Chapter 12 — "The Close"

The square of white spackle on the yellow kitchen wall stayed unpainted through the end of the week.

It sat behind the trash can, four inches across, sanded smooth where James had drawn the putty knife over it Tuesday night. The leftover quart of yellow was in the basement. Neither of them went down for it. Painting it meant standing at the stove with a brush over the spot where James's mug had gone into the studs, while Ray Vogler stood at the island in James's open robe with his second load of the morning running down Jenna's leg.

So the patch stayed white, and the two of them moved around the kitchen as if the floor between the island and the sink had gone thin.

On Thursday evening Jenna got home from Meridian ahead of him and started dinner before she'd taken her earrings out. She'd spent the day on the fourth floor with her door shut, her fingers drifting to the greenish mark under her left jaw where the concealer sat over what Ray's mouth had done on Sunday. In the middle of the afternoon her phone had buzzed on the blotter.

Back from Cleveland. Cleared five on my end. Come by Fourth at six, we'll go over the Phase III close and pick up where we left off before your boy lost his mind.

Her heart had kicked once, hard.

A little higher up the same thread sat Monday morning. *You're texting like you're in a deposition, Blondie.* Under it, the square thumbnail of herself in the grey office light, her black

blouse open to the ribs, her left cup hooked down under one pale breast, her Meridian badge lying crooked below the dark mark on her throat. *Sorry. Diane was hovering. Better?*

That morning, across their kitchen table, James had looked at her with bloodshot eyes and laid down his one rule. *Every call, every text, every time you see him — before it happens, or the minute you walk back in the door. If I find out about one text after the fact, I'm done. I pack a bag, and you handle him by yourself.*

And she had said, *Everything. I swear.*

She didn't delete Monday. If James ever scrolled, a thread with a hole in it would look worse than a thread with something buried in it. So she hit return three times at the bottom, until the older messages slid up out of sight, and typed in the warm, hurried shorthand Ray expected from her in a close:

Can't tonight — Patel's audit team dumped forty Phase III line items on my desk after lunch and Diane wants the variance reconciliation before the Friday cutoff. Don't be mad. Next week once the quarter's off my neck, I promise.

Ray answered almost at once.

All work and no play, Blondie. Don't make me come rescue you from the fourth floor. Early next week.

Now she heard James's car in the driveway. She dried her hands, picked up her phone, and scrolled the thread to the very bottom, so only Thursday's four bubbles showed above the keyboard. Monday was two thumb-swipes up.

The side door opened. James came in with his laptop bag on his shoulder and the March wind still cold on his coat. He toed off his shoes on the mat. His eyes went across the kitchen: her hair clipped up off her neck, the asparagus on the stove, the salmon seasoned and waiting. Then the phone in her hand.

He didn't smile. He had taken her back in their bed on Wednesday night, and since then he'd held her until the alarm, and kissed her shoulder before he left for work, and said almost nothing.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Hey." He hung his coat on the peg and came to the island, loosening his tie. His eyes dropped to the screen. "He texted?"

"At four." She turned the phone toward him and held it upright in her own hand, six inches from his chest, her thumb resting on the edge where a swipe couldn't happen by accident. "He's back from Cleveland. He wanted me at his apartment at six. I pushed it to next week. Used Patel and Diane."

James read without touching it. She watched his eyes reach *pick up where we left off before your boy lost his mind*, and the small muscle under his ear jumped.

His eyes went up to the top edge of the screen and stayed there. She didn't breathe. Then they came to her face, clear and hard and tired.

"Okay," he said.

She let the screen go dark and set the phone face-down by the knife block. "Salmon's five minutes. Beer, or there's half a bottle of the Pinot Grigio open?"

"Beer's fine."

He opened the refrigerator, two inches from the junk drawer where the gold *Blondie* chain lay tangled behind the rubber bands, and twisted the cap off a bottle.

"You didn't have to do salmon on a Thursday," he said, leaning a hip on the counter while she laid the fillets skin-down in the hot oil. They hissed at once. "Leftover chicken would've been fine."

"You ate three bites of that chicken over the sink like a hostage, Whitfield." She turned the heat down a notch. "It didn't count. Besides, the fish guy at North Market gave me the corner cut because I laughed at his joke about the Buckeyes."

The corner of James's mouth twitched. The old reflex answered her, and then he flattened it out.

"I'm sure it was the joke," he said dryly.

"It was a terrible joke. I earned that half-pound." She glanced back at him with a small, careful smile, then looked at the pan again, because if she held his eyes too long the air went heavy. "How was Tom? Did the Whitehall draft clear?"

"Cleared at two. He found three typos in his own cover memo and congratulated me on catching them."

"Generous to a fault."

They ate at the table by the window instead of the island. Neither of them said why, and neither of them looked at the counter where Sunday had happened. When they reached for the salt at the same time, their fingers stopped an inch apart, and each of them said a polite, careful *sorry* that made Jenna's throat ache worse than the shouting had, Sunday, after the mug went into the wall.

She lifted her wine. His eyes went to her mouth.

They stayed there while she drank, on her lips pressed to the rim, on her throat working as the wine went down. Then they dropped to his plate as if he'd been caught. She set the glass down. A minute later she drank again, and his eyes came back to her throat, and left faster.

She knew what he was watching in his head. She'd put it there herself, at this same table, this morning.

Ray's kitchen, four weeks ago. Her knees on his linoleum, still in the night's skirt and heels, top off, his gold chain swinging between her bare tits, the red dot of his phone a foot from her face. She had looked straight into the lens and told it what she was about to do. *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.* Then she'd taken him down until her eyes ran, and when he came she'd held it on her tongue and opened her mouth to show the camera, full and white, and swallowed it in one long pull, and opened again to show it empty. *Because my husband gets a performance. And you get the truth.*

James had never seen it. He didn't need to. Every time her throat moved, he was watching it.

Her nipples drew tight against her bra. She pressed her thighs together under the table and hated that she had to.

Her throat tightened around nothing. She put her fork down and reached for the water instead, and across the table her husband watched her mouth close on the glass, and looked out the window at the dark yard.

On Friday morning James ran four miles instead of three.

He hadn't meant to. He'd tied his shoes in the dark front hall with Jenna still asleep upstairs, one bare calf kicked out from under the duvet. He'd turned left on Elm the way he had for six years. At the corner of Sycamore his feet didn't turn right toward the park bridge.

Four houses down, under two bare pin oaks, a white *For Sale* sign stood pale under the streetlamp.

Brick colonial. Black shutters. A brass coach light on the porch. Five minutes on foot from his own back gate.

Clear out that top drawer upstairs. Give me a key.

James stood at the corner with his breath fogging. Ray had said it on Sunday, in James's robe, in James's kitchen, about James's own bedroom. He didn't go down the street. He crossed Elm and took the steep hill past the reservoir, where the wind came off the water into his teeth. He pushed until his calves burned and his lungs tasted like pennies.

It didn't burn anything out.

He'd sat through all of Thursday at his desk with three spreadsheets open and seen none of them. He kept seeing Wednesday night. Jenna's wrists under his hands in the clean pillowcases. Her bare heat opening around him with nothing between them for the first time in their marriage. His palm over her mouth, his own voice rough at her ear: *Say my name.* Her lips moving wet against his hand.

He had wanted to finish in her alone. His wife, his bed. And he had driven into her as hard as he had in him, and it had stayed an inch out of reach.

Until he shut his eyes and the kitchen came in behind them.

Her rings in the soap dish. Her cheek on the marble. Her eyes on his from across the room, steady and wet, while she said it to the man behind her: *Breed me right in front of him.*

He had emptied into her two seconds later like a teenager.

Now, coming down the grade on High Street in the freezing dark, his cock thickened against the lining of his tights at her looking at him while she asked. At her eyes on his. He ran harder and it didn't go down. His molars ground together until they ached. On Sunday he'd told her the truth, *something in my*

head is fucked up, and on Wednesday night his body had made it a confession.

When he let himself back into the front hall, he didn't go upstairs to shower.

He walked down the hall in his damp running clothes and pushed open the door of the second-bedroom office. The oak desk he'd sanded by hand two summers ago. His personal laptop on the corner of the blotter. The chair Ray had ordered him to wheel down the hall to the foot of their bed.

He pulled the chair out and sat in it anyway.

All Thursday, under the Whitehall numbers, Jenna's argument from the breakfast table had kept turning over. *It's our word against our own word.* In February they had sat in that locked hotel room and told Braddock it was all James's idea. If they walked back in now, Braddock would pull her off Ashford, the shared Meridian–Cortec account that put her in Ray's building, and make the whole thing go away.

She was right. As long as he looked at it as a marriage problem.

James didn't get paid to look at marriage problems. He got paid to find the number that didn't line up across three quarters. The date with nothing on either side of it.

He opened a yellow legal pad on the desk. He uncapped a pen.

He didn't write Ray's name at the top. He wrote **BRADDOCK.**

Then he sat and looked at it. Sweat cooled down his spine under the jacket. He thought about a manila folder on a hotel table, and a man who had come downtown alone, and the pen began to move. It moved in short lines. He stopped, crossed

one out, and wrote under it. Upstairs the pipes hummed in the wall as Jenna started the shower.

Somewhere down the page his pulse changed. It slowed and went flat, the way it did when a vendor's billing finally lined up and he could see exactly who had moved the money. The pen stopped.

He read what he had. He read it again.

When the shower shut off upstairs, he tore the sheet off the pad and folded it once.

When Jenna came down to the kitchen, she was dressed for the fourth floor in a charcoal top cut off the shoulder and a houndstooth wrap skirt that opened a hand's breadth above her left knee when she walked. Her damp hair curled over her collarbones. She had blended the concealer under her jaw so carefully it took the sun through the window to find the shadow under it.

James was at the table in his dress shirt with the cuffs open, his tie lying beside his tumbler, a folded yellow sheet under his wrist.

"Morning," she said, crossing to the coffeemaker. When she reached up for a mug, the skirt rode up the backs of her thighs over her sheer black stockings. In the window she caught his eyes dropping to her legs and coming back up. "You ran long. I heard you come in."

"Did the reservoir hill," James said. "Sit down a second before you pour that."

His voice was level and quiet. It was the voice he used for work. She turned around with the empty mug in her hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I want you to read something."

She sat across from him and crossed her ankles under the table. "Okay. You have that face on. You're scaring me a little."

He unfolded the sheet flat between them, facing her.

"Yesterday you told me why we can't go to Braddock," he said. "You were right. If we walk in asking him who to believe, he picks the story we gave him in February, and he keeps his salesman."

She looked down at his square print.

BRADDOCK at the top, underlined. Under it, nothing she would have called an accusation. Questions, numbered, each one short. *Who saw the flag first. Who did Anand send it to. Why that room. Why no calendar. Who handled the files. Who still had copies.* At the bottom, alone, underlined twice: *Who signs Ray's seat in Columbus.*

"James, what is this?"

"February," he said. "Without us in it."

He tapped the last line. "Sunday, Ray stood in this kitchen and told us about the house on Sycamore. I ran past it this morning. The sign's still up."

Her stomach tightened. "He was showing off. He was trying to push you—"

"He was telling us. That's how he does it. He says it out loud first, so by the time it happens you're used to it." His voice didn't rise at all. "He's on loan to Columbus for Phase Three. A man on loan doesn't look at houses. Somebody has to make that seat permanent."

"Braddock."

"Braddock."

"So he signs it," she said. "Ray's his best closer. He got written up over that Dallas comment and still kept Ashford."

"He did." James turned the pen once between his fingers. "Then Anand flags the files on your laptop and emails him three stills. What was Braddock supposed to do with that?"

"Escalate it." It came out of her without thinking. "Sandra at Cortec HR, our own HR, both legal teams. Preserve the files."

"And what did he do?"

"He called me." Her eyes went to *Why no calendar.* "*Don't put it on any calendar Ray can see.* Then he rented a room at the Renaissance and brought the folder."

"And then he did the one thing nobody in his chair is allowed to do. He put the three of us in a locked room together. You, me, and Ray. Remember what he asked you?"

She remembered.

The blinds down, the desk lamp, three greyscale prints dealt out between the water glasses. Her on her knees in the black lace with Ray's cock laid across her cheek. Her in the hotel robe, sliding off her shoulders. And the third, the one her eyes had kept going back to while three men watched her look at it: the end of the second night, her astride him with her head thrown back, Ray's hands clamped over her hips pinning her down onto him, and at the bottom of the frame the thick base of him buried in her and his cum already running out around it. Braddock had listened to the audio alone. *Pull out, you promised.* Then he'd looked across the blotter and asked her whether any of it had happened to her that she didn't choose.

She'd been wet the entire forty minutes in that room. She was wet now, at her own kitchen table, with her husband's pen on a legal pad. She pressed her knees together and kept her face still.

"He was asking me if Ray forced me," she said.

"With Ray sitting six feet away." James's voice didn't rise. "Think about what Braddock was looking at. His own salesman, a man he'd kept on probation since your complaint, holding you down on video and finishing in you while you told him to pull out. That's a possible sexual assault of a client's employee by a Cortec rep. There's exactly one thing a VP is allowed to do with that. He calls Sandra. He calls Legal. He preserves every file. Instead he asks you once, in front of the man on the tape and your husband, in a room booked under a name nobody can find. You give him the answer he needs, and he destroys the evidence himself and tells us there are no notes."

"Because of Ashford."

"Because he told us so. 'The biggest deal of my career.' He staffed you on it because Ray walked into his office and asked for you by name. If those files had gone to Sandra, the first question anybody asks is why the rep with your complaint on his record was put on your account. And the answer to that question is Braddock."

Jenna stared at the paper.

"The files are gone," she said slowly. "Anand's email isn't. It's on two mail servers."

"And Braddock told us every copy was gone. Verified. He'd handle the chain of custody himself." He put his finger on *Who still had copies.* "The next night Anand walked into your office with a thumb drive."

