper. "At the end, he asked what if he stayed in this week. And for four seconds — four seconds, James, I was coming so hard I couldn't think — I begged him not to pull out. The first pulse went off inside me before I panicked and yelled *out, Ray, out* and shoved him off and he finished on my stomach."

The kitchen went silent except for the hitch of her breathing.

He backed up a step. His heel hit the lower cabinet and rattled the toaster. The color had gone out of his face.

"You begged him to get you pregnant at a client gala," he whispered. "While I was at the bar downstairs."

"For four seconds. I made him pull out. I swear I made him pull out." Her wet fingers caught the edge of the stone. "I didn't know what was happening to me. Ever since November something broke open in me and I kept telling myself it was for you — that it was what you wanted from that forum post—"

She shut her mouth a fraction of a second too late.

His eyes narrowed. "What forum post."

She closed her eyes. Tears squeezed through her lashes.

"Last March. Eight months before the conference. My phone was charging and I borrowed yours to look up the hours for that nursery on Morse Road, and you'd left a private tab open. A throwaway account. Writing about how badly you wanted to watch your wife be wanted. Consumed. Overwhelmed by another man wanting her."

Across the marble, his face went grey.

"I knew the way you write." She opened her red eyes. "I put your phone down and never said a word, and I thought about it every day for eight months while our bedroom was so quiet I thought you'd stopped wanting me. That's why I believed those texts. Not because I'm stupid. Because when my phone lit up in that lobby bar — *There's something I've been trying to say to you for a while. I think about watching you. With someone else* — I thought you were finally confessing the post I'd already read.

And I wanted you to look at me the way you used to so badly that I walked into that room for you."

Neither of them spoke. Neither of them reached for the cracked phone between them.

Then James shook his head, his eyes moving from her bare ring finger up to her neck.

"Room 914 was for me," he said roughly. "Maybe the first ten minutes of that dinner in January. Nothing since has been for me. And last night wasn't about that post or my floor."

"Do you know who sat down two stools from me at Bellini's last night? While you were feeding him off your fork and coming on his fingers under the tablecloth?"

She blinked. "No. Who?"

"Kevin Foss. Two desks down from me for three years. The Christmas party — the coat check — *if you ever get tired of the quiet guy with the spreadsheets*."

Her breath stopped. Her hand went to her mouth.

"Recognized you in the mirror in five seconds. *Holy shit, that's Jenna Whitfield.* Told the guy next to him he knew your husband right before he spotted me on the corner stool. My phone kept lighting up with your texts while the guy beside him asked, *That's your wife?*"

"Oh God, no." Her voice climbed. "James, he still drinks with half your partners, he knows Tom Brewer, he'll *tell* people—"

"When you two went down the hall, the bartender told the whole bar there was a single back there with a lock on the door and you weren't the first," he said right over her. "Foss sat there five minutes with his arms crossed, watching my face. You came out thirty seconds after Ray with your lipstick gone, and Foss

laughed and said you didn't get that from the short rib. When I got up to leave he blocked me, looked down at the front of my pants, and slid his card across the bar with his cell on the back. *She blew him in there, Whitfield. If it's a thing — call me. I'm in a lot better shape than that guy.*"

She bent forward until her forehead touched the cold marble. "Oh God. James—"

"And then you texted me from the lot that you'd kissed him on the cheek like a lady and watched him drive off, and you brought him in through our side door." His voice was shaking. "You told me in our bed last night you asked him to save up for nine days. Was that to test my honesty, Jenna?"

She lifted her head an inch off the stone. "James, it wasn't—"

"Did you beg him to empty nine days into your fertile pussy — in our bed, with nothing in the house — to teach me a lesson about lying?" he cut across her. "Did you look me in the eyes while you came and scream *te amo* at him because you were running a *test*?"

"He told me to say it—"

"Did you beg him to mark your neck this morning where all of Meridian will see it, and take off your rings, and bend over this island with his plug in you and beg him to breed you, laughing about a house on Sycamore — because you were punishing *me*?"

He gripped the edge of the marble. His voice dropped low.

"Or did you fall in love with the way a fat fifty-three-year-old vendor fucks you, and use my silence as your alibi so you never had to look in the mirror and call yourself a cheating wife?"

Her head came up. Her hair had fallen out of the clip in damp tangles. She opened her mouth to say *no* — that she despised him, that *te amo* was bedroom talk — and as she shifted on the stool the steel inside her pressed against her, a throb she couldn't sort into shame or heat, and the word stuck in her throat. Because at five o'clock this morning, in the dark, before she'd drifted back under, she had lain there full of him with her own voice echoing in her ears and terrified herself with the same question.

He watched her mouth stay open on nothing. She watched him take in the silence. The color went out of his lips.

"Then why were you hard, James?"

She didn't scream it. It came out low and shaking and terribly precise.

"Tell me that. If it was all extortion and you hated every second, why did you get hard every single time I gave you the worst version? In the armchair when he came in me on our couch. In this kitchen in your running tights, the morning my period came, when I told you I didn't take anything. Last night, at the foot of our bed, when he called you a wimp and a cuckold and had me suck you through a rubber while he fucked me bare — I *felt* you, James. You came in under a minute. I've spent four months watching you answer every awful thing we did like you were begging for more. How was I supposed to know it was blackmail when every night you showed me that losing me to him was what got you off?"

He held her eyes. The *stag* story he'd hidden behind since the airport was gone, and there was nothing in front of him.

