

THE HUSTLE



Part 1: The Game
Sire Rickenbach

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: The Game](#)

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Chapter 1: The Game

Vince Barella sat in the folding chair just inside his garage and watched Megan Calloway bend over to pick up a package from her front step.

The shorts she had on should have been illegal. Grey cotton, rolled at the waist, tight enough to show the crease where her ass met her thighs. She bent for the box and the tank top—white, thin, no bra—fell away from her chest and he saw them. Both of them. Hanging free inside the cotton, heavy and round, swaying with the motion of her reaching, the nipples pink and stiff through the gap in the fabric for two full seconds before she straightened and they settled back against her body with a bounce that made his cock twitch against his thigh. The cotton caught on the hard points of her nipples and clung. He could see everything through that shirt—the full round weight of each tit, the way they sat high and firm on her frame even unsupported, the puffy raised nubs pressing through the white fabric, swollen and shameless. Tits like that on a body like hers, three doors from his garage, every goddamn morning.

She tucked the box under one arm and her dark hair swung against her shoulders and the tank top rode up on one side, and there it was: a strip of pale stomach, the hip bone, the waistband of whatever she was wearing underneath. She turned and walked back across the dead lawn, and those tits bounced with every step—heavy, shifting under thin cotton that hid nothing—and he watched every one.

The light caught her face when she reached the door. Dark hair. Pale blue eyes. That contrast—it hit him low in the gut every time, the same sick pull that never dulled. She didn't belong on this street. She didn't belong anywhere Vince had ever been.

The face was the hook. The tits were what kept him in this chair. He'd seen tits. He'd paid for tits. He'd never seen a pair like Megan Calloway's—the size, the shape, the way they held firm without a wire or a strap, the stiff pink points that showed through anything she wore. They turned every shirt she owned into pornography. He'd scraped the folding chair to this exact angle two weeks ago so the sightline was clean when she came out her front door. Hadn't moved it since.

Vince had been watching her since she moved in six months ago. Not casually. He knew her schedule. Monday through Friday she left at eight-fifteen, sometimes eight-twenty. Tuesdays and Thursdays she ran—sports bra, running shorts, hair in a ponytail, those tits bouncing with every stride in a way that made him grip whatever he was holding. She ran past his house and he sat right here or stood in the driveway next to the rusted Dodge Ram he'd scraped together enough to buy after county, and she didn't look at him. Chin up. Eyes forward. That straight-backed stride that said *I know you're staring and you're nothing to me*.

He'd jerked off thinking about her more times than he could count. In the shower, on the couch, twice in this exact chair after she jogged past in a sports bra soaked through with sweat and plastered to her skin. He'd thought about the weight of her in his hands.

The sounds she'd make—whether they'd be the quiet, controlled sounds the rest of her suggested, or something else entirely. He'd thought about her on her knees in his basement looking up at him with those pale eyes, and the thought alone was enough to finish him.

There was no woman like her on this block. There was no woman like her in this zip code.

He lit a Marlboro Red and flicked the Zippo shut and watched her disappear inside her half of the duplex.

Six months ago, she'd called the cops on him.

A Tuesday night. Bass through the shared walls of the duplex row, his dead father's sound system cranked past midnight because his buddy Ray was over and Ray brought a bottle and the bottle said turn it up. She'd dialed the non-emergency line at 1:07 AM. Spoke to the responding officer for maybe thirty seconds. Pointed at his house. Went back to bed. By Thursday she'd forgotten about it entirely.

Vince was on parole.

The officers ran a compliance check—standard procedure when they're already at a parolee's residence. Found the Remington 870 in the bedroom closet. His dead father's shotgun, unfired in six years, wrapped in an oil cloth behind the winter coats. Possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. He was in handcuffs before she turned off her bedroom light.

Ninety days in county. He did them on the fourth floor of Middlesex Correctional with the fluorescent lights that never went off and the toilet two feet from his cot. His truck—the '04 Silverado he'd had for eleven years—repo'd from the driveway while he was inside. He came back thinner by fifteen pounds and walked the mile and a half from the bus stop because he didn't have a vehicle anymore.

She waved at him from the mailbox his first day back. Smiled. The little neighborly wave of a woman who barely knew his name. She didn't remember. She genuinely, honestly did not remember making the call. It was nothing to her. Thirty seconds on the phone. A noise complaint. Background noise of a Tuesday she'd already forgotten.

He remembered everything. The cell. The strip search. The lights. The sound of the door engaging. The manila envelope with his wallet, keys, lighter. Ninety days for a shotgun he'd never loaded, in a closet he never opened, because a woman who looked like a magazine cover pointed at his house and went back to sleep.