She could still see it turning over in Anand's fist, his shoulders flat against her door. *I'm the one who does the purge.* By Monday he'd handed over every copy he had kept, to her, not

to Braddock. Braddock had never known there was anything left to purge.

"His clean room wasn't clean," James said. "He doesn't know that. We do."

The kitchen was very quiet. A delivery truck rattled past on Elm.

She looked at her husband. For four months she had watched Ray Vogler move him around like furniture. She had watched him kneel at their bed with a warm washcloth and clean another man's cock.

There was nothing shaking in him now.

His hair was still damp at the temples. His hands lay still on either side of the yellow page.

"What do you want from him?" she breathed.

"One signature he doesn't give. Ray's transfer comes across his desk at the rotation review, and he doesn't sign it. Ray goes back to Chicago when Phase Three closes. Or I sit down with Cortec's audit committee and walk them through February: Anand's email, the rented room, the question he asked you with Ray in the chair, the files he destroyed with his own hands, and the copies that survived him anyway."

"That puts us in it too."

"It puts our story in it. Our story doesn't save him. Whatever we said in that room, he still had to call Sandra. We weren't the ones with a duty to report."

Her lips parted. "He'll threaten to pull me off Ashford."

"He'll think about it for about a second." James almost smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "Then he'll remember who'd be asking why. Moving the woman in the files, the week somebody starts asking about the files, is the first thing an audit commit-

tee looks for. It's the proof the cover-up was a cover-up. He won't touch you, Jen. He won't touch your account, your reviews, or your bonus. He won't so much as look at you wrong in a hallway."

"You can't know that."

"I do. Think about what he's holding. Decades at Cortec, a VP title, and his name on the biggest deal of his career. All of it rests on nobody ever asking what he did with those files. After I sit down with him, every day he keeps that title is a day I decided to let him." He folded the sheet into quarters and slid it into his shirt pocket. "He won't be bargaining with me. He'll be working for me. He just won't put it that way to himself."

He set his hand on the table between them and left it there.

"I don't work for him. I don't work for anybody he can call. He signs nothing for Ray, Ray goes back to Chicago, and Braddock spends the rest of his career hoping I never pick up the phone."

Jenna didn't move.

She was looking at the flat line of his mouth. At the dry certainty in it. And under the table, before she could stop it, she saw Ray.

Ray at the Dayton audit table, taking Neil Garrison apart without raising his voice. The patience to find what a man was hiding. The thumb on the nerve, pressing, until Garrison folded and handed him everything he wanted. She hadn't seen that in James in eleven years. She hadn't known it was in him.

Her nipples drew up tight against the inside of her top. The throb went straight down into her clit and stayed there, heavy and slow. She pressed her thighs together under the wrap skirt and felt the warmth gather in her panties. Her mouth went dry.

In her head he walked into a room with a man twice his rank and put a finger on one line of that page, and her knees went loose and she opened, the way she opened for Ray's voice.

Then the word reached her. *Chicago.*

Something dropped through her chest, hollow. No heavy footsteps down the fourth-floor corridor. No weight pinning her into the white quiet where she didn't have to think. No thick, heavy cock forcing her open until her breath stopped, stretching her past anything her body had known before him, so full she could feel the shape of him for a day afterward. Chicago meant never again. Her pussy clenched at the thought, empty and aching, and she hated it for answering.

"Jenna?"

She blinked. James was watching her, his eyes narrowing at the color climbing her throat.

"Sorry," she said, and it came out half a note lower than she meant. She reached across the table and laid her ringed hand on his wrist, her fingers curling warm around the bone. "I just didn't see it. Not on Thursday. Not at all. That's brilliant, James."

He looked down at her hand, then up at her eyes, dark and shining, and the color high on her cheeks. Something moved behind his face. She knew that look. He had been reading her flush since she was twenty-two.

His hand turned over under hers and gripped her fingers hard enough that her wedding band bit into the skin.

"Until I sit down with Braddock," James said, his voice dropping rough, "Ray doesn't get a hint from you that anything's moving. You keep your head down on the close. If he pushes you before I've got Braddock boxed in, you tell me first."

"I will," she said softly, her clit still pulsing between her pressed thighs as she looked into her husband's eyes. "Every word. You'll know before I take a step."

She bought them the weekend.

On Friday she kept Patel's junior on the Ashford call from start to finish, and Ray spoke twice, both times about a dock timestamp. When he texted afterward — *You're awfully busy this week, Blondie* — she showed James before she answered.

On Saturday they drove out to the nursery on Morse Road and came home with four flats of pansies and two bags of cedar mulch. James carried the bags to the back bed and worked the mulch into the cold soil with his bare hands. She knelt beside him in her old jeans, setting purple and yellow blooms in rows.

"You're putting them in crooked," he said.

"They're organic rows. It's a look."

"It's a crooked look."

"You haven't planted a single one."

"I'm supervising." It came out of him on reflex, and his hands stopped in the dirt.

She sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with the back of her wrist. He looked at her. Then he reached over and brushed a crumb of bark out of her eyebrow with his thumb, slowly, and left his thumb there a moment longer than the bark needed.

"There," he said.

"Thank you," she said, and her voice wasn't steady, and neither of them mentioned it.

That night he didn't pin her wrists. The blinds were shut tight against the Dentons' house. He slid into her slow, in a condom again, his weight on his forearms, his mouth on the

clean right side of her throat. She held the back of his neck. Each long push drew a low, wet sound out of her, and she let him hear every one. When she started to come she kept her eyes wide open on the ceiling fan turning in the dark, because if she closed them the kitchen would be there. She came with her eyes open and his name in her mouth, clenching around him, and he groaned into her neck and followed her.

By Tuesday the weekend was gone.

It was the last week of the quarter. Jenna was at her desk on the fourth floor in slacks and a sleeveless turtleneck, cross-checking the last vendor sign-off sheets, when her phone gave a single heavy buzz against the wood.

She didn't have to look at the name.

Done playing secretary tag, Blondie. Two o'clock today. My office over at Cortec. Bring the Q1 vendor sign-off packet and bring yourself.

A second bubble came in under it before she'd picked the phone up.

Don't send me another line about Patel or Diane. You stall me one more afternoon and I'm driving over to Meridian to take you to lunch off your own floor, or I'm knocking on that side door on Elm at six to see for myself what changed in that kitchen after I left.

Her hand closed around the phone.

The skin at the hollow of her throat went hot under the knit. She read the second message again. There was no sales humor in it anywhere. *The side door.* She believed him. He would stand on their mat at six with his car in their driveway.

She looked down at her slacks, at the plain sensible cut of them. Fine for a Tuesday on the fourth floor. Not what a

woman wore to a man who had just written *bring yourself*, and who hadn't had his hands on her in nine days.

Then she thought of the white lace at the back of her dresser drawer. She had bought it with Ray in mind. She could admit that much to herself. It had been lying under her folded camisoles ever since, waiting for an afternoon she'd told herself wasn't coming. Her thighs pressed together under the desk, once, hard.

It was a little after ten in the morning. She was a lead analyst with a quarter closing in six days, and she was about to drive home in the middle of a workday to change her underwear for a two o'clock with Ray Vogler.

She knew exactly how that would sound out loud. She lined up the reasons anyway. Ray couldn't see a woman in deposition slacks who'd been ducking him since Thursday. He had to see Blondie walk through his door, still his, so hungry for him that he'd stop looking at anything else. And James was working from home today. She had sworn to him at the kitchen table that he'd know before she took a step, and a text didn't feel like keeping that promise. He deserved to hear it from her face.

All of it was true. None of it was why her pussy had gone slick at the thought of that lace against her skin.

She locked her workstation, slid the Cortec folder into her tote, and took the elevator down to the garage.

The house was quiet when she let herself in through the side door, except for the low murmur of James's voice upstairs. She stood at the island with her keys still in her hand, in her own kitchen at eleven on a Tuesday, and felt like a burglar. Then she left her tote on the stool and climbed the stairs.

The office door stood half open. James sat at the desk in a grey crewneck, his reading glasses pushed up into his hair, his legal pad beside his elbow. He had just set down his phone.

He looked around at the tap of her heel on the threshold, and his face went flat.

"What are you doing home?" he asked. "It's not even lunch."

"Ray just texted me." She came to the edge of the desk and held out her phone so he could read both bubbles. "Read it."

He took his glasses down and read. His eyes went down the first bubble quickly. On the second they slowed, and stopped near the end, and stayed on one line. She knew which one.

Outside the window, a squirrel ran the top rail of the cedar fence.

"He knows something's off," James said, his voice tight.

"He doesn't *know* anything," Jenna said quickly. "He's guessing, because I put him off Thursday and hid behind Patel's junior on Friday. If he knew we'd talked on Sunday, he wouldn't be asking for the Q1 packet. He'd already be in Braddock's office." She lowered the phone to her hip. "Did you get Braddock?"

"Next Friday. Late afternoon." He touched the corner of the pad with the back of his pen. "He's in town after the close."

"Next week," she repeated. "Then I have to go at two." She turned the phone face-down against her hip. "Five days of Patel and Diane, and he's already noticed. You know what Ray does when something doesn't add up. He doesn't come at it. He goes around it. He switched the contact in my phone. He got himself moved to Columbus. He sat on a dock number for weeks so he could put me in a hotel room in Dayton. If he decides Sun-

day changed something, he won't knock on any door. He'll find another way in, and we won't see it until he's through. And the first door he'll try is Braddock's. He's been Braddock's best closer for nine years, James. One drink, and that transfer is signed before you ever get in the room."

James looked down at the desk. A dull red crept up his neck above the sweater.

His pen hand lay on the pad, on the page with Braddock's name. His eyes went from her phone to the page and back to the phone. His fingers flattened slowly on the paper.

"How long does a Q1 sign-off take," he said, without looking up.

Her pulse gave a slow, heavy thud. Lying to him now, before she went, would only blow up in her face when she came back through the door.

"It's not going to be just the sign-off sheet, James," she said quietly. "He's suspicious. If I walk in there with a clipboard and shake his hand at the door, we're dead."

His fingers closed on the pen until the plastic clicked.

"Then I move Braddock up." He reached for his phone. "I call his assistant back. Thursday. Tomorrow. I'll fly to Chicago if I have to."

"And tell her what? That it can't wait until after the close?" She kept her voice low. "A man nobody at Cortec has ever heard of calls twice in one morning, desperate to get in front of a VP during quarter-end. She mentions it to Braddock. Braddock mentions it to the one man in Columbus who'd know why. You'd be ringing the bell yourself."

He set the phone down. "Then send the packet over with Patel's junior. Tell him you've got the flu."

"Five days of excuses, and now the flu." She shook her head. "James. He wrote *bring yourself*."

"I know what he wrote." He was on his feet before she saw him move, and the chair rolled back into the bookcase. "I know exactly what he wrote. Say it."

She didn't look away. "He's going to want me."

"And you're going to let him."

"Yes."

He laughed once, a short ugly sound with no air in it, and turned to the window.

"Five days ago," he said to the glass, "I told you one hidden text and I pack a bag. And here you are in my office, hiding nothing. Telling me to my face you're going over there at two o'clock to let him fuck you." His hands were braced on the sill. "And I'm supposed to be grateful for the honesty."

"I'm not asking you to be grateful. I'm asking for a better idea." It was the same thing she'd said to him over cold coffee on Thursday, and they both heard it. "If you have one, tell me. I'll text him I'm sick and we'll do it your way."

He didn't turn around for a long time. She watched the red stay up above his collar. She watched him look for another way, the way he had on Thursday, and not find it.

When he finally faced her, the cold analyst from Friday morning was gone. He looked like a man being asked to hold his own hand on a burner so the alarm wouldn't go off.

"Go at two," he said, clipped and rough. "Keep him quiet until I'm in front of Braddock. Don't stay all afternoon. The minute you walk out of his building, you text me. And when you get home, you tell me all of it. Every word he says to you."

He looked at the floor, then back at her. "And don't you dare come back and tell me you did it for me."

"I will." She reached for his shoulder. He stepped back before her fingertips landed, dropped into his chair, picked up his pen, and turned to his monitor.

"I've got a call with Tom," he said to the screen. "Shut the door on your way out, will you?"

Jenna pulled her hand back. "Okay."

She stepped into the hall and pulled the door shut until the latch clicked. Behind it, his keyboard started up, fast and angry. Ahead of her, light fell across the foot of their bed.

She went into the bedroom, shut that door too, and leaned back against it.

The blinds were still down from Saturday night. Late-morning sun came through the slats in thin bars across the bed, across the clean sheets from the hall closet, because the old ones were in the alley bin. James's side was pulled tight. Her side was turned back the way she'd left it at six.

Across the hall, through two doors, she heard him say *Tom* in his phone voice.

She thought about what Ray would see at two. He'd had five days of Patel's junior and Diane's deadlines from a woman who, ten days ago, had told him she loved him with his cock in her on that bed. Whatever had changed in her face since Sunday, he would find it. He found everything. Unless she handed him something bigger to look at. If she walked in hungry, dressed for him in the middle of a workday, wet before he'd laid a finger on her, he wouldn't go looking for what had changed. He'd be too busy collecting everything that hadn't.

That was the plan, and it was a good one. It was also exactly what she wanted to do, and she didn't let herself look at that for long.

She toed off her flats, unzipped the slacks, and let them drop. She pulled the turtleneck over her head, and her hair came out of it in a heavy blonde spill across her shoulders. She pushed it back with both hands.

Then the dresser. The deep middle drawer, past the everyday bras in the front row, all the way to the back corner under the folded camisoles, where James would never in his life reach. She'd bought the set with Ray in mind and hidden it the day it came. It was still folded in its tissue.

White lace. A balconette bra cut so low the cups were barely a shelf, scalloped along the edge. A thong that was mostly a promise: a small sheer triangle in front with a satin bow at the top, a string behind.