"Because something in my head is fucked up!" His voice was hoarse; his hands were trembling on the stone. "I get hard

when he does it to you and it makes me want to throw up. I've hated myself every morning since November when I wake up and remember what I jerked off to. Yes, I wrote that post when we were barely touching each other. Yes, I get hard when you humiliate me with him. That doesn't mean I want my life burned down. Or my wife screaming *te amo* at another man in our bed. Or Ray Vogler buying a house on Sycamore and putting his clothes in my dresser. Whatever's wrong with me, this went ten miles past it. I want that man out of my house and out of my life."

He stopped, chest heaving under the nylon jacket, his hands braced on either side of the cracked phone. Across the kitchen the coffee had dried into a dull brown crust down the wall. Jenna stared up at him through her tears with her mouth trembling open and nothing left to defend herself with.

In the silence after, Jenna slid off the stool onto her bare feet, careful of the broken stoneware on the tile. Crying hard, she came around the corner of the island and reached for his forearm.

"James, please—"

He stepped back out of reach before her fingers touched his sleeve.

His eyes moved, deliberately, from the purple mark on her neck to the gold script in the hollow of her throat, and down past the hem of the bunched flannel to the inside of her thighs, where Ray had dried in a cloudy streak.

When he spoke, the shouting was gone. His voice was flat and cold as sleet.

"Take that necklace off," he said. "Be downstairs in twenty minutes. We're driving to CVS, because I'm not raising Ray Vogler's kid."

He put the cracked phone in his pocket and walked out toward the front hall without looking back.

"Okay," Jenna whispered to his back. Her voice broke on the second syllable. The only answer was his footsteps and the click of the hall closet.

Alone in the sunny kitchen with the smell of coffee and sex in the air, she let the flannel slide off onto the stool and reached behind her neck with both hands. Twelve hours ago Ray had hooked his thumb under that gold word in the dark and made her tell her husband she'd never once been Blondie for him, and the little letters had burned against her pulse like a coal. Now her fingers shook so badly it took three tries to open the clasp. The chain tangled in the damp hair at her nape and pulled three strands out by the roots before it came free. She hated the cold sting of losing it almost as much as she hated the thing itself. She dropped it in the junk drawer beside the refrigerator, behind the rubber bands and spare keys, and shoved the drawer shut.

At the sink, without anyone telling her to, she lifted her rings out of the soap dish and rinsed the dried film off them under the cold tap. Her fingers were swollen from crying, and the band caught on her knuckle and wouldn't go. She pumped a drop of dish soap onto her finger and twisted it over the joint until it sat in the pale dent where it belonged, and pushed the diamond on behind it.

When she bent to pick James's robe up off the tile, the plug shifted deep inside her, and nausea came straight up her throat. She'd stood through the whole fight with Ray's steel still in her.

She buttoned the flannel crookedly and carried the stained robe upstairs. The sun was still pouring through the open blinds onto the ruined bed. She yanked the cord and dropped the slats on the Dentons' window, and the room went to striped shadow. She rolled James's chair back down the hall into his office where it belonged.

She tore the wet fitted sheet off the mattress, breaking a nail on the elastic, and balled up the top sheet, the duvet, all four pillowcases, the washcloth, and the knotted condom inside James's robe. The pillowcase from his side reeked of Ray's skin. The March concrete bit the soles of her bare feet when she carried the whole bundle out to the black bin in the alley behind the garage and shoved it in.

Upstairs in the bathroom, the shower glass still held smeared cloudy prints of her breasts and palms. Before she turned the water on, she braced one hand on the tile, reached back, took hold of the base of Ray's plug, and pulled it slowly out. As the widest part stretched her and slipped free, she clenched once, greedily, on the empty space — a hot pulse straight from the kitchen island — and her stomach turned with self-disgust. She washed it twice in hot water and antibacterial soap until the metal burned her palms. She dried it on a tissue and held it over the open trash can.

Her fingers stayed closed around it.

Heart thumping, she walked into the bedroom, opened the bottom drawer of her nightstand, and pushed the plug all the

way into the back corner under an old cashmere scarf, and shut the drawer.

Under the scalding spray she washed her hair twice and scrubbed her skin, thinking there wasn't a room left in the house — the bed, the hall, the glass three inches from her face — that Ray hadn't put his hands on. When she wiped the fogged mirror, the mark stared back at her, dark and swollen against her scrubbed-pink skin.

She dressed in dark jeans and sneakers and a thick cream cable-knit turtleneck pulled up under her chin.

When she came downstairs at ten to ten, James was waiting in the driver's seat with the engine running. He'd already swept up the mug and wiped the coffee off the wall.

The ten minutes to the pharmacy on High Street passed in silence. Radio off. The heater fan ticking on low. He kept both hands on the wheel. She sat with her knees together and her ringed hand twisted in the hem of her sweater.

Outside the CVS he put the car in park and left it running. "Do you want me to go in?"

Her hand stopped halfway to the door handle. Even now, jaw locked, his first instinct was still to keep her from walking up to a counter alone. The first winter they dated, when she was twenty-two, he'd walked six blocks through slush at midnight to bring her ginger ale and a heating pad, and she hadn't even asked.

"No," she whispered. "I'll go."

In November, on the third morning of the conference, she'd walked three blocks to a CVS in the cold and swallowed this same pill alone in a parking lot, furious at Ray and sure she'd just saved her marriage. Today she stood in front of the

locked plexiglass case and pressed the call button. A teenage clerk in a red vest ambled over with a ring of keys. He looked at her swollen eyes, then at the turtleneck pulled up to her chin in the overheated store, and unlocked the case.

"Just the one?" His eyes flicked past her shoulder to the man sitting motionless behind the wheel of the idling sedan outside. "Fifty-two ninety-nine up front. You doing okay, ma'am?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Jenna said, in her crispest vendor-review voice, her face burning under the wool.