He wanted her. He'd wanted her since the day she moved in—a raw, greasy wanting that lived in his hands and his cock and the back of his throat. But the wanting had changed after county. Now it came with something underneath, something cold and patient. She'd taken ninety days from him. The wanting and the debt had grown together until he couldn't feel where one ended and the other began.

He had a plan.

He'd been reading the Calloways' financial trouble from across the street all spring. Didn't need a forensic accountant. They cancelled the lawn service in March. Her car

wore a boot for three days in April and she'd walked to the grocery store with a backpack on her shoulders. The Amazon deliveries—daily when she moved in—dried up to nothing by May. Her husband, Tyler, had been driving to a job site in a truck he clearly couldn't make the payments on, leaving before seven. Vince recognized the type—young guy whose jaw still clenched when he pulled into this neighborhood.

He was going to pitch Tyler the poker game this week.

Vince looked across the street. The porch light glowed yellow. Through the front window, the bluish wash of a laptop screen—Tyler, probably, staring at a bank balance that would make the pitch for him.

He pulled out his phone and called Dale.

Two rings. The voice came through low and heavy, like something settling. "Talk."

"Friday," Vince said. "I'm pitching the husband this week. You and Wicks come to the game, lose some hands, let him stack chips. He goes home thinking he's a genius."

"And the wife pours drinks."

"She pours drinks. She looks like she looks. He thinks she's the distraction that makes you idiots play stupid. The whole thing's framed as their hustle." Vince took a drag. Exhaled. "She's not running the hustle, Dale. She *is* the hustle. You and Wicks are paying me for the seat. The cards don't mean shit."

Silence on the line. Then: "The husband's in the room."

"Sitting right there. Three feet away. And here's the thing—he doesn't know you know. Far as he can tell, you've never seen either of them before. She's just some girl I brought in. He's just some guy who plays cards."

"But we know he's the husband."

"You know he's the husband. And you don't say a word about it. You look at his wife, you touch his wife, you tell her exactly what you're thinking when you look at her—and he sits there and takes it. Because if he acts like a husband, the cover's blown and the money stops. He'll police himself."

Dale was quiet for a beat. When he spoke, the voice was lower, and there was something in it—a thick, private satisfaction. "The husband won't even know we know."

"Not a clue. He'll think you're just some old guy who can't keep his hands off the bartender. Meanwhile you're grabbing his wife's ass while he watches and pretends he doesn't care."

The sound Dale made was barely a laugh. More like a growl that found something funny. "How much."

Vince told him. Dale didn't negotiate—he'd seen the photos Vince had taken from this chair with the zoom lens, her in the sports bra, her bending for the mail, and he'd looked at them for a long time without speaking before those same two words. Dale would pay whatever Vince told him.

"Friday," Dale said. "I'll have the cash."

Vince hung up. Set the phone on the arm of the chair. Took a drag and watched the smoke dissolve toward the dead lawn.

He could be patient. He'd waited ninety days behind a locked door. He could wait three more.

The gas station on Route 9 smelled like diesel and hot asphalt and the particular sweetness of a leaking soft-serve machine inside the convenience store.

Tyler was filling the truck—hand on the nozzle, watching the numbers climb—when he heard the Zippo. Click. The flick of the wheel, the small flame catching.

He looked up.

Vince Barella. The neighbor three doors down, opposite side. Tyler recognized him the way you recognized a dog that didn't look friendly—something you noted, avoided, kept noting. He'd seen him from the truck a dozen times: tanned and stocky, gold chain at his collar, sitting in the open garage or leaning against the driveway watching the block with a flat, idle patience, like someone with nowhere better to be. Tyler had never exchanged more than a nod. The dead lawn, the oil-stained driveway, the rusted weight bench visible in the garage—he'd clocked the house his first week and steered Megan to the other side of the street without explaining why.

Up close the seediness sharpened. Shorter than Tyler expected—five-ten at most. Thick through the shoulders and chest, gone soft in the middle. The tan was deep and permanent, creased into his skin like it had been baked there over decades. Dark eyes sat deep under heavy brows and the stubble on his jaw was shot through with grey. He wore a stained grey t-shirt and work pants and the gold chain caught the afternoon light.

He smelled like cigarette smoke and something else—a musk, close and heavy, that occupied the space between them like a third person.

Tyler was polite—Tyler was always polite—but the assessment was already made. A man who ran schemes and leaned against things and smoked. Useful, probably. Limited, certainly.