She held the bra up by its straps, and the last time she'd worn white for him came back whole.

Dayton. The bathroom in Room 714, a white paper bag on the counter that she'd opened expecting something cheap she could hate him for. Instead, a teddy so sheer she could see her own hand through it, with a little satin bow between the cups. She'd stepped into it with her heart going, the lace dragging over nipples that were already hard, the thong back vanishing between her cheeks, the garter clips cold on her hip bones. She'd been wet for hours by then. In the bathroom mirror she'd watched the damp spot darken the white triangle, and she'd walked out anyway. His face when she came through the door: the salesman gone out of it, just a big ugly man in an armchair staring at her as if she'd been delivered. By the end of the night

the teddy was bunched at her waist and he was in her ass, slow and all the way, her stockinged thigh hooked over his hip, and in the black window across the room she'd seen a woman ruined from the lace up.

She had never seen the teddy again. She had never asked where it went.

Ray liked her in white. He liked to watch what happened to it.

Her nipples had drawn up tight in the cool room.

She unhooked her everyday bra and dropped it on the bed, and her breasts came free, heavy, full enough to sway when she bent to step out of her panties. She stood naked in the middle of the bedroom at eleven on a Tuesday with her husband on a work call across the hall, and she was already slick. She could feel it when she moved, her lips sliding against each other, wetter than she'd been all weekend in this bed with James.

She stepped into the thong and drew it up her thighs. The string settled deep between her cheeks. The front pressed snug over her trimmed strip and flat against her, and the lace went damp at the center the moment it touched her.

The bra next. She fastened it at her ribs, bent forward, scooped each breast into its cup with her hand, and straightened. The underwire took the weight and lifted it. Her tits sat high and round over the scalloped edge, the lace covering barely half of each one, her dark nipples pressing straight through the mesh. When she breathed, the edge dragged across them.

She turned to the full-length mirror on the closet door.

She looked like a bride somebody had already fucked.

She looked over her shoulder. Nothing behind but the string, and the ass it disappeared into, round and high and full,

the cheeks parting around one thin white line. Half the fourth floor watched it walk to the coffee machine every morning. Ray had left his handprint on it in her own office. She spread her hand over one cheek and squeezed, the way he did, and felt herself clench.

Across the hall James said, "No, the second tab," in the patient voice he saved for Tom.

Her fingers went to the front of the thong. She pressed two of them to the wet lace, and her clit throbbed up into them, hard, and her knees went soft. Nine days. She rubbed once, slowly, and had to brace her other hand on the dresser.

She took the hand away. If she started she'd come in four strokes standing up, and she wanted to walk into his office starving.

She sat on the edge of the bed and rolled the first stocking up her leg, sheer black from toe to calf to knee to thigh, the lace band gripping bare skin a hand's width below the white. Then the other. In the mirror the black stopped high on her thighs and the white began above it, and between them was a strip of bare skin a man would have to see to understand.

The burgundy bodysuit went on over the bra. It wrapped across her in a V so deep it ended under her breasts, and she snapped it closed between her legs over the thong. From the front, it covered her. From two feet above, looking down, a man would see the scalloped white edge and the inner curves of both tits pushed together beneath it. She tugged the V half an inch wider and watched more white show.

The pencil skirt was black and tight enough that she had to work it up over her hips with the old shimmy, and the slit ran up the left side almost to the stocking band. When she took a

step, the skirt fell open on the lace top of the stocking and a flash of thigh above it. She took another step to be sure.

Heels last, black, four inches. Everything lifted. Her calves went taut, her back arched, and her ass pushed up and out against the skirt.

She leaned in to the mirror to check her face, and her eyes went to her jaw.

The mark from Sunday was almost gone, a faint yellow-green shadow under her left jaw that she'd been covering every morning since. She'd blended the concealer so carefully today it would take sunlight to find it.

She went into the bathroom, wet a tissue at the sink, and wiped it off.

There he was. Ray's mouth, still on her nine days later. He would see it the second she walked in, and he'd know she had stopped hiding it for him.

She looked at it for a long time.

She had sworn to James at the kitchen table that he would know everything. He knew where she was going and why. He knew what Ray would want when she got there. He didn't know about the white, or the jaw. She told herself that wasn't hiding. She'd tell him after, the way he'd asked, every word. It just wasn't a thing you said to a man on a call with his boss.

She knew that wasn't the reason either.

She belted the tan trench over all of it, tight at the waist, and turned the collar up over her jaw, so that if James opened his door while she passed he'd see a coat and a pair of heels.

He didn't open it. Tom's voice boomed through the door on speakerphone, and James answered him, level and measured, a man doing his job.

She went down the stairs on the balls of her feet so the heels wouldn't click.

In the kitchen she picked up her tote from the stool and slid the folder out of it. The side door was to her right.

She turned left.

The junk drawer beside the refrigerator. She'd thrown the chain in there herself on Sunday, with the mug in pieces on the floor, and she had known exactly where it was every hour since. Past the rubber bands, the spare garage keys, the takeout menus. Her fingertips found the fine links in the back corner as if they'd been waiting for her.

Blondie. The little gold script swung against her palm.

This was the part she couldn't put in the plan. The white she could argue for. The jaw she could argue for. Ray would look for the chain the moment she walked in, and if her throat was bare he would know Sunday had changed something. That was true, and she held on to it. But she had thrown it in this drawer on Sunday and meant it, and she was taking it out on Tuesday, and she was wet doing it.

She lifted her hair with one hand and reached behind her neck with the other. The clasp caught on the first try.

The word settled into the hollow of her throat, two inches below the mark she'd just uncovered. It was cool for a second. Then it took her heat, and her pussy clenched once, hard.

Upstairs her husband laughed politely at something Tom said.

She pulled the coat collar closed over her throat and went out to the car.

Cortec's regional office was out off 270. By the time she reached the outerbelt, her breathing had gone shallow.

Every other time she had driven toward Ray Vogler, she'd had a story to wrap around it. At first, that it was for James. Then, that James had lied, had let her believe he wanted this, and had it coming.

She tried them on now, one at a time, the way she'd tried on the white in the mirror.

It was for the plan. That one was true. Ray had to see her hungry so he wouldn't see anything else, and next Friday James would be in a room with Braddock, and none of it worked if Ray got there first.

It was for Ray. She thought of his hands, and the nine days, and her thighs pressed together on the seat until the stocking bands rubbed.

It was for James. She almost laughed. She could still see his phone lying cracked on their kitchen marble, Ray's texts on it leaning on him from the very first morning, and hear the Dayton voicemail come out of the little speaker, flat and tinny. *People love to talk.* James had never asked for any of it. He'd been cornered, and he was sitting at his desk right now hating every mile of this.

Nothing she let Ray do to her today could be for James.

She held on to that for about a mile.

When you get home, you tell me all of it. Every word he says to you.

He'd said it at the window with his back to her and the red climbing his neck. A husband's condition. That was how he'd meant it. She was almost sure that was how he'd meant it. But she had lived with that man for eleven years, and she had read what he wrote on a forum he thought nobody would ever trace back to him. *Consumed. Overwhelmed.* And on Sunday he had

stood in their kitchen holding a coffee mug in both hands, and he hadn't said a word while Ray—

She shut it down. It came back from the other side.

Tonight, in their bed, with the lights off. James over her in a condom, slow and careful the way he'd been all weekend, and her mouth at his ear, telling him. Because he'd asked. Because he'd made it the price of staying. What Ray said when she walked in. What Ray did when he saw the white. Where Ray put his hands, and his mouth, and what she said back. She could feel exactly how James would go still on top of her. She couldn't tell whether the next thing he did would be to cum or to get up and pack a bag.

She didn't know which one she was hoping for. Her clit throbbed hard against the wet lace, and she understood that she had dressed for that conversation too.

And there was the other one, the one she hadn't seen coming. Friday morning at the kitchen table: his hair still damp from his run, his finger on one line of a yellow page, nothing shaking in him. A man who was going to walk into a VP's office and come out owning him. She put that man behind Ray's desk with the door shut, telling her in that flat, quiet voice to open her coat and show him what she'd worn. It went through her exactly the way Ray's voice did. Nipples, clit, knees, in that order.

That frightened her more than anything Ray had ever said to her.

And under all of it was the one she didn't need to try on. The woman in the bedroom mirror, wiping the concealer off her own jaw, hadn't been thinking about anybody's plan.

Her right hand left the wheel. She pulled the coat's belt loose, opened the lapels, and slid her hand inside.

It went past the gold at her throat, down the deep V, over the scalloped white edge and the fast hammer under it. Then lower, to her lap, where the slit of the skirt had fallen open over her thigh. Her fingers found the band of her stocking, then bare skin, then the snapped edge of the bodysuit. She slipped two fingers under it.

The lace was soaked through. Hot, clinging, slick against her swollen lips. She pressed, and the wet mesh slid over her clit, and her hips came up off the seat.

"He'd hate this," she whispered to the windshield. Her voice shook, and her fingers pressed harder. "Baby, you'd hate this so much." Her fingers kept working. "Look. Look what he does to me, and I'm not even there yet." Her hips rolled up into her hand. "You'd reach over and grab my wrist. And then you'd hold it right there."

A semi came up on her right and hung there, matching her speed.

She caught the cab at the edge of her vision, high and dark, a man's shape up in it, and she knew what he could see down through her side window. An open coat. A deep red V and the white lace edge inside it. A woman's hand moving under her skirt at sixty-five miles an hour.

She didn't close the coat.

She thought of the man at pump six in Powell, in his Carhartt jacket, his sentence dying in his mouth while she stood at pump four with her coat off in the cold. She thought of Ray four cars back that same afternoon, watching her let him look. *I'm always going to be in the lot across the street.* Her eyes

went to the rearview mirror before she could stop them. No Buick. A white SUV, and the grey ribbon of 270 behind it.

She was disappointed. She felt it plainly, and it made her wetter.

She worked the lace in tight circles. Her breath came in short pulls through her nose, and her heels pushed into the floor mat, and the cab stayed right there beside her.

"Papi," she said, out loud, alone in the car, and she didn't know which of them she was saying it to.

The truck's horn gave one short, low blast. She laughed, breathless, and her pussy clenched hard, and she was at the edge of it all at once, her thighs shaking. She stopped. She held her fingers flat and still against her clit and breathed through it until it ebbed. Not here. She'd promised herself she would walk in starving.

The semi dropped back and was gone.

She drew her hand out and looked at it. Wet to the second knuckle. The smell of herself filled the car, sharp and warm.

Her phone lit up in the cupholder.

James: Did you leave?

She looked at the message, and at her hand.

At the light at the bottom of the exit ramp she picked the phone up and typed with the same two fingers, slowly, each letter leaving a faint shine on the glass.

Almost there. I'll text you when I'm out.

She hit send. He had asked her to tell him everything, and she hadn't said one thing that wasn't true.

She wiped her fingers along the inside of her thigh above the stocking, belted the coat, and turned onto the frontage

road. After that text about her side door, Ray would take his time with her today.

Cortec's Columbus branch took up the third floor of a limestone box west of the river. At two in the afternoon the sales floor was loud. Reps paced the aisles in headsets. Somebody had written the Q1 totals on a whiteboard in red marker and circled the worst one twice.

Jenna slipped off her trench coat in the elevator and folded it over her arm. Her tote rode on her shoulder, the Q1 folder in her hand.

Halfway down the aisle a rep at the printer said, "—so tell him the freight's on us, and he'll—" and left it there. The slit of her skirt had opened on her left leg, past the stocking band to bare thigh, and her nipples drew up tight under the wrap before it fell shut again.

Ray's office was second from the end on the glass wall. The door stood open.

He sat behind a wide desk with a solid front. He was on a headset, leaning back so hard the chair springs groaned. Suit jacket on the hook. White shirt pulled tight over his chest and gut, tie loose, top button open. One swollen-knuckled hand lay flat on a stack of printouts.

Her heel clicked on the metal threshold. His small eyes came up under the heavy brow.

They went to the gold *Blondie* at her throat and stayed there.

Nothing in his face got softer.

"Tell Miller he gets Columbus before five," he said into the mic. He kept his eyes on her. "Gotta go."

He pulled the headset off and dropped it. Then he stood. She knew how big he was. It still brought the ceiling down when he came up out of a chair in a room this size.

"In," he said. "All the way."

She set the folder on the front edge of his desk. Coat and tote went over the narrow guest chair in the corner. He came around the desk past her. Behind her, his palm pushed the door shut. The latch clicked. He twisted the blind wand once, and the sales floor went to grey stripes.

He didn't touch her. He leaned his hips on the door and folded his arms over his gut.

"Thursday I ask you over," he said. "You give me Patel. Friday you keep a junior on the call so you don't have to hear my voice alone. Ten days ago you were telling me you loved me in your husband's bed." He let that sit. "It's Tuesday, Blondie."

Her heart knocked against her underwire. She tipped her head and gave him the crooked smile he knew. "It's the last week of the quarter, Ray. Patel's team flagged forty line items Thursday, and Diane's been living in my doorway—"

"Don't give me Patel." He didn't raise his voice. "I'm on that distribution list. Twelve items. Your junior had them cleared by two."

Heat climbed her throat. She kept her chin up. "Diane wanted backup tables—"

"And last week." He came off the door one step. "I text you from Cleveland. I ask if your boy calmed down after he put a mug through the wall by my head. Took me three texts to get a real word out of you."

He stopped two feet from her. Heat came off him. Sweet drugstore cologne, and under it the sour sweat of a morning on

the phones. His eyes went to the yellow smudge under her jaw where his mouth had been. Then back to hers.

"That Sunday I reach for you in that kitchen," he said, "and he says one word. *Don't.* No man says it like that over a real estate joke. And you stood there looking at the hole in the plaster like the house fell in."

Her palms went damp.

"He lost his temper." She laughed, small, and stepped in so the V of the wrap sat right under his chin. "You were in his kitchen in his robe, drinking out of his mug. Telling him to clear out a drawer for you. What did you think he'd do?"