She didn't wait to get home. Before James had shifted out of park she tore the box open, pushed the single white tablet through the foil, unscrewed the half-empty water bottle in the console — beside the cupholder where the benefit-night condom had ridden home four weeks ago — and swallowed it in front of him. The chalky edge caught at the back of her throat. She forced it down with a second swallow, crumpled the box into the paper bag, and put the bag in her purse.

James watched her swallow. He gave one tight nod and backed out of the space.

That afternoon she made the bed with fresh white sheets, cracked the window an inch to the freezing air, and when she went to bed at ten she left the bedroom door wide open.

At ten-thirty she heard him turn off the downstairs lamps and come up.

She lay on her side of the clean sheets in the dark, heart hammering, watching the wedge of hall light in the doorway. His footsteps reached the top of the stairs, passed the open door without slowing, and went on down the hall.

The guest room door clicked shut.

A tear ran out of the corner of her eye into the pillowcase.

On Saturday night Ray had sent him to that room. Tonight Ray was gone and the bed was clean, and James had chosen it himself.

On Monday she wore a high-necked black silk blouse buttoned to the chin under a charcoal blazer, with concealer patted over the top edge of the mark in case the collar shifted. Ray was in Cleveland through Wednesday for Cortec's regional review — the only mercy on her calendar — and she kept her head down on the fourth floor and her office door shut.

In a glass conference room her collar shifted when she turned her head. A colleague's eyes landed on her throat and moved away. She fixed the collar in the reflection with her pulse hot under the concealer. Nobody said anything.

At 11:14 her phone buzzed beside her keyboard.

James settle down after his little tantrum?

She stared at the word *tantrum*, and Ray's voice from the Dayton voicemail played in her head: *People love to talk.* Her skin went cold. She'd watched that man read a room from across a conference table for three years. If one sentence on this screen sounded wrong to him, he'd know.

She typed, deleted it, and typed again.

He's fine. Embarrassed, sulking. Giving him a few days. Buried in Phase III decks, talk soon.

The dots came up almost at once.

That's a lot of words for fine.

Then: *What'd he say after I left? Exact words. I'll give him a ring tonight from the hotel. Man to man. Smooth it over. He always feels better when I'm nice to him.*

Her heart slammed so hard the silk collar felt like wire around her throat. Ray calling James in his current state.

Please don't call him. He's mortified, he'll just hang up on you and sulk another week. He said watching you play HGTV about Sycamore made him feel like an idiot. That's all. Still no floor.

A full minute ticked past on the corner of her monitor.

You're texting like you're in a deposition, Blondie.

She read her own message back above it. It wasn't how she talked to him. She hadn't talked to him like that since before Dayton.

He'd heard it in four lines.

The dots came up again. Went away. She knew what came next if she let him sit with it. He'd call, not James. He'd call her, right now, and she'd have to do it with her voice, and her voice was worse than her thumbs.

She got up and shut the blinds on the glass wall of her office. Then she sat back down and unbuttoned the black silk from the chin.

Four buttons. Five. The blouse fell open over the bra she'd put on that morning without thinking about who would see it, pale pink lace, the cups thin enough that her nipples showed dark through them. She was already tight against the lace. She told herself it was the air conditioning. She tipped her head to the right and licked her thumb and wiped the concealer off the mark below her jaw in two strokes, and there it was: purple going green at the edges, Ray's mark.

She held the phone up and found herself on the screen.

The light in the office was flat and grey and it didn't matter. Her own face looked back at her, flushed along the cheekbones, eyes darker than they should have been at eleven in the morn-

ing, the silk hanging open from her throat to her ribs. She hooked one finger in the left cup and drew it down until her breast spilled over the lace, full and pale, the nipple drawn tight and pink in the cold office air. She tilted the phone until the frame held the mark, the open blouse, the bared breast, the lanyard with her Meridian badge lying across her ribs. Her mouth was open a little. She closed it, and then she opened it again, because that was the face he liked.

It was a good picture. That was the worst part. She looked at the woman on the screen, the analyst with her badge on and her tit out and another man's bite on her neck, and something low in her pulled tight and warm, and she hated it and she didn't stop.

She typed with the phone still angled down her body.

Sorry. Diane was hovering. Better?

She sent it before she could think. The little whoosh sounded very loud with the door shut.

Then she sat there with her blouse open, her breast still out of the lace in the grey light, and looked at what she'd just done. One more picture on his phone. One more thing that said she wanted this. She'd done it to keep him from hearing her husband's voice break. She'd done it so James could have three more days in the guest room in peace. And she was wet. Sitting at her desk, at eleven on a Monday, with the fourth floor walking past the blinds, she was wet from taking it, and she couldn't make the two facts sit in separate rooms.

The dots came up at once this time.

Much.

Then: *Look at that mark on you. Tell Diane it's from your husband, see if she buys it.*

Then: *Leave him to you then. Thursday, Blondie.*

She pulled the lace back up. She buttoned the silk to her chin with fingers that weren't quite steady, found the concealer in her bag, and dabbed the mark out again in the dark reflection of her monitor. Her pulse was hot under it. She sat with her hands over her face for ten minutes.

For four months she'd hidden behind one story after another. What was on James's phone had stripped every one of them away and left a woman who had wanted another man's hands on her and used her husband's silence to pay for it. And she had just bought three days of quiet the only way Ray ever let anyone buy anything.

Monday night he walked past the open bedroom door again without slowing.