“Hey—Tyler, right?” Vince squinted through the smoke. “Three doors down?”

“Yeah.” Tyler pulled the nozzle free and hung it up. “Vince?”

Vince didn't extend his hand. He just stayed where he was, planted, the smoke curling between them. “Listen, don't take this the wrong way, but you look like a guy who could use a good night.”

Tyler waited.

“I run a card game. Friday nights, my place. Some guys I know—older guys, got money, can't play for shit. You any good at cards?”

“I've played.”

“You've played.” Vince grinned. Chipped incisor, yellow teeth. “That's what good players always say. ‘I've played.’ You're an engineer, right? Smart guy. Numbers guy.”

Tyler didn't ask how he knew that. Small street.

“What kind of stakes?”

“Enough to matter. These guys show up with cash—eight hundred, thousand, twelve hundred a night floating around the table. They play loose, they drink heavy, they think they’re good.” He took a drag. “They’re not good. You sit down with these guys for three hours, you’d walk out with a grand easy. More if you’re patient.”

Tyler could already see it—the room, the marks, the money on the table. He was good at cards and better at reading people who thought they were good at cards.

A thousand dollars a night. Two nights and the Visa minimum was covered. Four months and they were caught up.

But the part of Tyler’s brain that had run project budgets and managed subcontractors who lied about timelines—that part was already asking the question.

“Why me?”

Vince’s expression didn’t change. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a card game full of guys who hand you money every Friday. Why cut somebody else in? If they’re that easy, play them yourself.”

Vince took a drag. Held it. The smoke came out slow. “I had a guy. Eddie. Played with me for about a year—good player, sharp, kept the table honest. Moved to Bridgeport last month. His wife got a job or something.” He shrugged. “I need somebody in the chair who can actually play. Otherwise these guys get bored, stop coming, and the game dries up. You can’t fleece guys who don’t show up.”

It was an answer. It was a reasonable answer. Tyler turned it over and couldn’t find the seam, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that a man like Vince—a man who leaned against things and watched and smoked—didn’t do favors without a cut that ran deeper than twenty percent.

“I’ll think about it,” Tyler said.

Vince nodded. “You do that.” He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. As he turned to walk back to his truck—a rusted Dodge Ram that looked like it had been parked in a field for a decade before being pressed back into service—Tyler noticed a detail.

A tattoo on Vince’s right hand, across the knuckles, faded to near-illegibility. Old ink. Prison ink, maybe. And the way Vince’s eyes went flat for half a second when a siren wailed past on Route 9, the sound distant and fading, and then came back like nothing had happened.

Tyler clocked it. The tattoo. The flinch. The pitch that was almost too clean. He put the objections where he put the debt notice and the cancelled gym membership — in the back of a drawer he’d open when he had to.

He drove home thinking it might work, and thinking he’d need to hear more before he believed it.

Two days passed. Tyler sat at the kitchen table with his coffee and his laptop open. \$411.23 in checking.

He'd been staring at it for three minutes—not panicking, just working the problem. There was always a way through. He was good at this. He just had to find it.

He heard the bedroom door and closed the laptop. Slid the consolidated debt notice deeper into his desk drawer with one finger, casual. Megan didn't need to see it yet. He'd have the answer before she had the question.

Six months ago they'd been in a two-bedroom in Cedar Heights—good light, a parking garage, a lease they signed without checking the balance. Then Aldric & Partners lost a contract, the layoffs came in rounds, and Tyler's name was on the second one. Three months from vesting. The engineering salary that covered the rent, the furniture, the future—gone in a five-minute call from HR. He'd picked up electrical work through a temp agency within a month. Half the pay. Twice the hours on his feet. They'd moved here because the rent was nine hundred a month and the savings wouldn't survive another month at eighteen hundred.

The duplex was small and clean—Megan's doing. She'd made the place livable inside even if the outside was a lost cause. Their old apartment furniture—bought for rooms twice this size—looked oversized and wrong here, the dining table shoved into a corner that didn't quite fit it, framed wedding photos on walls that made the whole thing feel borrowed. The espresso machine from their registry sat on the counter, chrome and European, wildly out of place next to the Mr. Coffee they'd bought at Target the first week. The place was fine. The place was also the exact opposite of where they were supposed to be by now. Tyler saw the gap as temporary. He was sure of this the way he was sure of tensile strength ratings and rebar spacing—it was a fact, not a hope.