He didn't look down at her cleavage. He kept looking at her eyes.

"I think since November that man sat in whatever chair I pointed at," Ray said. "And I think when my Buick turned off Elm Street, you two had a long talk over that broken cup."

His right hand came up and closed around the side of her neck. His thumb settled on the gold letters, right over her pulse. It jumped against his thumb.

"So what'd he tell you?" Ray said quietly. "After. He finally give you his side of November?"

Her calves locked and her heels rocked under her.

His side. Ray didn't say what was in it. He didn't have to. She knew exactly what was in it: James's cracked phone on the marble, Ray's texts leaning on him from the very first morning, Ray's own voice coming tinny out of the little speaker. Ray had never told her one word of that. He wasn't telling her now. He was asking whether she'd heard it from somebody else.

She had watched him take Neil Garrison apart at the Dayton audit table, with Patel and her junior watching and Brad-

dock on the speakerphone. One wrong blink and he'd know he'd hit.

So she didn't pull back. She leaned her throat into his palm. She let her eyes go wide and wet, and laid her left hand over his wrist, rings and all.

"He yelled for an hour," she whispered. "He said it went ten miles past anything he ever wanted. He said he hated himself every time he got hard watching you with me. He made me take the necklace off." She swallowed against his thumb. "And I let him scream, Ray. If I pushed him one more inch after that mug, he was going to blow up my job and walk out."

His thumb stayed on her pulse. He went over her face the way he went over a contract. "That why you hid behind Patel?"

"I waited till he quit watching the driveway." She slid her fingers off his wrist and down his shirt, onto the hard slope of his chest. "Then I came here."

"Yeah?" His mouth moved. It wasn't a smile. "Take the top off."

"Ray. We're at Cortec—"

"Door's shut. Top off. Unzip the skirt. I want to see what you wear to work when you're hiding from me."

He let go of her neck. He stepped back and leaned on the front of his desk, and waited.

Her heart was going so hard she felt it in her fingertips. She reached up under the skirt and thumbed open the snaps of the bodysuit. She peeled it up her ribs and over her head and laid it on the corner of his desk. Then she found the zipper at her hip. It rasped down. The skirt slid off her thighs. She stepped out of it. She lifted her coat off the guest chair, laid the skirt flat on the seat, and let the coat fall back over it.

She stood in the middle of his carpet in four-inch heels and nothing else that counted.

Black thigh-highs to the tops of her thighs, the lace bands biting into bare skin. Above them, a hand's width of her, pale under the office lights, and then the white. A thong that was a sheer triangle and a small satin bow and nothing more, pulled so tight against her that it showed the shape of her lips through it. The bra held her tits up over the scalloped edge as if she were serving them to him across his desk, the lace covering half of each one, her nipples dark and hard and plain through the mesh. The chain lay in the hollow of her throat with his name for her on it. Two inches above it was his mouth, nine days old, uncovered.

Behind her, the blinds were down over the glass wall, and the sales floor came through the slats: a phone ringing, somebody laughing, a man reading numbers off a sheet across the aisle. Twenty men on the other side of a pane of glass and a few strips of plastic, and she was standing in white lace for the one in here.

She'd driven across town to see his face. She made herself stand still and let him look first.

Ray said nothing.

His chest filled under the tight shirt and stayed full. She watched it hold. The buttons strained over his gut. His mouth came open a little, and his tongue touched his lower lip. Then the air went out of him through his nose, slow and loud in the shut office.

The vent over the door breathed on her. It found the wet front of her thong and turned it cool against her lips, and she felt exactly how much of it there was.

She didn't cover up. She took a step closer and set her hands on her hips, above the white straps.

"I bought it for you," she said low. "You put me in white in Dayton. I remember your face when I came out of that bathroom in it. I wanted that face again." Her voice dropped further. "I've had it on at my desk since ten, Ray." It came out easy, and she heard how easy. "Thinking about what you'd do to me. I'm wet right through it."

His eyes held on her face. Then they went down to the lace, and his nostrils flared. He hooked two thick fingers into the front of the thong and pushed them straight down into her.

She gasped out loud. Her hips bucked into his wrist. She grabbed his forearm to stay up on her heels while the rough pads of his fingers dragged through her.

He pulled them out and held them up between their faces. Shiny to the second knuckle. A string of her stretched from his middle finger back to the bow.

"Bridal white," Ray said. "Past my reps in it. Cunt leaking through the front."

"They didn't get the bow, *papi*," she breathed. "I saved the bow. They just got the skirt."

"The skirt was plenty." He drew his wet fingers across her lower lip, one way, then back. She tasted herself. Salt and musk. "That's right, lick it off."

She licked it off, looking at him.

Then his hand went to his buckle.

The brass tongue clicked free. He drew the belt out of his loops in one long dry pull. His work belt. Heavy, dark brown, two inches wide. He doubled it in his fist and slapped it once against his own palm, and the sound filled the room.

Her stomach dropped. In his apartment, and in her own bed, he had cinched a belt around her wrists. He had never laid one across her skin.

"Ray—"

"You made me wait since Thursday," he said. "You hid behind Patel. Now you bend over for it. Come around here."

He walked around the end of the desk to the chair side. He shoved the swivel chair back against the credenza with his knee and pointed at the desktop with the folded leather.

"Over it. From this side. Head toward the door."

Her feet didn't move for a second.

Ray Vogler was going to belt her ass in his office. The same man whose name she had typed into a Meridian HR form in Dallas, word for word, *ass is wasted on one man*, while James sat beside her and told her she was doing the right thing. She had been so proud of that complaint. She was a lead analyst on the biggest account in the building, and he was a fat fifty-three-year-old salesman in a shirt he'd sweated through by noon. Every sane part of her knew exactly how wrong this was.

None of that reached her knees. Her pussy gave one slow, heavy throb at the sight of the folded belt, and under it came the thing she'd been starving for since Sunday: the quiet that would come down over her the second he made her stop thinking.

She came around after him on her heels. The kneehole gaped under the overhang. The desk was long. His printouts sat squared at one end. Past the blotter, at the far edge, lay her own folder.

"Someone's going to walk past that glass," she whispered. Her heels kept carrying her to the edge.

"Then you keep your mouth shut while you take it." His palm spread between her shoulder blades. "Down."

She bent from the chair side and laid herself across the desk. The laminate was cold on her belly. Her breasts pressed into the desk in their lace. Her chin hung near the front edge, a foot from her folder, and past it she could see the bottom of the door and the striped blinds. Her heels stayed on the carpet behind her, back by the credenza. Her ass was the highest thing in the room.

Ray hooked his thumbs in the sides of the thong and pulled it down. It stopped above her stocking tops, stretched tight, and held her knees apart.

He didn't hit her yet. His fingertips traced the split of her cheeks, light. They passed over her back hole. She clenched. They went lower and slid into her pussy two knuckles deep. Then out.

"Whose is this?" he said.

"Yours," she breathed.

"Whole sentence."

"It's yours, Ray, it's all—"

The belt came down.

She heard it before she felt it. A flat, heavy smack of leather on bare skin, wide as both her cheeks. For one second there was only a white sting. Then it sank in and spread under her skin in a hot band, and ran down between her legs and lit her clit as if he'd pressed his thumb on it. Her knees dipped.

"*Ah* — God — Ray — you mean, mean — I felt that in my—"

"That's for Thursday." His palm settled over the stripe and squeezed. She hissed through her teeth and pushed up into his hand. "This one's Cleveland."

The second stroke fell lower, across the crease where her ass met her thighs. She cried out and ground her hips into the desk edge. Her clit dragged on the laminate. Wet ran down the inside of her leg.

He put his fingers back on her. One fingertip circled her asshole and didn't go in. Two fingers sank into her pussy and turned. She squirmed on the desk like something pinned to it.

"Ray — *please* — that's so mean—"

"What are you?"

"I'm—" She panted against the blotter. "Your Blondie—"

"Not enough." His fingers left her. "What are you to me. In this office."

Her face burned. "Your plaything. Fine — your plaything, Ray, your office toy, your — *ah!*"

The third stroke cut off the end of it. It landed low, under her ass, and the tail of the leather licked across her swollen lips. It smacked wet. She felt the strap come away slick with her. A sob jumped out of her. The fourth crossed the first, and she squealed, high and loud, and the sound bounced off the glass.

Even on Wednesday night, pinning her wrists to their pillows, James had touched her like she might crack. This man was belting her bare ass in a building full of people, and her thighs were slick enough to slide against each other.

"Listen to that noise," Ray said. "Half my floor's going to be at the door."

"I can't help it — I can't—"

He reached between her thighs and fisted the stretched thong. He dragged it down over her stocking tops, over her knees. He lifted her right heel, then her left, and pulled it free.

He came up beside her head. His hand took her jaw and squeezed her cheeks until her mouth opened. He balled the wet lace and pushed it in past her teeth.

The taste of herself flooded her tongue. Musk and salt and wet cloth. She made a sound into it.

"Bite down," he said. "Keep it there."

She bit.

He went back behind her. The belt landed. She cried out into her own underwear, high, and it came out through her nose thick and muffled. Again. Her eyes ran. Her hips humped the edge of the desk. Between strokes he ran his fingers through her from behind. Through her pussy. Up over her asshole, pressing. Every time, she moaned into the lace and pushed back at his hand.

"That Sunday," Ray said behind her. He was breathing hard now. "I'm in your kitchen. Your husband throws a cup at my head. Tells me *don't* like I'm a dog at his table. Puts me out his front door."

The belt fell.

"And you stood there and let him." Again. "That wasn't right, Blondie. Not after the night you gave me upstairs. So you take some of his." Again, lighter, right on the hottest stripe. "And then you work to make it up to me. You hear?"

She nodded into the blotter. She nodded hard. "*Mm-hm. Mmh.*"

Then he walked around the end of the desk to the front.

She heard his zipper. She lifted her face off the desk. Ray stood at the front edge, between her and the door, the folded belt in his left hand. His trousers hung open. His cock stood out of his boxers under the hang of his gut, thick and dark. The head flared past the shaft and shone wet at the slit.

He hooked a finger into her mouth and drew the thong out. It came out a sodden rope. He pushed it into his trouser pocket.

"Open."

She swallowed, gasping. "Ray, if somebody—"

"Open your mouth."

She opened it. He fed her the head.

It filled her cheek to cheek. Her tongue went flat under it. She tasted salt, and the sour skin of a man who'd sat in wool all day. Her nose was an inch from his belly.

He leaned out over her back. His gut came down on the top of her head and held her on him. Above her spine he lifted the folded belt a foot and snapped it down, short. The leather landed across the small of her back and the top of her ass. Lighter. Hot all the same. She squealed around his cock, and the squeal went into him and stopped there.

"Better gag," Ray said. He rolled his hips and slid an inch deeper. "Hum on it when it lands."

He hit her again, and it came out of her as a hum. Her throat buzzed around him. The sting ran down her spine and into her pussy. Her hips bucked against the far edge of the desk with nothing to rub on. She sucked. She couldn't not. She hollowed her cheeks and drew him in and moaned on him while spit ran out the corners of her mouth onto the desk.

He pulled out and let her breathe.

"Talk," he said.

She had air again, and her mouth to herself. This was the moment to say *Ray, they'll hear*. To remember the folder on the far edge of the desk, and James at home waiting for a text, and why she had come at all. She heaved for breath with her cheek on his blotter and spit on her chin, her ass on fire, and every reason she'd brought with her was gone. All she could think about was the next stroke and his cock back in her mouth.

"Hit me again, *papi*," she gasped. "I want it while you're in my mouth. Fill it up and hit me. Please."

He pushed back in to the root of her tongue. The belt landed across her shoulder blades, and the whole desk felt it. She choked a sob around him, and her eyes streamed. He set a slow push and pull in her mouth. On every off-stroke he leaned over her and snapped the leather down from above. Back, then the top of her ass, then back, until she couldn't tell which of them she was moaning for.

Two sets of footsteps came down the corridor outside the blinds. One of them stopped at the door.

Three knuckles on the wood.

"Ray? You got two seconds on the Cleveland roll-up before I send it to Miller?"

Jenna froze with his cock on her tongue.

Dave Reston. Three doors down. She knew the voice from this floor. She'd heard it in the hallway every time she walked a folder down to Ray. He was four feet away through a door that didn't lock.

Ray's eyes went to the door. Then to the front of the desk. Then down at the kneehole on his side. She watched his eyes stop there.

He slid out from between her lips.

"Dave drops paper on the front edge and walks," he said, very low. "Panel's solid. I fill the rest."

"Ray, no," she whispered. "Wait—"

He was already moving. He flung the belt over her back. It slapped the carpet on the chair side, by the desk leg. He came back around the desk with his cock jutting out of his open fly. He gripped her hips and dragged her backward off the laminate. Her heels hit the carpet. He turned her by the shoulders and pushed her down, and her knees went into the dark of the kneehole under his desk.

He dropped into the swivel chair. His knees spread on either side of her. His fist closed in the hair at the back of her skull and pulled her face onto him, and the head of his cock was back on her tongue before she could close her mouth. With the other hand he snatched her bodysuit off the desk corner and dropped it over her bare shoulders. Then he rolled the chair forward until his gut met the edge of the desk and the only light left was a grey strip along the floor, under the panel.

In the dark there was only him. The heat of his lap closed around her face. He smelled of cock and crotch sweat, thick and sour, shut in there with her, and her own spit cooling on him. Her tongue lay under the fat head and felt the vein beat along it.

A drop leaked from his slit onto the back of her tongue, bitter and slick. Her throat worked to take it. A moan started up from her chest. She caught it behind her teeth and swallowed it down with him.

"Come on in, Dave," he called. His voice went big and easy. "It's open."

The door swung.

Two brown loafers walked onto the carpet and stopped at the front of the desk. She could see them through the gap under the panel. Two feet from her knees. Three-quarters of an inch of board between her and a man who knew her name.