Tuesday morning she came down at six-forty in leggings and a cropped sweatshirt, twenty minutes early, to catch him after his run. He was at the counter in his damp black running tights, pouring coffee into a steel travel tumbler instead of the white stoneware mug Ray had drunk out of on Sunday, eating dry cereal standing up.

She stopped by the island and tucked her hair behind her ear and tried a smile. "Up before the sun. Those tights are still illegal on a weekday, by the way. You're going to cause a pileup on High Street."

It was their oldest Tuesday bit. For seven years it had made him blush by the coffeemaker.

His face stayed still. His eyes dropped once to her hand on the island — the gold back where the dent had been on Sunday — and went to the refrigerator handle. He finished chewing, rinsed the bowl, and screwed the lid onto the tumbler.

"Going in early," he said evenly. "Back around seven."

He walked past her to shower and left her standing in the kitchen with the dead joke on her lips. For the first time in their marriage, she couldn't make him look at her.

That night she stopped outside the strip of light under the guest room door and rested her fingertips on the wood. She thought of the boxes James had spent a weekend stacking in an Erie storage unit for Mike Reeves, and her stomach turned. Laura Reeves had cheated with her trainer in a gym parking lot. She hadn't brought him home and had her husband wipe his cock with a warm washcloth and sent him down the hall with his own pillow.

"James?" she whispered through the door. "I'm so sorry. You don't have to come out. I just wanted to say goodnight."

The click of laptop keys went on a few strokes and stopped. His voice came back level, polite, ten miles away. "Night, Jenna. Sleep well."

On her way back she stepped into his dark office. Streetlight fell across the oak desk he'd spent three summer weekends sanding by hand, rounding the front edge himself so it wouldn't snag the sleeves of her sweaters. The rolling chair was tucked neatly under it. Three nights ago Ray had sent him down the hall for that chair and pointed at the foot of their bed, and he'd sat in it and watched, and she'd stayed on Ray's cock and watched him obey.

In the bathroom she switched on the vanity light. In the mirror, the mark on her neck was going a mottled violet-green at the edges. On the counter below it, her travel case lay open with a fresh strip of James's extra-tight condoms in the mesh

pocket. On the floor beside the stool, her purse, with the crumpled CVS bag and the empty blister pack.

She gripped the cold edge of the sink and her vision blurred. It had always been condoms. She'd never once gone without, not with James, not with anyone before him. But at twenty-five, a year before the wedding, she'd tried to get them off condoms for good. The pill gave her three months of migraines so bad she threw up at the kitchen light. Then the IUD shifted and she bled for six weeks, until James carried her into the Riverside ER at two in the morning and held her hand for six hours beside the gurney and told her, *Never put another hormone in your body again, baby. We'll use condoms the rest of our lives. I just want you healthy.*

That was why it had stayed condoms. Every one of them, all those years, was him choosing her health over ever feeling her. And she had let Ray Vogler turn that into a joke — bragging on her knees in the suite that James went in a rubber and Ray went in bare, tying James's condom in a knot on Saturday night and setting it beside Ray's plug like a trophy — until James had to drive her to CVS and watch her swallow a massive dose of the exact hormones he'd spent their whole marriage keeping out of her.

A sob tore out of her over the basin. Ray didn't love her. Ray was weather — rough hands on her throat and a gravel voice saying *good girl* that switched her brain off, a man who'd burn her career and her house to the ground to own her. James was her life. James was the one who still got her stupid tongue-out, cross-eyed face across the island when nobody else was looking. Who'd swallowed four months of extortion and hu-

miliation in silence because he couldn't stand to watch the truth break her in half at an airport gate.

On Wednesday evening she stood at the stove for two hours making the herb-butter roast chicken she'd last made the Saturday after he came home from Erie, pressing compound butter and thyme from the garden under the skin, and she was so rattled she burned the side of her thumb on the oven rack and didn't feel it until it blistered.

He came in at seven-twenty. He stopped in the kitchen doorway for half a second at the smell.

"Made the chicken," she said from the island, trying to smile without crying. "It's still hot. I poured you a glass of red."

"Thanks." He left the wine where it was. He put a piece of breast and a spoonful of potatoes on a small plate and ate standing at the sink with his back half-turned to her, so he wouldn't have to sit across the table.

She watched the tight line of his shoulders while he ate over the sink like a stranger in a boarding house, and understood that she'd given him three days of space and every hour of it had carried him further off. One more week and there'd be nothing left to save.

She was not going to let Ray Vogler take her husband.

At ten o'clock on Wednesday night James came out of the hall bathroom in a grey t-shirt and boxers, drying his hands on a guest towel, and walked down the runner toward the spare room.

Jenna was standing in its doorway.

She'd washed the concealer off her neck and let her hair down, damp at the ends from the shower. In the narrow hall her smell reached him first — soap and shampoo and her own

warm skin, nothing else, every trace of anyone else scrubbed out of the house. She stood with her chin up and one hip cocked under the hall light in the plainest things she owned: a thin white ribbed tank with nothing under it, so it moved with her breathing, and low white cotton briefs riding high on her ass. Her throat was bare where the chain had been. The mark on the left side of her neck had faded to green and yellow and she'd left it uncovered. Her rings were on.

He stopped a pace short on the runner. His eyes went down the front of the tank once, and heat crawled up the back of his neck, and his cock started to fill against his thigh. Three days of ice and it answered her anyway. He hated it for that. He made his eyes go back to her face.

"Did you need the charger?" he said flatly, stepping past her into the room. "It's on the dresser."

"No." Her voice broke on it. She followed him in and stepped around in front of him at the foot of the narrow bed so he'd have to look at her. Tears were pooling on her lower lashes. "James. Please don't shut the door on me tonight. Just listen to me for one minute."