Megan came out of the bedroom in one of his old college t-shirts, her hair piled in a messy knot on top of her head. No bra. The shirt hung to mid-thigh and her legs were bare and long beneath it, and when she walked to the coffee maker the cotton moved with her and he could see the shape of her breasts shifting with each step—the weight of them, the way they swayed under the thin fabric. She reached for a mug on the top shelf and the shirt rode up over one hip and his stomach did the thing it had been doing for eight years.

The same hit. Never less.

She didn't notice because she never noticed. This wasn't a performance. This was a Tuesday. The morning light from the kitchen window caught the freckles across her nose and the faint scatter across her upper chest where the t-shirt collar hung loose—pale, barely there, the kind you only saw this close, this early, in this light.

“We're out of half and half,” she said, her back still to him. She opened the fridge and stared into it like it might produce some.

“There's oat milk.”

“Tyler.” She turned around. The look she gave him could have curdled the oat milk. “Don't.”

“It's not bad.”

“It's despair in a carton.”

He grinned. She fought the smile and lost, and when she smiled the whole room got warmer.

She poured black coffee and sat across from him and pulled one knee up to her chest and wrapped both hands around the mug. The t-shirt stretched across her breasts. She had no idea. He had every idea. This was his favorite part of every morning.

“What’s your day?” she asked.

“The Brenner house. Should be done by three if Bobby doesn’t rewire the panel backwards again.”

“Again?”

“He’s consistent.”

She laughed—the real one, the short bright sound that came from somewhere in her chest.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Freelance deck for the dental group. ‘Smiles That Inspire Confidence.’ I’ve been workshopping taglines in the shower.”

“Give me one.”

“‘Your Teeth Are Our Passion.’”

“Christ.”

“‘We Put The Fun In Fundamental Oral Hygiene.’”

“Stop.”

She grinned at him over the rim of her mug, pleased with herself, and for a second the duplex and the bank balance and the debt notice in the drawer didn’t exist. For a second it was just the two of them being the two of them, which was the one thing in Tyler’s life that still worked exactly the way it was supposed to.

He could smell her shampoo from across the table. She still used the expensive stuff—some French brand that came in a bottle the size of a flask and cost more per ounce than the wine they’d been drinking lately. She wouldn’t give it up.

The last luxury. Neither of them mentioned it. Every morning the scent of it filled their small kitchen and reminded him of the apartment they’d left, the life they’d left, the version of themselves that could afford shampoo without thinking about it.

They didn’t talk about money. They hadn’t in weeks. Megan checked the bank balance once a week; Tyler checked it daily and never mentioned the gap between what she saw and what he knew.

Tyler drove to work and the block unrolled through his windshield.

Chain-link fences. Yards with engine blocks on cinder blocks. The duplex next door with an above-ground pool that had been empty for two seasons, the liner sun-bleached and peeling. A pit bull tied to a tree in the yard across the street, asleep, its chain coiled in the dirt.

The Calloways’ side of their duplex was conspicuously cleaner—Megan had planted window boxes, swept the front step, put out a doormat that said “Hello” in

cursive.

It looked wrong.

He drove past Vince's house. The garage was open, the folding chair empty in the shadows, the ashtray full. The conversation at the gas station replayed—the pitch, the numbers, the easy confidence of a salesman closing on a sure thing. Tyler hadn't said yes yet. He'd said *I'll think about it*, which in his experience meant yes but on his terms.

He gripped the steering wheel. The truck was a 2021 F-150—bought when his salary was double what it was now, the monthly payment a small wound that bled every thirty days. He was keeping it. It was the last piece of evidence that his life had been bigger than this street, and selling it would mean admitting something he wasn't ready to admit. He pulled onto Route 9 and left Ridley Street behind and told himself, with complete certainty, that this was temporary.

Megan went for a run that afternoon. The route she did instead of the gym they'd quietly stopped paying for—three miles through the neighborhood, out to the elementary school and back, the kind of run you did to think rather than train.

She wore a sports bra and running shorts and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail that swung between her shoulder blades, and she was aware that she was impossible to ignore on a street like this.

It had always been this way. She'd grown breasts before any girl in her class—not gradually, not gently, but fast and full and impossible to hide, the kind that stretched her soccer jersey until her mother took her bra shopping with a face that was half sympathy and half resignation. By sixteen every boy in her high school knew her chest before they knew her name. By college she'd stopped counting the stares and started reading them—the quick downward flick, the half-second pause, the careful return to her face. She'd never gotten used to it. She'd gotten better at ignoring it.