"Sorry to barge in, man," Dave said. Paper slapped down on the desk, right above her head. "Miller's riding everybody about the five o'clock lock. Euclid dock numbers from last Wednesday look twelve grand short on our side. Figured you had the Cleveland sheet."

"Lay it down," Ray said.

Under the desk, his hand pushed her head two inches forward.

Ray's fat cockhead slid to the back of her mouth and into the top of her throat. Her gag kicked in her chest. She pressed her nose into the open fly of his trousers and swallowed it. Silent. She swallowed it again. Tears ran sideways across her temples.

If her lips parted a millimeter, the wet pop would carry. Dave would stop talking. He'd lean over the desk and look down past Ray's knee, and he'd see Meridian's analyst on her knees with her ass striped red and her underwear in Ray's pocket.

She sealed her lips around the shaft and kept them sealed. She breathed in sips through her nose. Her pussy clenched so hard she dug her nails into the carpet to keep her hips off the panel.

"Line fourteen," Dave said. His elbow came down on the desk edge. His trouser cuff hung twenty inches from her bare ass, on the other side of the wood. "They booked the hardware

under the Q2 maintenance code instead of the Phase One close."

"Morons," Ray said. While he said it, his hand drew her up until only the head filled her mouth. Then down again to the root. Up. Down. Slow. "Same thing they did in October. Give me your pen, mine's dry."

A pen clicked onto the desk. Above her head Ray wrote something and scratched something out.

"Initialed," he said. "Have Sarah key it before four-thirty and Miller shuts up."

"Lifesaver." The loafers shifted. They didn't leave. "Hey. Was that the Meridian girl I saw come down the aisle? Jenna? Blonde, that—" A short laugh. "I figured she was headed in here."

Jenna stopped breathing.

"Dropped off her packet," Ray said. His hand didn't change speed. "She's down the hall in the ladies'. That's her coat. You just missed her."

"Huh." A pause. Dave would be looking at the guest chair now. Her coat. Her tote. Under the coat, laid flat on the seat, her skirt. She went cold to her fingertips, then hot. "Well. Kowalski about walked into the printer."

"Kowalski walks into the printer for the UPS girl."

"Not like that he doesn't." Dave dropped his voice, man to man. "I'm not saying anything. I'm just saying. That slit goes up to here. And the top. I didn't know where to put my eyes, Ray. I'm a married guy."

"You knew where to put them."

Dave laughed. "Okay. I knew."

Ray pushed her down to the root and held her there. Her nose was buried in the grey hair under his belly. Her throat pulsed around him.

"She walks like that on purpose," Ray said. "All the way down the aisle. She knows every guy on the floor is looking at her ass."

"That ass," Dave said, with feeling. "I got up and refilled my coffee just to stand by the aisle. I didn't even want coffee."

"She sits in that chair," Ray said, "crosses her legs, and checks if I noticed."

"And did you?"

"I notice everything, Dave."

Dave laughed. "Yeah, you do." The loafers didn't move. "Kowalski says she's the one who took Garrison apart at the Dayton audit. People down there still talk about it."

"She did." Ray's hand drew her up the shaft and let her hang there with only the head on her tongue. "Sharpest analyst Meridian's got. Takes a room apart without raising her voice." He pushed her back down, slow, all the way, until her lips met the open fly. "Mouth on her you wouldn't believe."

Above her head, Dave snorted. "That's one way to put it."

"I mean it." Ray's thumb rubbed once behind her ear. "Doesn't matter what you put in front of her. She takes all of it and asks for more."

Under the desk her face burned. He was saying it to a stranger with his cock in her throat, and every word of it was true, and Dave thought he was talking about spreadsheets.

So she answered him.

She drew back on her own until only the head sat on her lips, and she kissed it. Wet, open-mouthed, slow, the way she'd

kiss his mouth. She ran the flat of her tongue around the rim twice. Then she took him back down herself, past where his hand had been taking her, past the soft catch at the back of her mouth, and swallowed until her lips pressed the open teeth of his zipper. She held him there with no hand on her at all.

Ray's thigh went hard as a beam against her shoulder.

"She married?" Dave said.

A half-second too long went by.

"Auditor," Ray said. "Some firm downtown."

"Poor bastard." Dave said it with real sympathy. "Can you imagine going home to that every night and wondering where she's been all day?"

"I bet he wonders," Ray said. "I bet he's got a hell of an imagination."

James. At his desk right now, his phone face-up beside the keyboard, waiting for her text. She could see him so clearly that her pussy clenched hard around nothing. She came up off Ray, sucking the whole way, and went down again faster, and then again, using her throat on him, and her knee knocked the inside of the panel.

A dull thump in the wood.

"You hear that?" Dave said.

Ray rocked back hard, and the chair springs shrieked under his weight. "This chair. Put in for a new one in January. Miller says Q2."

"Miller says everything's Q2."

Ray's fist tightened in her hair to slow her. She let him lift her an inch. Then she pushed down through his grip and took him again anyway, all of him, her nose crushed into his fly, and swallowed on him three times, slow, so he felt each one.

His fist opened. His hand lay on the back of her head and didn't pull.

She slid her right hand off the carpet and between her own thighs.

Her thong was in Ray's pocket. There was nothing there but her, swollen and soaked, and the first touch nearly sent her over. She pushed two fingers inside herself, deep, and held them there and didn't dare move them. Any wet sound would carry. With her other hand she reached up into his open fly and cupped his balls, heavy and hot and tight already, and rolled them in her palm while she sucked.

Above her, Ray breathed out through his nose. Long. Not quite steady.

"Swear to God, though," Dave went on, lower, man to man. "When she went by, Brennan made a noise. Out loud. Like a dog seeing a ham."

"Brennan's an animal."

"You okay, man? You're red as a stop sign."

"Quarter close," Ray said. "Miller."

"Miller," Dave agreed, as if that covered it.

She smiled around his cock. She couldn't help it. Ray Vogler, the man who never lost a room, sweating through his shirt three inches over her head because of what her mouth was doing to him, and lying to a coworker to keep his voice level. She took him into her throat and squeezed his balls gently in her fist and hummed on him once, so low only his body could hear it.

His hips came up off the chair an inch before he caught them.

"What do you think, though?" Dave leaned in. His elbow creaked the desk edge right over her head. "Woman like that. You think she's — you know. Into stuff? Behind closed doors?"

"Dave." Ray's voice came out slow, the way a man walks across ice. "I think a woman like that, you put her on her knees, she stays there."

She stayed there. She worked him with her throat until her eyes streamed.

"I think she'd let you do whatever you wanted to her." A breath. "Thank you for it after."

She pulled up to the head and licked the slit, slow, tasting him leaking onto her tongue, and looked up at him in the dark, though he couldn't see her eyes.

"And I think—" he stopped, and started again, "I think she'd want the door unlocked while you did it."

Her fingers moved inside herself. One stroke. Two. She curled them and pressed and felt herself come apart around her own hand, with Ray's cock on her tongue and another man's loafers two feet from her knees.

Dave laughed, uneasy and delighted. "Jesus, Ray."

"You asked."

"Remind me never to ask you anything." A pause. Then, slower: "Wait. Are you — you and her?" He laughed it off before Ray could answer. "Come on. No offense, man."

"Look at me, Dave," Ray said.

"Yeah." Dave laughed, relieved. "Yeah, okay."

She took him to the root while Dave laughed. She felt Ray laugh too, silent, all the way down through his belly into the crown of her head, and she swallowed on him, hard, through the middle of it. The laugh broke off in his chest.

She came.

It tore through her in total silence. Her throat locked around him, and her thighs clamped on her own hand, and she shook in the dark under his desk with her lips sealed and no breath in her at all. She came, and kept coming, the tears running hot into her hairline. In her mouth his cock jumped once, then again, and swelled hard against her tongue, and his hand clamped the back of her skull and wrenched her up off him to the tip, and held her there, shaking. He was right at the edge. She could feel his pulse beating against her lip. She held perfectly still on the head and let him feel her not moving, and the power of it went through her as hard as the orgasm had.

Above her, Dave asked whether Ray had seen the bonus table yet.

"Saw it," Ray said. The word came out half a step thick. Only she would hear it.

"All right," Dave said. "Close dinner Friday?"

"Wouldn't—" Ray cleared his throat. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Tell her I said hi." The loafers turned. "Actually, don't."

The footsteps crossed the carpet. The door opened and shut. The latch clicked.

Ray didn't let her up. He held her at the root for a long moment, while she shook. Then his hand opened, and he rolled the chair back a foot.

She came off him with a loud, ragged gasp. A thick rope of spit snapped between her lips and the head of his cock. She sucked air into a burning chest.

He looked down at her between his knees. The bodysuit was sliding off one shoulder. Mascara smeared at the corners of

her eyes. Spit shone on her chin and throat and down onto the gold letters.

She didn't wipe any of it away. She stayed where he'd put her, on her knees, her palms resting flat on his thighs, and tipped her chin down so she had to look up at him through her wet lashes. Waiting to be told. Then the corner of her mouth curled, just slightly, and she ran the tip of her tongue along her lower lip and gathered him off it, slowly, without breaking his eyes. *I almost made you come in front of him.* She didn't say it. She didn't have to. She watched him know it.

"He was *right there*," she whispered. She shrugged the bodysuit off her shoulders onto the carpet. "He was looking at my coat, Ray. He was talking about my ass. God, the things you said about me."

She bent her head toward his lap and stopped an inch away. She didn't touch him.

"Please," she said, looking up. "Let me. I'll be good."

He let her wait. Then he nodded once.

She took his hand off the arm of the chair and set it on the back of her own head, and laced her fingers over his for a second so he'd know she meant it. Then she let go and put her mouth on him. Not fast. She could feel how close he still was, the heat and the hard jump of him under her lips. She kissed down the length of him to the base, then lower. She licked his balls, slow and flat-tongued, took one into her mouth and sucked on it gently, and looked up at him while she did it.

"Say more of it," she breathed against him. "What you'd have told him if he stayed. Tell me what I am."

Ray's voice came out rough. "I'd have told him to come around the desk and look. See where the Meridian girl really spends her afternoons."

She moaned. She couldn't stop it. She dragged her tongue back up the underside of his shaft and took the head into her mouth and sucked, soft and wet, her eyes on his.

"I'd have told him she's got a husband at home with a hell of an imagination," Ray said, "and she still crawled under my desk the second I pointed."

"Yes, *papi*," she said around him. Spit ran down her chin. "Yours. Use it however you want."

His hand closed in her hair. He pushed her down slowly to the root and held her there, and his hips rose off the chair into her throat once, twice, and she let him, her hands open on his thighs, her bare ass in the air behind her and the stripes throbbing every time she rocked.

His thighs went hard as stone under her palms. He hauled her off him by the hair.

"Enough," he said roughly. "You're not finishing me on the carpet. Up."

He hooked his hands under her arms and dragged her out of the kneehole. She came up on wobbling heels between his knees, naked from the waist down except for the stockings. Before she was steady he reached around her and pinched the hooks of her bra. They popped. He stripped the straps down her arms and dropped the lace on the carpet. Her breasts fell free, heavy, the nipples wet from her own drool and drawn up hard.

"Look at these," he said. "Standing up for me in my office."

"They've been up since the elevator." She laughed, shaky, and pushed her chest at him. "Ask Kowalski."

He took her left breast in one enormous hand and weighed it. His palm was hot and rough as a rasp. He rolled the wet nipple under his thumb until her knees buckled, then pinched it, and she rocked forward into his face. His other hand found the back of her right thigh, just above the stocking top, and held her there on her shaking heels while his open mouth dragged hot and wet over the top of her breast.

He sat back, spread his knees, and slapped his thigh.

"Get on," he said. "Sit down on it."

She swung one stockinged leg over him and set her knees on the leather on either side of his hips. The chair springs shrieked under both of them. His gut pressed warm and damp against her bare belly, and his cock stood up between them, still slick from her throat, its head resting just under her navel. Then his rough palms closed on her ass and spread her, right over the welts, and the burn bloomed fresh under his grip.

"I never know if I can take it like this," she whispered. "Not all the way. Not sitting on it."

"You can," he said. "Line it up."

She reached down with her left hand, rings on, and closed her fingers around him. The head was so wide her fingers didn't meet under it. She notched it against her opening and let her weight come down.

Her entrance held him off. One second. Two. She whimpered. Then it gave, and the crown pushed through with a thick wet sound she felt up under her ribs.

"*Oh* — God, Ray — it's so thick—"

Her forehead dropped onto his damp shoulder. She sank, inch by inch. He didn't get smaller anywhere. Then her striped ass came down on his trousers, and he was seated to the base.

Wednesday night came into her head. James, bare, in their bed. How easily he had fit. How she'd had room left to think, even while she was coming. There was no room now. Ray pushed everything out. The desk, the door, Dave's loafers, the house on Elm Street. There was only the stretch, and the hot thick weight lodged against the end of her.

"Tell me," Ray said. His fingers dug in. "Your boy open you up like that?"

"No," she laughed into his neck, breathless. "God, no. He never gets up here." Laughing clenched her on him, so full it hurt, and she laughed again.

He lifted her. Four inches up his shaft, then dropped her. Her ass slapped his thighs. Up again, down hard. The chair rocked and groaned. On every lift the flared rim of his head dragged along her front wall and caught at her entrance, tugging, before he let her fall back down the whole length. Every landing lit the stripes. Sting and stretch hit her at the same instant, over and over.

He ducked and took her left breast in his mouth. He sucked the nipple hard against his teeth. His stubble scraped her.

"Harder," she begged. "Bounce me harder, Ray, I don't care who hears the chair. Let Dave hear it. Let him come back—"

He bounced her harder. She grabbed the back of his thick neck and rode the drops. Her breasts slapped his face. The wet noise of her coming down on him was obscene, and she didn't try to muffle any of it now.