He stood by the bedpost with the towel in his fist. "You've got a minute. Say it."

"I've spent three days walking around this house looking at what I did to you." The tears spilled over. "You were right on Sunday. Every word."

His jaw shifted. His eyes went to the open door. "Sunday's done, Jenna."

"It's not done." She stepped closer. "After November something woke up in me that scared me to death, and instead of owning it or stopping it, I used you. Every time I wanted to

cross a line — putting his chain on, bringing him into our bed while you sat in your chair — I told myself it was your kink, or your punishment for lying. So I never had to look at how selfish I was being."

She wiped her cheek with the back of her ringed hand, then laced her fingers through his free hand so he couldn't pull away without dragging her with him. When her chest rose on a sob, the tank shifted over her bare nipples, and his cock throbbed and his face stayed stone.

"You sat beside my gurney when I was twenty-five and held my hand while I bled," she whispered. "You wore a condom every single time for me so I'd never be in pain, and I let that man walk into our house and turn it into a joke to humiliate you with. Tonight I watched you eat my chicken standing over the sink so you wouldn't have to sit across from me, and I couldn't breathe. Please don't sleep in this room anymore."

He looked down at her wet face and at the gold band on the hand holding his. Every night of their marriage she'd stolen food off his plate at that table. His throat closed, and his fingers tightened on hers.

"Jenna, I don't know how we—"

She let go of his hand and went down on her knees on the rug.

"Don't." He dropped the towel on the bed and caught her shoulders. "Get up. We don't have to do this."

"I want to," she whispered, looking up at him through the tears.

His fingers dug into her collarbones. "Four nights ago I sat in a chair and asked him for your mouth," he said, low and raw.

"And when he let me have it, you put a rubber on me while he had you bare. Get up."

"There's nobody to ask." She took his wrists and pressed his hands off her shoulders. "There never was. It's yours, baby. It was always yours. Let me."

His hands went slack at his sides.

She hooked her thumbs in his waistband and drew his boxers down his thighs, and his cock came free against her breath, already rising. She wrapped her ringed hand around it — the gold band bright against the dark hair at his base — and felt him pulse in her palm. He smelled like soap from the hall bath and his own skin. She leaned in and brushed her parted lips over the head, where a bead was already welling, and looked up at him.

"I want you in my mouth," she whispered against him. "Just you."

She took him in. Bare.

He gasped and his back hit the wall beside the bedpost. Since Sunday he'd said one sentence to himself over and over — *if you touch her, you're back in that chair* — and the instant her tongue flattened against him with nothing in between, his hands were in her hair and his hips had come forward and the sentence was gone.

It was nothing like Saturday. Saturday had been dull pressure through squeaking latex while another man's sounds filled the room. This was heat, wet and close and total, her tongue dragging slow up the underside of him, her lips sealing behind the ridge, and the soft obscene sound of her sucking hard enough to hollow her cheeks. He hadn't felt it in so long he'd forgotten what it was.

"God, Jenna," he groaned.

She kept her eyes on his face while she worked him, swirling her tongue around the head, tasting him. She pulled back to the tip with a wet pop, a thread of spit from her lip to him, and stroked him slick in her fist.

"I missed this," she whispered. "I missed tasting you. Let me take all of you."

She opened her throat and went down until her nose was in his hair and he was all the way in her mouth, her throat working around the head in thick wet swallows, and he made a sound he didn't recognize. Her free hand slid up the back of his thigh and cupped his ass and pulled him deeper.

"Fuck," he choked. "Right there."

When she came up for air her chin was shining and her lips were swollen. She dragged her open mouth up and down his length, and took the head back in.

"Talk to me," she whispered against him. A tear slid off her lashes onto his knuckles. "Don't go quiet on me. Say something."

"Too good." His hands guided her head; he moved in slow, deep strokes over her tongue.

She hummed so he felt it all the way down. Let him have her throat twice more, until her eyes streamed and spit ran over his fingers, and pulled off gasping as his thumb brushed her cheek.

"If you keep doing that I'm going to come standing up," he said roughly. "Get up. Not in here. Our bed."

He pulled her up under the arms, kicked his boxers off, and kissed her hard — tasting himself and her tears on her tongue,

his wet cock pressed against the cotton of her tank. When he broke for air she laughed against his mouth, shaky.

He caught her wrist and pulled her down the hall. Halfway there he couldn't wait. He backed her into the wall, shoved both hands down the back of her briefs to grip her bare ass, and lifted her onto her toes and ground against her through the tank.

"Couldn't even make it down the hall," she gasped into his neck.

"Shut up and hold on," he said against her jaw, and walked her backward through the bedroom door and kicked it shut.

In the amber light of her lamp the bed was made up in clean white sheets. The blinds were down. James looked once at the mattress where Ray had been, and something hardened in his face, and he backed her to the edge of it and pulled the tank over her head in one motion. Color was already spreading from her throat across her breasts, her nipples tight and dark. He gripped her ass in both hands and hooked his thumbs in the briefs.

He drew the cotton down her thighs and it caught on her heel, and he had to stop and work it free one-handed while she watched him.

"Smooth," she said.

"I'm out of practice."

She fell back on the sheets laughing, a little wet-eyed, while he pulled his shirt over his head. She let her knees fall open in the lamplight, and he stopped.

He wasn't looking at her the way she'd been looked at all week. He was finding what was different. Her toenails were chipped. Every Sunday night for seven years she'd painted

them on the bathroom floor with the door open, singing badly, and this Sunday she hadn't. Then the rest of it reached him all at once: the white cotton on the floor, soaked through from kneeling in front of him in the guest room; her swollen and shining under the lamp; the warm smell of her rising over the clean sheets, nothing in it but her and what his own cock in her mouth had done to her twenty minutes ago.

"You didn't do your toes," he said.

"I've been a little busy ruining our marriage."

Half a second went by.

"I know," James said. "I was there."

He came over her, his weight between her knees. Up close his eyes went to the fading mark on the left side of her neck, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. He put his mouth on the clean right side instead, hard, on her pulse, and then took her left nipple into his mouth and pulled on it with his teeth until she arched.

"James, please." Her fingers were in his hair. "I need you in me. Hurry."

His cock brushed slick against her hip, and her hand went out sideways off the mattress the way it had gone out every time for as long as she'd known him — toward the top drawer of her nightstand and the box of extra-tight condoms. Six inches above the bottom drawer where Ray's plug was hidden under a scarf. Shame pricked her skin as her fingers found the brass knob.

James saw her hand move. And he saw Saturday: the knot beside the lamp, her voice saying *that's where yours goes.* She'd pulled the drawer an inch open when his left hand caught her wrist in midair and pinned it to the sheet beside her head.

With his right he slammed the drawer shut. *Bang.*

"James?" Her eyes went wide. "You didn't — you don't have one on—"

"No rubber." His voice was rough and shaking. He caught her other wrist and pinned both of them to the pillow and wedged his knees between her thighs and spread her.

Her pulse hammered under his hands. James had never once been inside her bare. Bare had only ever been Ray.

"James, it's still my week—" Her heart was kicking. "It's too close, we've never—"

"I know."

He didn't move. He held her wrists in the pillow and let her feel him: the bare head of him resting right against her, hot, slick from her own mouth on the guest room rug, just touching. Not pushing. Waiting.

"Tell me no," he said.

She opened her mouth and nothing came out.

She'd never seen him like this. He had her pinned under him in their bed, his jaw tight, his eyes on hers, wanting her so badly his arms were shaking. And the danger of it didn't scare her off. It made her ache. She felt herself go wetter against him, and watched him feel it too.

"That's not a no," James said quietly.

"No," she whispered, and lifted her hips the inch he'd left her. "It's not. Please, James. Don't make me wait anymore."

"*Oh*—"

It broke out of her. She opened around him with nothing in the way, no dull drag of rubber, just the smooth hot skin of him sliding all the way in.

"Jenna. God." He watched himself sink into her until his hips met hers. "I can feel you. Bare."

"I can feel all of you." Her heels locked high on his back. He dropped his forehead to hers and pinned her wrist again.

He held still and swallowed against her temple. All those years of latex, and now he could feel every flutter of her around him, every wet pulse against the ridge of the head. A bitter thought cut through him — that Ray had had this first, in a hotel room in November — and then the heat of her squeezing him drove it out.

"You're so hot," he whispered into her mouth, rolling his hips in a slow grind that made them both shudder. "My bed. Just us."

"Feel me holding you." Tears ran down her temples. "I wanted you like this. Fuck me, James."

He drew back almost to the tip — three days in a narrow bed and four months in a chair behind it — and drove home.

The sound of it filled the room, the wet sound of skin leaving skin and meeting again, louder than anything they'd ever made through latex. He shifted his grip on her wrists and fucked her hard and fast, grinding down on her clit at the bottom of every stroke, her bare breasts crushed under his chest, sweat and sex rising between them.

"This is our bed," he panted in her ear. "You're mine. Say it."

"I'm yours." Her hips came up to meet every stroke. "I'm your wife, James. God, you're so hot inside me. I missed you so much."

"Hold on to me." The headboard started knocking the wall.

"Yes, harder." She arched into him. "God, feeling you without a rubber — it's so much better than—"

He let go of her wrists, clapped his hand over her mouth, and stopped dead inside her.

His chest heaved against hers. His wedding band pressed into her bottom lip. He stared down into her eyes with his jaw locked.

"Don't," he said, low, an inch from her face. "Not his name. Not a comparison. Not one word about him in this bed. You hear me?"

Over his hand, her eyes went wide. Mortification dropped through her stomach — for four months she'd whispered Ray's name into the dark of this bed to make James come — and right behind it a hot jolt went to her clit, because he had never once taken her mouth like that. She nodded hard against his palm, and she clenched around him so tight they both heard it.

"Eyes on me." He eased his hand off her lips and held her jaw. "Say my name."

"James." Her freed hands gripped his arms. She held his eyes. "James. Just you. Don't stop."

He kissed her hard, swallowing her gasp, braced both hands on her shoulders, and drove into her again at full speed.

The headboard took up its knock faster than before. She looked up at the fierce concentration in his face, the damp grey at his temples, and her throat tightened. *This.* Her husband over her like he'd tear the house down before he let anyone else touch her. This was what she'd been starving for the eight months before the conference — standing in the kitchen with his phone in her hand, reading what he'd written to strangers because he couldn't say it to her.

"James, yes, right there," she panted, locking her heels behind his back, lifting off the sheet to meet him, squeezing him.

And inside the heat of loving him, she noticed the difference anyway. She didn't want to. Bare and driving as hard as he could, James was her size. His lean weight on his elbows left her room to breathe. He fit inside her. There was none of the brutal stretch, none of the two hundred and seventy pounds pinning her into the white quiet where she couldn't think or decide anything. She hated herself for noticing the gap, and drove her hips up harder to bury the thought.