"*Sí* — right there — don't stop, don't stop, I'm—"

It hit her in the middle of a drop. Her pussy clamped on him in hard pulls, and she cried out against his collar and shook.

"There you go. Your cunt's sucking on me," Ray grunted. He kept lifting and dropping her right through it.

"R— Ray — *Ray* —" His name was all she had, broken in half on every drop, until she was whimpering and twitching and wet all over his lap.

His hands slid to the backs of her thighs.

He lifted her off him. She sagged at the loss and nearly folded. He stood, turned her by the hips, and walked her the two steps to the desk with his wet cock pushing at the welts.

"*Papi*," she managed. Just that.

His palm spread between her shoulder blades and put her down where she'd taken the belt. His forearm swept the headset and Dave's sheet off the far side. Her folder went crooked by her cheek.

"You stopped," she said, loud, to the door. "Finish it, Ray."

He bent and came up from the carpet with the leather doubled in his fist. He laid it across both cheeks once, hard, right over the old stripes.

She cried out, high and raw. Nothing in her mouth, nobody at the door. It tore out of her throat, and her pussy clenched, empty, and ran.

He dropped the belt. "Knee up. Right one. On the desk."

"Ray, I can barely stand—"

"Knee up."

She put her hands on the laminate and lifted her right knee onto the desktop. Her left heel stayed on the carpet. It tipped

her hips up and sideways. Her ass rose at a slant, the stripes on it hot in the open air, her pussy open and swollen between her spread thighs. He stood behind her and looked at it. She heard him breathe.

"Stay like that," he said. "Still red from my belt." He fed his cock back into her.

The angle was new. He went in deep and a little sideways, and the head scraped a place that made her yell. He gripped her hip and her raised thigh and drove in with long heavy strokes. His gut slapped the stripes. The desk jumped on the carpet with every thrust.

Then his right hand slid between her cheeks, wet with what was running out of her, and pressed his thumb to her asshole.

"*Ah* — Ray — not back there, I'm not ready back there—"

"Breathe out."

"Ray—"

"Out."

She breathed out. His thumb pushed past the ring to the first knuckle, then the second. Her mouth fell open. His cock was in her pussy and his thumb was in her ass, and on every thrust the thumb pressed down through the thin wall between them, and she felt him rub his own shaft through her body. "*Fuck*," came out of her, flat and stunned.

"Soaking my desk," Ray panted. Sweat dripped off his chin onto her back. "Now you're pushing that ass back on my thumb. That's mine too. Keep pushing."

"I am — I'm pushing — give me more—"

His left hand left her hip. It climbed her spine and wound into her hair. He pulled. Her head came back, then her shoul-

ders, until she was arched up off the desk with her throat stretched and her face turned up toward his.

"Your own bed," he rasped. His mouth was at her temple. "You looked your husband in the face and told me you loved me. Next morning, your hand on the bedroom wall. Him in the spare room on the other side of it."

He drove in to the root and ground there. His thumb turned inside her.

"Was that a show for your boy?" he said. "Or do you love me?"

She couldn't find the floor.

James's face came to her, grey in the kitchen while Ray's voice came out of his phone, and with it the knowing that he had hated every second of this from the very first one. It went straight down into her pussy and burned there, and her second climax started up from her heels.

"It wasn't a show!" It tore out of her, high and sobbing. Her fingers clawed the laminate. "It wasn't a show, Ray, I meant it — I love you, Ray — *I love you, papi*—"

His rhythm broke for one stroke. His hand left her hair and clamped down on her shoulder, hard enough to hurt. It put her chest back down on the laminate. Then he drove into her harder than before.

"All of it," he growled. "All of it."

His thumb hooked down inside her and his cock rode right over it, and her cunt pulled on both. "He's half your size," she got out. "I sit across from him at dinner and all I think about is this cock. He watched you take me in his own bed and threw a *cup*, that's all he — all he c—" A deep stroke knocked the rest of it out of her.

For a few blind seconds she didn't know if she was saying it to buy James his meeting, or because she wanted Ray Vogler to keep doing this to her forever. She meant every word while it was coming out.

It took her on the next stroke. Her cunt locked down on him and pulled in long hard squeezes, and the thumb in her ass felt every one of them through the wall. He fucked straight through it. His thumb pressed down and his cock dragged across it, and each squeeze came harder than the last. She sobbed into the blotter, high and broken. "*Te — te a — te amo—*"

"Mine," Ray said through his teeth. "You hear me? All of it. Mine."

He buried himself to the hilt and came.

She felt him swell. "Ray — inside me — on your *desk*, oh God, you're—" A pulse hit high in her and took the rest of it.

Then the others, hot and heavy, deep in her. One. Another. Another. He kept grinding in on each one with his hips pinned to her ass. It backed up around his shaft and pushed out of her, warm, running onto the desk under her raised knee. He groaned against her neck. His chest heaved on her back. She clenched on him until the last slow twitches stopped.

He stayed in her a long time. Then he drew back.

He came out of her with a wet, hollow pop. Right after it came a gush, warm and heavy, out of her open pussy and down the inside of her left leg. It stopped at her stocking band, and the band drank it.

"Stay like that," Ray said.

She stayed. Knee on the desk, face on the blotter, his cum running out of her. She could feel him look.

"Okay," he said finally, breathing hard. "Okay. Down."

She brought her knee off the desk. Her legs nearly went. She caught herself on the edge and turned her head. The glass wall, striped grey. One door. It opened onto the sales floor.

"Ray," she said. Her voice was scraped raw. Her hand went between her legs, and another thick trickle ran over her fingers. "Where's your bathroom?"

He was already tucking himself back in. He zipped up. He picked his belt up off the carpet at his feet and threaded it back through his loops.

"Down past the elevators," he said. "This isn't the executive floor in Chicago, Blondie."

"I can't walk across your sales floor like this. I don't even have underwear—"

Ray pulled the thong out of his pocket. It was a wet twisted cord. He dropped it on the desk by her hand.

"There's your underwear."

She stared at it. Putting it on would just plaster cold wet lace against her and hold back nothing.

He buckled his belt. He went to the credenza and pulled a handful of tissues from the box and tossed them on the desk beside her hip. His eyes went over her striped ass and the white streak shining down her thigh.

"Wipe the worst of it. Put your skirt on. Clean up at your own shop." He reached down and patted her right cheek, slow, right on a stripe. She jumped. "Feel me running down your leg the whole drive back."

Her face burned from her chest to her hairline. She dabbed between her legs with four tissues. They went heavy and wet in

her fingers almost at once. He had put it too deep. More was coming.

She picked the thong off the desk and the bra and the bodysuit off the carpet, and carried them to the guest chair. She shoved the thong and the bra into the zippered pocket of her tote. She pulled the bodysuit back on over her bare breasts and snapped it between her legs, and the snaps were cold on her swollen lips. Without the bra, her nipples stood out hard against the burgundy. She slid the skirt out from under her coat, stepped into it, and zipped it. The lining slid against the stripes on her ass, and she sucked in a breath.

She reached behind her neck for the clasp of the chain.

"Leave that on," Ray said. He was sitting at his desk again. He had Dave's pen and was signing the bottom of her Q1 packet. "Take it off at your car."

He slid the folder across the desk to her.

"See you on the close call Friday," he said. "Tell James I'm glad he's feeling better."

She took the folder and shouldered her tote. She belted her trench coat to the throat over the gold and her bare chest. Then she opened the door and walked out.

Every step on the four-inch heels pushed more of him out of her. Under the skirt she was bare, and it came down her inner thighs in slow warm threads. Each heel-strike jarred up into the stripes, and the lining rasped over them.

The floor was quieter than when she came in. At the printer, Kowalski stood with a sheet in his hand. His eyes went to the blinds on Ray's office, then to her. Behind her, by the whiteboard, a man said, "Well. Somebody's having a good Tuesday," and another one snorted. The noise or her walk. She couldn't

tell which. She kept her eyes on the elevator doors and felt him reach the tops of her stockings.

She rode down with two men from shipping in steel-toed boots, talking about a forklift. At the second floor one of them stepped back to make room, and his shoulder came within inches of hers. Her fingers tightened on the folder until the edge bit her palm. He went on about the forklift. Another warm thread slid down and met the first one at the lace.

In the car she unclasped the chain and held it in her fist a moment before she dropped it in her tote.

At Meridian she rode up to the fourth floor. In the women's room she wet a wad of paper towels at the sink. Then she locked herself in the handicapped stall at the back and hiked the skirt to her waist. The tops of both stockings were sticky. Her ass throbbed under her own fingers when she touched the stripes. She cleaned herself as well as she could, and he kept coming out of her, and the taste of him was still at the back of her throat.

She texted James from the Meridian garage before she started the engine. *Done. Signed the packet. On my way home now.*

At the side door she fished the gold chain out of her tote and dropped it in the junk drawer. She shut the drawer with her hip. His footsteps were already on the stairs.

She set the tote on the island stool, the lace zipped away in its inside pocket, and slid out of her trench coat and hung it on the peg.

James came through the archway in his grey crewneck and stopped three steps into the kitchen.

His eyes went to her mouth first. She pressed her lips together and felt how sore they were. Then his eyes dropped to the plunge, where nothing held her nipples back from the burgundy, and the color went out of his face. A loose strand was stuck to her cheek. She pushed it back, and that was worse, because he watched her do it.

"That's not what you had on at eleven," he said.

"No." She kept her voice even. "I changed before I left."

"While I was on with Tom." Flat. Quiet. It wasn't a question. "Right across the hall."

"I had the coat on." She tried a small smile. It didn't land. "I wasn't hiding it from you, James. I just wasn't going to stand in your doorway like this with Tom on speaker."

His eyes went back to the plunge and stayed there. "You said he was suspicious. So you dressed for him."

"I dressed so he'd stop being suspicious. Five days of Patel and Diane. If I'd walked in there in my work clothes with a folder under my arm, he'd have spent the whole hour looking for what changed on Sunday." She held his eyes. "This way he didn't look for anything."

"No," James said. "I bet he didn't."

He took a step toward the island. His hands had closed at his sides.

"Did he fuck you?" It came out scraped. "Did you say the things you said on Sunday? Did you tell him you love him again?"

She shifted her weight on the tile, and Ray moved in her. He was still up there, high, where the paper towels hadn't reached. The skirt lining dragged over the stripes, and she kept

her face still. *I love you, papi.* An hour ago it had come out of her sloppy, sobbing and moaning it.

If she gave James a tenth of it, his bags would be in his trunk before dark.

Then her eyes dropped, only for a second, to the front of his chinos.

He was hard. The ridge of him stood out against the cotton beside his zipper, and above it his face was white and set.

Her shoulders came down. Her voice went low and soft. She came around the island to him on her heels.

"No, baby," she said. "Of course I didn't. Why would I say that to him with you not even in the room?"

She laid both hands on his chest. Her breasts brushed his sweater.

"He was suspicious the second I walked in," she murmured. "He kept fishing about Sunday. If I'd argued, he'd have known. So I didn't let him talk." She held his eyes. "It was mostly just a blowjob, James. I got under his desk and kept my mouth busy."

His hands came up and took her waist hard through the skirt. He didn't push her away. He didn't pull her in.

"Under his desk," he said.

"Under his desk. And a guy from his floor walked in with the Cleveland numbers while I was down there."

His cock jumped against her stomach the second she said it. She felt it, and she smiled. She slid her right hand down and closed it over him through the chinos.

"Oh," she said softly. "You liked that part."

"Jenna. Stop."

"You stop." She squeezed, and he pulsed in her hand. "You're the one poking me."

"I asked you a question."

"And I answered it." She rubbed him slow with the heel of her hand, up the length of him and down. "Now let me show you."

"Show me what."

"How it went. Exactly how." She kept her palm moving. "So you don't lie awake tonight making up something worse."

"No."

He said it flat, in that finished voice she knew. Under her hand his cock swelled against the zipper, and a warm damp spot came through the cotton into her palm.

She pressed the spot with her thumb. "Tell him that, baby," she whispered. "He's not listening to you."

"That isn't how this goes—"

She sank down in her heels until her knees met the tile.

Kneeling pushed more of Ray out of her. It slid warm onto her inner thigh under the skirt, a foot from James's knees, and he couldn't see it. She sat back on her heels, and they pressed the skirt into the stripes. She bit the inside of her cheek. Her pussy gave a hard throb anyway.

His hand went into her hair and pulled up, once, the way a man starts to lift something heavy. Then it stopped.

"Get up," James said.

"Make me." She unbuckled his belt. He didn't make her. She popped his button and drew the zipper down, and his hand stayed fisted in her hair and didn't pull. She looked up at him. "I know that grip."

She hooked his boxers down. He sprang out against her cheek, hot and red, already slick at the tip.

"Leaking for me," she whispered, and kissed the wet head. "You've been like this since I walked in the door, haven't you? Since you saw my mouth."

"Jenna—" His voice cracked on it. "Don't you dare make this—"

"Make it what, baby? Good?"

She wrapped both fists around him, one stacked on the other. "This is how I held him," she said. "Watch."

His thighs went rigid. His eyes stayed on her hands.

She opened her sore mouth and took the rest of him in.

He fit. That was the first thing she knew. Her jaw still ached from the last hour, and James slid over her tongue with room to spare. She could take him to the back of her throat without fighting for it, until her lips met her own knuckles. He jerked forward into her at once, and a groan came up out of his chest that she had never heard from him.

"Oh, *fuck* — Jenna—"

She gave him the rhythm. Short, fast bobs of her head on the top half of him. Her stacked fists twisting on the wet lower half, turning against each other, so no inch of him was ever still. She didn't keep it neat. She let the spit run over her fingers and down her wrists and used it, and the kitchen filled with one wet sound, loud and sloppy and unashamed.