The orgasm coiled tight and sudden behind her navel, and as it came, the word she screamed every time she came on a bare cock rose into the back of her throat on its own. *Papi.* She bit down on the inside of her lip until she tasted copper and trapped it behind her teeth.

Terror went through her right in the middle of the wave. Even here — her husband inside her bare for the first time in their lives — at the peak she'd reached for Ray. And the shame of swallowing it made her clamp down on James even harder as it tore through her.

"I'm coming — James — yes!" She clamped her thighs around his ribs and grabbed his ass with both hands and hauled him deep, bucking up into him, wet and spasming around him. "Come in me, baby. Please. Give me all of it."

"Jenna — you're squeezing me so hard—"

Above her, his lungs sawing, he strained to finish on her alone. On her heat around him and her voice begging him in their bed. His rhythm stuttered at the edge. Sweat dripped off his brow onto her collarbone, and the peak slid half an inch out of reach. *Come on,* he thought, panic spiking. *She's right here. She's begging you. Come on.*

And behind his shut eyes, against everything he'd just forbidden out loud, Sunday morning cut in for two seconds. *Jenna bent over the kitchen marble with her rings in the soap dish, holding herself open around the silver plug while Ray's dark cock went into her bare from behind, looking straight into James's eyes and begging to be bred.*

He hated himself so much it burned his throat. It was what tipped him over.

"Jenna — mine — *inside you*—" He drove all the way in and came with a raw, broken groan into her neck. His cock jerked inside her, pulse after hot pulse, nothing in the way. She gasped at it — the strange new warmth of her husband filling her — and held him in with her heels and her arms while it seeped out around him onto the clean sheet.

"I feel you," she whispered shakily. "All of it. I love you, James. I love you."

When it drained out of him he collapsed onto her chest, shaking, and kept his eyes squeezed shut and his face buried in her neck so she couldn't see it. His hand twisted into the sheet beside the closed drawer. His stomach turned over.

"I love you too," he whispered into her skin, with the kitchen island still burning behind his eyelids.

On Thursday morning, for the first time since Saturday, James woke on his own side of the bed with Jenna's head on his chest.

When the six-thirty alarm went he reached to slap it off and brushed the warm skin of her bare shoulder instead. She stirred against his ribs and blinked up at him in the pale gold light, at two days of stubble on his jaw.

"You stayed," she whispered, thick with sleep. Her fingers slid across his sternum and hooked lightly over the gold band on his hand.

"The mattress in the spare room has a spring right at the third vertebra," James said, his thumb at the corner of her mouth. "Purely a lumbar decision."

A real laugh came out of her, her eyes crinkling. She tipped her chin up and kissed the underside of his jaw. "My hero. Are you sore?"

When her lips touched his skin his thumb had stopped at the corner of her mouth. He swallowed once against a sudden flash of the kitchen island he'd come to behind his shut eyes ten hours ago, and let the breath out through his nose.

"I'm thirty-six, Whitfield, not eighty," he murmured. But when she slid her bare thigh across his hip under the sheet they both felt the tender, unfamiliar ache of last night and went quiet — her cheek over his heartbeat, her fingers laced tight in his, as if neither of them wanted to let the morning start.

At seven-thirty she came downstairs in high-waisted olive trousers and a fitted black mock-neck that covered the fading mark on her throat. On the yellow wall behind the trash can, a neat four-inch square of white spackle — James had smoothed it on with a putty knife Tuesday evening — waited for primer.

He carried two mugs to the little wooden table. Her fingers brushed his when she took hers. He sat down across from her in the sun.

"I've been thinking about how we do today," he said. "We end it. We block his number on both phones. And if he tries anything — anything — I take the voicemail and the texts straight to Braddock. Or the police."

She set her mug down and looked at him, steady and clear.

"James," she said softly. "We can't go to Braddock. And we can't go to the police."

"Why the hell not? I have him on tape threatening us."

"Because of what we already told them." She held up one finger. "The mediation. I sat in front of Sandra and Diane and said I was a flirt and you were insecure, and it was all a misunderstanding between consenting adults." A second finger. "Six weeks ago. Braddock's office. He had pictures of me sucking Ray's cock out on his desk, and you looked him in the eye and said it was your idea. *Mine.* And I said I chose it. That's on the record. Twice. In front of the people who sign my paychecks."

He opened his mouth. She kept going.

"So now we walk back into Braddock's office and say, actually, we were being blackmailed the whole time. What does he see? He sees a couple who told him one story under oath, practically, and now have a different one. He sees a husband who negotiated by text what his wife was allowed to do with her mouth. And then he hears the voicemail." She shook her head. "Play it cold, James. It sounds like our little game went bad and now we want to punish the third guy."

"It *was* a threat."

"I know it was. I'm telling you how it sounds." Her voice stayed low. "Braddock doesn't have to decide who's lying. He doesn't have to believe anybody. He just pulls me off Ashford, calls Meridian, and makes the whole thing go away. And the police?" She almost laughed. "The first thing they do is ask for the files and evidence, and god knows Ray will give it to them. The mediation where I said it was consensual. Braddock, telling them what you told him in his office. Ray, with his lawyer, say-

ing we came to him. Who do you think Braddock backs — his own top salesman, nine years running, or the couple who already lied to him once? It's our word against our own word, James. And it doesn't stay in a police station. It ends up in a courtroom, and on the fourth floor, and at your office, and on my mother's phone. We don't win that. We just get dragged through it in public."

He stared at the grain of the table. His shoulders were rigid.

Then his hand came down on the wood, knuckles first. "Fine. No Braddock. No cops. We just cut him off. We tell him Sunday was the end, and he stays away from this house. I called his bluff once. He folded."

"He folded because he still thought he was going to get me." She leaned across and caught his forearm. "James. When has that man ever taken no? I told him to pull out, the second night in that hotel, and he held my hips and finished anyway. You made him promise in Dayton it would stop at my mouth, and he was in my ass inside the hour. He doesn't stop. He just finds another way in, and you never see which way until he's already through it."

"Then let him try. What's he going to do, show Braddock the same pictures again?"

Jenna stopped.

He watched the color go out of her cheeks. Her eyes dropped to her coffee, and her thumb went dead still on the mug.

"There's something else on his phone," she whispered.

His eyes narrowed. "The photo? The one you sent me from his bed?"

"No." So low he had to lean in. She lifted her eyes to his face. "Three weeks ago. That Monday morning, right before I came home and kissed you in this kitchen. Ray said every time I'd ever been on camera, it had been for you. He said he wanted one that was his."

James stopped breathing. "Jenna. What did you do."

"I was so angry at you. I'd just spent the whole night believing you handed me to him at the airport." Shame burned up her neck, but she didn't look away. "He started recording. He had me get on my knees on his kitchen floor with my top off and his chain on, and he told me to tell the camera what I was about to do and why. And I looked into it and said — word for word — *I'm going to suck Ray Vogler's cock. In his kitchen. On a Monday morning. My husband is at home right now, and I'm here, and I'm going to swallow everything this man gives me. Because I'm his. Because my husband gets a performance. And you get the truth.* And then I did it. And I showed the camera, after."

The kitchen went so quiet he heard the refrigerator click off.

The blood had left his face. His fingers came off his mug and pushed it an inch away, as if the smell had turned his stomach. He couldn't look at her mouth. The mouth that had taken him bare on the guest room rug ten hours ago. The voice that had whispered *I love you* into his hair in the dark.

"*My husband gets a performance,*" he repeated. Barely above a rasp. "Was last night a performance?"

"No." Tears jumped into her eyes. She reached for his hand and stopped an inch short when his jaw locked. "God, no. Every second of last night was real. That morning I wanted to

hurt you, and he put a camera in front of me, and I said the cruelest thing I could think of."

He sat back with his hand over his mouth. He believed her. He believed her here, at this table, and he still couldn't tell where the woman crying in his arms at midnight ended and the woman smiling into Ray's lens began.

"So think about what happens if we just tell him no, we're done" she said, smaller now. "He has that video. He has the pictures. He has your texts and he has my voice saying I'm his. And he doesn't even have to send any of it to anyone. That's what I keep thinking. He'd never put his name on it. It just shows up — in Diane's inbox from an address nobody's heard of, on some site where somebody from the fourth floor happens to find it. *People love to talk.* You heard him say it. If we shut the door on him, that's what's on the other side of it. And we'd never be able to prove it was him."

James didn't say anything for a long time. Across the kitchen, the square of white spackle on the yellow wall waited for paint.

"Then what do we do," he said finally.

"I don't know." It came out of her honest and frightened. "I don't know yet. I've been up half the night and I don't have an answer. I just know what we can't do. We can't report him, and we can't slam the door. Not until we've figured out something better."

"And until then?"

She was quiet a moment. When she spoke, two fingers of her left hand had come up to press the fading mark under her collar.

"Until then, he can't find out that Sunday changed anything. As far as Ray knows, you lost your temper, I calmed you down, and everything's the way it was." Her voice caught, and she made herself finish. "Which means I keep seeing him. I answer when he calls. I wear the chain. I let him think he still has me."

Ten hours ago he'd slammed a drawer shut on the condoms upstairs. Now, before the coffee had gone cold, she was explaining why she had to go back to him.

"No," James said. He pushed his chair back from the table. "No. We stall. You're busy. Work, the filing, your mother, whatever. You keep it to work calls until we think of something."

"For how long? A week? A month?" She didn't raise her voice. "Saturday night I told him I loved him while he came in me. Sunday morning he was picking out a drawer upstairs. If I go from that to *sorry, I'm busy*, how long do you think it takes him to notice? He notices everything. You know he does."

He did know. That was the worst part. He looked at her across the table, and every piece of it held, and underneath the logic a colder thought went through his stomach like ice water: *she wants a reason to go back to him.*

"That's a very neat argument, Jenna," he said, dead quiet. "Is it really the only way? Or is it just the one where you don't have to stop fucking him?"

She held his eyes without blinking.

"If you have a better one," she said softly, "tell me. Right now. And we'll do that instead."

He didn't have one. She watched him look for it. His right hand started to shake on the table, and he slid it off the edge and pressed it hard against his thigh until it stopped.

When he looked up again his voice was flat. "Then I have a condition."

She went very still. "Okay."

"You tell me. Every time. Every call, every text, every time you see him — before it happens, or the minute you walk back in the door. No more hiding anything. Not one thing." His voice went low and ragged. "If I find out about one text after the fact, I'm done. I pack a bag, and you handle him by yourself. Do you understand?"

Her fingers tightened on the mug. He meant it. "Yes," she whispered. "Everything. I swear."

James got up to rinse his mug. She sat at the table and listened to the water run.

Every word she'd said was true. There was no safe way to report him and no safe way to shut him out. But all week, under her terror of losing James, the thought of never again feeling Ray's hands on her had sat in her belly like a hollow, restless ache.

Her eyes went to the junk drawer beside the refrigerator. Rubber bands. Spare keys. A thin gold chain with a word on it, pushed to the back where she'd thrown it on Sunday.

She didn't get up. She didn't have to yet.

But she knew exactly where it was, and an unmistakable curl of heat rose between her legs

About the Author

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