The tile bit her knees. Every bob rocked her back onto her heels and into the stripes. Between her legs she was slick with Ray, and the shame of that came up hot into her face in the same second her clit pulsed against nothing. She squeezed her thighs together and sucked harder.

"Is this—" He was panting. "Is this what you did? To him?"

She pulled off with a wet pop. A string of spit stretched from her bottom lip to his head, and she stroked him through it in her slick fist and looked up.

"Just like this."

His cock kicked in her hand. She felt it and kept it.

"He held my hair," she tried, low.

His fingers tightened in her hair. That was all. His cock stayed where it was.

"And then the door opened."

He jumped in her fist, hard, and the breath went out of him in a rush.

So that was the one.

"Walked right up to the desk," she whispered. She slowed her hand and twisted it over the head. "Dropped his papers a foot over my head. And I had Ray all the way in my mouth, and I couldn't make a sound."

"Stop."

"Not one sound, James. The whole time they talked." Her thumb rubbed his slit, and it gave up a clear drop. "They talked about my legs."

"*Stop*—" It cracked down the middle. His hips pushed into her fist anyway.

She leaned in and licked the drop away. Ray's cum shifted in her as she moved, and she kept her knees pressed together.

"You should see your face, baby," she breathed. "Like you were the one who walked in."

He stared down at her. She knew what he had to look at. Her mouth red and puffy and shining with spit. Her mascara gone soft at the corners. Her bare throat. His eyes went to her throat and stayed, and she was glad of the junk drawer.

She held his eyes and pumped him in her spit-slick hand, long and wet, root to tip.

"Look how hard this makes you, James," she whispered. "If you like this so much, why don't you just relax and enjoy it?" She laid her cheek against his thigh and didn't stop stroking. "I'm not going to let Ray ruin our life."

His mouth opened. Nothing came out of it. His head tipped back against nothing, and his throat worked, and his hips rocked once into her hand.

She put her mouth back on him before he could find a word.

She took him deep and held him there. Her throat squeezed around his head. He bent forward over her with a groan, and his free hand came down on the edge of the island behind her to hold himself up.

She came off him slowly, lips dragging the length of him, and talked against the wet head. "Hold my head," she breathed. "Like you mean it. Use my mouth."

"Jen — I can't — Jesus—"

"You can. Do it."

The hand in her hair that had tried to lift her pushed down instead. He held her on him. His hips found a rhythm of their own and fucked her mouth in short, hard strokes, and she read *stop* in his face and *more* in his body. She hummed around him and let him. Her eyes watered. Her hand let go of him, and her nails dug into the back of his thigh and pulled him in.

Each stroke bumped the back of her throat and rocked her down onto her heels. The stripes flared. Another warm slide of Ray came out of her onto her thigh. She moaned on James's cock with his rival running down her leg.

She pulled back to the tip, gasping. "You love it," she said. "Say it."

"Fuck — Jenna—"

"Say it, baby."

"I love it." His voice broke on the second word. "God help me, I—"

She swallowed him down again.

"I'm — Jenna, I'm going to—"

She pulled back to the head and sucked, and looked up at him, and nodded with her mouth full.

"*Jen—*"

It broke in half in his throat. He came in hard pulses over her tongue, his fingers locked in her hair, his whole body bent over her. She sealed her lips and kept her eyes on his face and let him fill her mouth, pulse after pulse, warm and salt.

When he slowed, she took her hand off his thigh and closed it around him, then drew back to his tip and opened her mouth and let him see it, pooled white on her tongue under her swollen lip. His cock gave one more jerk in her fist, and a last thread landed on her chin.

She closed her mouth and swallowed. Then again for the rest. She caught the thread on her chin with her thumb and sucked the thumb clean, her eyes on him the whole time.

"See, baby," she whispered. "That wasn't so hard."

His hand went slack in her hair.

Her knees ached on the tile. She stayed down until his breathing slowed. Then she kissed the tip once, tucked him back into his boxers, did up his chinos, and buckled his belt.

When she stood, he caught her around the waist and pulled her into his chest. He held her a long time. His chin

pressed hard on her shoulder, and his heart hammered against her ribs.

Over his shoulder she looked at the white square by the trash can. It still wasn't painted.

I love you, papi stayed behind her teeth.

On Friday afternoon an email from Meridian's managing director dropped into Jenna's inbox. **FINAL PRE-CLOSE STANDINGS — Q1 PRESIDENT'S CLUB.**

Her blazer hung on the back of her chair. Under it she wore a black vest buttoned over bare skin, the V cut nearly to her sternum, her shoulders bare in the office air. She opened the attachment expecting to scroll past it.

Marcus Vance, Chicago, sat at the top, where the Hartley rollout had kept him all quarter. Her own name sat right under his. The gap was thirty-four and a half points.

She read the number twice. Then she opened her Ashford tracker on the left monitor.

One line on her Q1 slate was still open. 09-C, the Phase Three hardware certification. Sixty points, in yellow. Dock date April ninth. The hardware was vendor-owned, so the sign-off belonged to Cortec.

Her thumb rested on the mouse wheel and didn't move.

Her pulse came up slow and heavy. It sank low and settled between her legs, and she pressed her thighs together under the desk and kept looking at the line.

She printed both pages and slid them into her portfolio while they were still warm. Then she pulled up the Cortec portal's governance rules and read them until the floor went quiet.

James was at the counter slicing bell peppers, sleeves rolled, a bottle of Riesling open by the stove.

"Peppers," he said without turning. "You can supervise."

It came out tired. She didn't take it.

She set the portfolio on the table and shrugged off her coat. He glanced over his shoulder. The knife stopped halfway through a pepper. His eyes went into the V of the vest and stuck there, where her breasts pressed together with nothing under the black. When he spoke, his voice had dropped.

"What's that?"

"The missing half of next week."

He wiped his hands on the towel and came over.

She laid the standings in front of him and put her finger on her name. "I'm second. Thirty-four and a half behind Marcus."

"Second in what?"

"President's Club. Number one for the quarter."

"What does number one get?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars. And four days in Key Biscayne for the winner and a guest. It leaves Wednesday."

He scanned the sheet. "Okay. That's close. And?"

She slid the second page over the first and tapped 09-C. "Sixty points. Enough to pass Marcus. Phase Three hardware. It docks April ninth, so it's Q2. Unless Cortec certifies it done before Monday's close."

"Cortec meaning Ray."

"Ray's override. Ray dates it the thirty-first."

He looked up. "That's backdating."

"Certified done nine days before it docks."

He read the line again. Then, dry and flat: "That's fraud, Jenna. People lose careers for less. Cortec logs every manual override. His ID, his machine, the time."

"I know." She sat and folded her hands on the papers. "So. Friday. Braddock does everything you want. What stops Ray the day after?"

James went still. "Braddock pulls his seat."

"He's been looking at a house on your running route, James. He doesn't pack a U-Haul because his VP said no. He finds another way to stay. Another vendor, another account, another way into my building. And the first day he smells us in it, he comes at us from an angle we never see, the way he always has." She tapped 09-C. "We've got nothing on Ray. This is Ray. His name and his password on a fake certification. Anyone points an auditor at this line, he's fired for cause and loses his vesting. Whatever he tries after that, one anonymous email ends him."

"And when he works out we're the ones holding it?"

"Then he needs us quiet more than we need him quiet. For once he's the one who can't move first."

His hand came down on the table and flattened there. "How do you get a thirty-year rep to put his override on that?"

"You don't want to know how, James. Let me handle Ray."

His eyes went to her mouth, the way they had over the salmon, and stayed too long. She guessed he was looking at a room he wasn't in. Then his mouth went thin.

"I made you promise I'd know everything," he said. "Now I don't want to know. Listen to that."

"James—"

"Fine. Get him to sign. Monday night you tell him the trip's off."

"I can't. Monday's only the cutoff." She pointed at the footnote. "He can take it back until Friday at four. One click, gone.

If I cancel on him Tuesday, it disappears before lunch, and he knows it was us."

He read the footnote. Then he picked the standings back up and looked at the line under her name, the one about the winner and a guest, and something in his shoulders let go for the first time all evening.

"Well." He almost smiled. "Last time you went away for work, I got Dayton on voicemail. I'll take Key Biscayne." He set the sheet down. "Four days. I haven't had a real vacation since the Outer Banks. I'm digging out the trunks with the pineapples on them, and you can't stop me."

She didn't laugh.

He waited for it. She watched him wait, and watched the smile stay on his face a second too long, and then she watched him read hers.

"Jenna."

She didn't answer.

He looked down at the guest line, then up at her. "Why would Ray put his override on a fake date," he said slowly, "so you can take me to the beach?"

She looked at the footnote.

"He wouldn't." He said it to himself. "He's the guest."

"It's the only thing he'd sign for, James. You heard him on Sunday. A drawer. A key. Four days with me and no husband down the hall is the one price he'd pay for this."

"So you take him to the beach." His voice was very quiet. "That's the plan. You fly him to a beach resort for four days on your bonus, and I stay here and water the pansies."

"It's the only way it holds."

"Then the trail starts with you." It came out faster now, the analyst finding the hole and climbing into it. "Your bonus. A guest voucher in a Cortec rep's name, booked by you. And whoever asked him to do it. They pull your file before they pull his."

"They pull both. Meridian issues the prize, and I name the guest." She kept her voice level. "His login is the only signature. My word against his log."

"Your word." He said it like a finding. "Your word's had a busy month."

She held still.

"Every week there's a new reason you have to be alone with him. Tuesday it was a sign-off sheet. Now it's four days and an oceanfront suite." He leaned on the back of the chair. His knuckles had gone pale on it. "I think you want this. I think you sat at your desk this afternoon and worked it backward until you found a way you can keep Ray's cock in you, and you came home and called it a plan."

For half a second she saw Ray on a beach, his red gut over a pair of swim trunks, a paper umbrella lost in his fist. Black socks. Sandals. Glaring at the Atlantic as if it were late on a delivery. A laugh climbed her throat, and she wanted the stupid trip anyway, and her nipples stood up in the V where James could see them, and she went wet in her pants because he had said *cock* and Ray's name in one breath.

She saw him see it.

"Yeah," he said. "There it is."

Something in her went cold and very clear.

"You want to talk about my word?" She stood up. "You stood at an airport gate in November, James, and you let me

walk into your arms believing those texts were yours. And then you let me go on believing it. For four months. You had Ray on our couch in January and you told me to go upstairs and put on something nicer. You sat in that mediation and let me call myself a flirt and you insecure, and you knew. You told me to go up to 714." Her voice cracked and she rode straight over it. "Every door that man ever walked through in this house, you opened for him. You put us here, James."

He had gone white around the mouth.

"And I'm the one getting us out." She put her finger on 09-C. "Me. I'm the one who walks into his office. I'm the one who smiles at him and gets his login on that line, with my name on the voucher right next to it. I'm the one who gets on the plane. And you're standing in our kitchen sneering at me like I'm the problem."

"That's not—"

"It's exactly what it is. You lied to me for four months and called it protecting me. I'm about to spend four days with him to get us free of him. Don't you dare look at me like that while I do it."

The refrigerator hummed. Neither of them moved.

Then James let go of the chair. He went back to the cutting board and picked up the knife, and sliced the last pepper into strips, every one the same width, and scraped them into the bowl with the flat of the blade. He wiped the knife on the towel and laid it down beside the bowl, square to the edge of the board.

"The condition holds," he said to the cutting board. "Down there too. Every night, that night. All of it."

"James."

"And the minute that portal locks, you call me. Before you tell him anything." He untied the towel from his waistband and hung it on the oven door. "Friday, once it's locked and you're still down there, I'm getting Braddock alone. In person." He turned off the burner under the pan. It hadn't been on long enough to matter. "I'm not hungry."

He went up the stairs. She heard the guest-room door close. Not slammed. Closed, carefully, the way he did everything when he was furious.

She stood alone in the kitchen with the standings on the table and the bowl of peppers on the counter and her heart going hard.

Fine.

If that was where he was going to sleep, fine. If he wanted to stand at a window with his back to her and call her a liar with his hands shaking on a chair, he could do it from down the hall. She had brought him a way out of this. She had brought him the one thing in four months that put Ray in a box instead of their bed. And he'd heard *Key Biscayne* and gone straight up the stairs.

She looked at the standings. The winner and a guest.

I think you want this.

Fine. Then she wanted it.

She stood there with her jaw locked and both hands pressed to the table and let herself have it, all of it, out of pure spite. Ray on Monday afternoon, reading the sixty points with those small eyes. Ray's face when she told him whose name was on the guest line. Four days with no husband down the hall, no wall to put her palm against, nobody's feelings to tiptoe around in her own kitchen. Ray bending her over a balcony rail

with the ocean right there. Ray's hands on her in a pool where anyone could see. Waking up with him still inside her and nobody's chair in the corner.

Her pussy clenched, slow and hard, and this time she didn't fight it.

He wanted to call it fucking? Fine. He'd already decided what she was. She might as well stop holding back and be it. Let him lie in that narrow guest bed and wonder about all four days. Whatever Ray wanted on that beach, she was going to give it to him, and then she was going to give him more than he'd ever thought to ask for. It was the last time. After Friday Ray would be caged and she'd never have to go to him again. So she wasn't going to waste a minute of it being careful.

She picked up the Riesling and poured herself a full glass, and drank half of it standing at the counter where Sunday had happened.

On Monday afternoon, the last day of the quarter, Jenna left her coat in the car and walked onto Cortec's sales floor without it.

James had slept in the guest room Friday night. On Saturday he came to bed after she was asleep, and she woke at three with his hand on her hip, and neither of them moved or said a word. Sunday they were careful with each other, polite, almost kind. This morning he'd been gone before she came down. The coffee was made. Her mug sat out beside the pot, and next to it, on the back of a Hadley & Morrow envelope, in his square handwriting: *Call me when it's done.*

She had stood in the kitchen in her robe and looked at it for a long time. Then she'd gone upstairs and dressed for Ray in

front of the bedroom mirror, slowly, and she couldn't have said, standing there, which one of them it was for.

The cropped black blazer hung open. Under it, a corset bustier cinched her waist and shoved her breasts up into a bare, high shelf. There was no bra. Her dark nipples pressed through the sheer cups for anyone who cared to look. The low-rise trousers were painted onto her ass, and the four-inch heels made her hips work on every step. At her throat, in plain sight of the whole floor, sat the gold *Blondie* script.

Three doors short of Ray's office, Dave Reston stood in his doorway with a coffee. His eyes dropped to her chest, came up to her face, and went straight back down, and his ears went red.

"Jenna," he said. "Hey."

"Hi, Dave."

I think a woman like that, you put her on her knees, she stays there. He had stood two feet from her mouth and laughed at that. She gave him the smile she gave clients and kept walking, and felt his eyes on her ass all the way to Ray's door. Her nipples drew tight against the mesh.

Ray's door was open. She didn't knock. She stepped in, pushed it shut with her heel, and snapped the blinds closed with two fingers.

He was in his shirtsleeves behind the desk, tie dragged loose, reading glasses down his pockmarked nose, keying territory adjustments into his laptop. He took the glasses off, set them on the desk, and looked up.

His eyes went to the chain and stayed there. Behind the desk his chair springs creaked as he shifted his weight.

"You wore that down my aisle," he said. "Last day of the quarter. My name on your neck, right past Reston. So this isn't a Patel visit."

She came around the corner of the desk instead of taking the guest chair. His slacks had gone tight across his lap. She stepped into the gap between the credenza and his armrest and laid two printed sheets on the desk. Then she settled one hip on the desk edge, her breasts level with his face.

"Top sheet," she said.

Ray read Meridian's Q1 President's Club board, Vance first, her name second, then the Ashford Phase III tracker underneath. It took him no time at all.

He set them down. "You just handed a Cortec rep Meridian's comp table. That sheet by itself gets you walked out of your building."

"I know who I handed it to."

"And you want my override on Oh-Nine-C." One thick finger tapped the second page. "My ID. On a date field. On close day." His small eyes came up and held hers. "Last week you were hiding behind Patel. Now you parade through my floor dressed like a bonus. What happened at home, Blondie?"

She didn't answer from the desk. She leaned down over the arm of his chair, let the blazer fall open, and lifted his right hand off the armrest.

"Feel who's asking," she whispered, and pressed his palm inside the blazer, flat over her left breast.

His fingers closed on her through the mesh. Her nipple dug into the center of his palm. He squeezed once, the way he'd heft a box, and kept his hand on it.

"Not James. He's been pissing me off," she breathed, her lips at his ear. "The voucher covers the winner and one guest. I pick the guest. I'm picking you."

His thumb dragged across the mesh over her nipple, slow and hard. The shiver ran down her spine and settled in the seam of her trousers.

"Four days in Florida," he said. "Wednesday to Sunday." He didn't smile. "That's the trip. I asked you what happened at home."

"Nothing happened. That's the point." She kept her mouth against his stubble. "He's been hanging on by his fingernails since that mug. Tomorrow night I pull a suitcase out of our closet and tell him I'm spending four days at the beach with you. In a suite where he can't even sit in a chair and watch." His thumb pressed down. A small, high sound slipped out of her into his ear, and she had to start the sentence over. "That's — that's the one that breaks him, Ray. Watching me roll a bag out the door for you. By Sunday he's either found his floor, or he never had one, and he sits in whatever chair you point at for good."

His hand went still on her breast.

She drew back far enough to see it land. The corner of his mouth moved. His eyes went to her mouth and back to her eyes, and he breathed out through his nose, long and slow, like a man watching a number come in higher than he'd forecast.

"You worked that up all by yourself," he said.

"Since I saw the board."

He took his hand off her breast and patted his thigh once. "Off my desk. Here."

She slid off the edge and swung one knee across his leg. She sat sideways on his lap in the wide chair, her hip wedged against the soft heat of his belly. His left hand found her ass through the tight trousers and dug in, all five fingers.

"Better," he said. "Now sell it."

She kissed him open-mouthed, wet and deep. She knotted her fingers in the thin grey hair at his nape and pushed her tongue into his mouth and tasted stale coffee and him. His stubble rasped her chin raw. He kissed back slow and heavy, his tongue thick against hers, and let her do the work.

His right hand came up between them. He didn't pull the cup down. He spread his fingers over the mesh and found her nipple through it and pinched, so the weave bit into her, and twisted until she whimpered against his teeth.

"New?" he muttered into her mouth.

"Saturday. For you."

"Waste of money." He hooked one finger in the left cup and yanked it down. Her breast spilled out over the boning into the cold office air. He lifted it bare in his rough palm, weighed it, and bent his heavy head and pulled her nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard enough to hurt. She bucked on his thigh and grabbed at his scalp.

Under her, his left hand had started to move. The trousers were so tight he could follow the center seam with one thick finger, down between her cheeks, and he did, slowly, and leaned his weight onto the spot where the seam crossed her rim. He pressed. Through two thin layers she felt the blunt tip of his finger push in a quarter of an inch.

"Ray—" It came out of her high and thin.

He let her nipple go wet and stiff from his mouth. "Reston's three doors down," he said against her breast. "Make that sound again. Louder."

She made it again. She couldn't not. Her face burned. Meridian's careful analyst sat in a Cortec chair with one tit bare and a fat man's finger working at her ass through her trousers, and her panties were wet through, and the wetter she got, the hotter her face went, and the hotter her face went, the wetter she got. She ground down on his finger and kissed him again, sloppy, and her free hand slid down his shirt, past the straining buttons over his belly, to the thick ridge in his lap.

She cupped it. He was hard as a pipe under the cloth.

"Let me take it out," she breathed against his lips. "I've been thinking about it since the elevator."

"Ask me right."

"Please, Papi." She squeezed him through his slacks. "Let me get my hand on your cock."

"Go on, then." His finger pressed deeper into her seam. "Slow. I want to watch you find it."

She opened the buckle with her mouth still on his. The button fought her. The zipper rasped down over the bulge in short jerks. She slid her hand into his boxers, into damp heat and coarse hair, and closed it on him and drew him out into the air between them.

The weight hit her first, the heavy, hot drop of him into her palm. He was dark and thick and stood up out of his fly past the edge of her fist. Her fingers didn't meet around him. There was a gap between her fingertips and the pad of her thumb, and the gold of her wedding band sat right on the fat vein underneath, riding it. James had slid that ring onto her finger in

front of two hundred people. She watched it press into Ray's cock and felt her pussy throb, sudden and wet. *Call me when it's done.* She tightened her fist until the band dug in.

At the tip, the wide head swelled past the shaft, dusky and taut. A clear bead welled up from the slit, grew, and ran down onto her thumb.

"God," she whispered.

She broke the kiss. Holding his eyes, she leaned over his lap, gathered her spit, and let it fall in a long string onto the head of his cock. It slid down over the rim. She caught it with her palm and spread it from the tip to the base, then up again, and started a slow twist, her ringed fingers screwing over the swollen head on every pass.

Ray's head went back against the chair. He watched her hand work him from under his heavy brow. "Meridian's best analyst," he said, flat. "Tits out in my chair. Jerking me off for a beach date."

"For *you*." She hooked her thumb in the other cup and pulled it down, so both breasts sat bare above the boning and her nipples dragged across his shirt with every stroke. "Hear what you're doing to my hand? It's obscene, Ray."

It was. Every upstroke made a thick, sucking sound against his skin. More pre-come kept leaking out of him and slicking her palm, and she pumped it down the shaft and brought it back up and the noise got wetter.

"I bought bikinis Saturday," she murmured into his jaw. "One of them's white. Thong back, practically nothing behind. I'm going to lie by the pool all afternoon and rub oil into your chest with my ass bare to the sun, and every husband on those loungers is going to stare at what you brought."

"White," Ray said.

The word came out low. His cock jerked in her fist, and a fresh bead ran over her knuckle.

"White," she whispered. She sped up, short quick strokes right under the head, her ring clicking faintly on his zipper. "Your cock wants me in white."

"On your stomach." His hand slid off her seam and spread over her whole ass and squeezed. "I do the oil. Right here. In front of all of them. You don't tie that thing back up till I say."

"Yes, Ray." She was breathing hard now, and she lost the stroke and found it again. "And at dinner—" She was making the dresses up as she went. "Backless dresses. Nothing under them. Your chain right out on my neck, and your big silver plug all the way up my ass while we eat."

His hand closed around her wrist and stopped her.

"You kept it," Ray said.

His cock jerked hard against her still palm. She felt it before she saw his face.

"I kept it." In her head it was already in her palm, cold silver, heavier than it looked.

"I figured that thing went in a dumpster." His grip on her wrist didn't ease. His eyes did something slow, creasing at the corners. "Bring it. You wear it at that table like you said. I'll check."

"Under the table," she whispered. "Whenever you want. Push on it with your hand while I order. Feel how wet I am around it."

He let go of her wrist and put that hand back on her ass. She started again, faster, the long pulls now, root to crown, and

rolled her thumb over the slick head on every upstroke. A grunt broke out of his chest and shook his belly against her hip.

"Then you take me upstairs," she said into his ear, "and put me out on the balcony. Over the rail. The ocean's right there, and there are people walking on the sand, and you pull that plug out of me and fuck my perfect ass where the whole beach can hear me."

"They'll hear you." His big hand came up off her ass to her face and took her jaw, thumb on one cheek, fingers on the other. He turned her face to his. "Door open. Lights on. Every floor under us."

"Every floor," she breathed through her squeezed lips. Her thighs were shaking against his knee. The words kept coming. "And in the morning I wake you up with my mouth. And you roll me over and pin me on that bed and fill my bare pussy. And again after lunch. And I don't wash you out. I put my bikini on over it and walk down to the water full of you."

"With it running down your legs," Ray said. His voice had gone rough. "And you smile at the waiter."

"And I smile at the waiter."

He let go of her jaw. His eyes dropped to her tits bouncing above his lap, and his hips pushed up into her fist hard enough to lift her on his thigh. His belly was heaving under his damp shirt. She could smell him now, the musk of his cock thick in the closed room, and her own wet under it.

"Shoot it for me," she begged, her lips at the corner of his mouth. "Please. I want it all over my hand."

"When I say."

His big hand came down over hers and closed. He slowed her. He dragged her fist up his shaft at his pace, a long, tight

pull that made her whimper, and down again, crushing her fingers around him so she felt every ridge of the vein go by under her ring.

"Slow," he said. "You came all the way over here. Work for it."

She worked. She squeezed on every pull and twisted over the tipand moaned against his cheek as if he were stroking her. Her clit throbbed in time with it. Sweat stood on his upper lip. His thighs went hard under her, and the vein swelled fatter under her fingers, and she could feel his heartbeat in it.

"Now," he said. "On the ring."

His hand left hers. His whole frame locked in the chair. His fingers bit into her hip, and a harsh grunt tore out of him, then another. His cock swelled in her fist until her fingers spread wider, and jerked. The first rope shot over her knuckles and splashed hot across her bare belly below the corset. The second hit her wrist. The third pumped up thick against the gold band and ran down between her fingers.

"Look at that," he ground out. "All of it. Every drop on you."

"Yes," she gasped. "Yes, Ray, all of it—"

She didn't slow. She milked him through it, base to tip, feeling each pulse travel up the vein under her palm before it spilled. It coated her fingers and her palm and the gold of her ring and dripped onto his slacks. The smell of it rose between them, sharp and thick. Her pussy clenched with every pulse as if she were the one coming, and her thighs clamped on his knee, and she rode it, panting into his neck, until the last of it shuddered out of him and he sagged back against the leather, chest heaving.

"Four days of that, *papi*," she murmured, still stroking him, gentle now. "No clock. Nobody to go home to."

She lifted her left hand away from his softening cock. Thick, glossy white coated her first two fingers to the knuckle and hung off the band in a pearl.

She held his eyes. She parted her lips and put out her tongue and licked one slow stripe up her index finger, root to tip, and swallowed, and hummed low in her throat.

"Ohh, I'm going to be so naughty for you, daddy."

Ray went still under her.

For a moment he just watched her mouth, his chest rising and falling under his damp shirt. Against her wrist his cock gave one slow, heavy twitch. Then he reached up and pressed his thumb into her lower lip, where his cum still shone.

"That one stays in here," he said. "Nobody else gets it."

"Nobody else," she whispered against his thumb.

He took his hand back. "All right."

He pulled tissues off the credenza and wiped himself, tucked his cock into his boxers, did up the zipper, the button, and the buckle, and dragged the laptop closer across the blotter. His right hand came back to her bare breast and stayed. His come was cooling on her belly. She didn't wipe it.

She watched over his shoulder. He logged into the joint vendor portal with his senior override and opened Ashford Phase III, line item 09-C. He clicked into the date field. Before he touched it, he scrolled to the small print under the attestation box and read it: provisional until the Friday lock, revocable by the submitter. He read it twice.

Then he deleted the ninth of April and typed the thirty-first of March. He checked the attestation, typed his initials, and hit submit.

The status bar spun and went green.

"There's your number one, Blondie," Ray said, low. He gave her nipple one slow, possessive pinch. "Pack something thin for Wednesday."

Ten minutes later, her cups pulled back up, the blazer buttoned once at the waist, her hands scrubbed in the third-floor women's room, Jenna walked out through Cortec's lobby doors into the March wind.

She got into her car and sat with both hands on the wheel.

Her panties were cold and clinging. She had washed her hands and nothing else. Under the corset his come had dried stiff across her belly, and she could feel it pull every time she breathed. The chain had gone warm against her throat.

She took out her phone and opened the thread with James. The cursor blinked under his last message.

Call me when it's done.

It was done.

She typed nothing. She set the phone face down on the passenger seat.

When she swallowed, Ray was still there at the back of her tongue.

About the Author

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