Now, three miles into a Tuesday run, she was flushed and sweat-soaked and the sports bra was doing what sports bras did on a chest like hers: trying. The fabric was dark with sweat, plastered to her skin, and the sheer size of her tits strained the compression—pushed together, bouncing with each stride in a heavy rhythm she could feel in her shoulders. Sweat ran down the line between them and soaked the band and the wet fabric caught on her nipples, the shape of each one visible through the clinging material. Her stomach was flat and slick. Her legs were long and toned from years of this, the running shorts riding up with every stride. She smelled like clean sweat and warm skin and the shampoo she refused to stop buying, and the scent carried in the June air behind her like a signature.

Men in driveways paused what they were doing. A teenager on a porch stopped scrolling his phone and stared. She ran through their attention the way she'd been running through men's attention her entire adult life—chin up, eyes forward, back

straight, the posture of a woman who knew exactly what they were looking at and would not give them the satisfaction of caring.

Her route took her past Vince's house.

She felt his attention — a stillness from the open garage, a quality in the shadows that was different from the driveways she'd passed. Not casual. Not the reflexive, half-conscious stare of a man who happened to look up. This was focused. Patient. It had been waiting for her.

She didn't look.

Her chin lifted higher. Her spine went straight as a rod. She ran past without turning her head and felt his gaze on her back—between her shoulder blades, lower, where the running shorts ended and her legs began—until she rounded the corner and the feeling released.

On the way back, breathing hard, earbuds out, she slowed to a walk on her own block and saw that the neighbor across the street had put a couch on his lawn. Not being moved in or out. Just there—sagging, rain-stained, the cushions dark with mildew. Her mouth tightened. She looked at it and felt the weight of the distance between here and everywhere else she'd lived, and the weight was getting heavier by the month.

Her leather jacket hung by the door inside. She hadn't worn it since they moved. There was nowhere to wear it.

Tyler came home from the job site at five-thirty, and the smell of the work was still on him even after he'd changed shirts in the truck. Drywall dust. PVC solvent. The particular funk of a crawl space in June.

He showered before Megan could notice—scrubbed his hands until the new calluses stung, dressed in a clean t-shirt and jeans. Came out looking like a man who'd spent his day behind a desk instead of under one.

The crew knew he was overqualified. The foreman, a thick-necked guy named Gary who'd been pulling wire since before Tyler was born, called him "College." Not cruel. Almost affectionate, the way you'd name a golden retriever.

But the nickname landed on a bruise every time.

Tyler was college. He had the degree, the licenses, the trajectory. The fact that he was here—taping junctions and running Romex through residential studs—was a demotion he hadn't accepted and didn't plan to. He'd be back in an office inside a year. Two at the outside. This was filler. This was a story he'd tell at dinner parties in the house they were going to buy when he got back on his feet.

He didn't tell Megan what Gary called him.

They ate dinner at the kitchen table. Chicken thighs—the third meal she'd gotten out of a single pack from Shop Rite. Megan had figured out how to stretch cheap protein into something that tasted like intention instead of scarcity, and Tyler was quietly amazed by it even as the fact of it sat in his stomach like a stone.

She poured wine from a bottle that had cost six dollars and held up her glass and examined it with performative seriousness.

“This is a bold vintage, Tyler. Really aggressive on the nose.”

“Is that what that is? I thought the cap was leaking.”

“Thin. Aggressive. A finish that suggests the winemaker gave up halfway through.” She took a sip and her mouth tightened—the precise displeasure she’d learned in a house where wine came with corks. “We should send France a formal apology.”

He laughed. She almost didn’t—she held the straight face for a beat, pleased with her own delivery—then the corner of her mouth gave and they both laughed.

After dinner, Megan caught him staring at nothing. Not the blank gaze of a man spiraling—the focused, distant look of a man turning something over, examining it from angles. She touched his forearm across the table.

“Hey. Where’d you go?”

He came back. Smiled. “Nowhere. Just thinking.”

He was thinking about Friday. The thousand dollars. The table. He almost told her right then—the number was burning a hole—but he wanted it tighter first.

One more day.

Megan gathered the plates. He watched her scrape chicken bones into the trash and rinse the pan—fast, practiced, wringing every molecule of value from a six-dollar grocery run.

“What?” She’d caught him staring.

“Nothing. You’re just—” He shook his head. “You make this look easy.”

“I make everything look easy.” She said it without looking up, matter-of-fact, the way she said things that were true and she knew were true and saw no reason to be modest about. Then she glanced over her shoulder and her expression softened a fraction. “The towel’s on the hook. You’re not excused.”

He picked up the towel. She went back to the sink. He’d tell her tomorrow.

The follow-up came Wednesday evening. Tyler was at his truck in the driveway, unloading tools from the bed. Megan was inside—he could see her through the front window at the laptop, headphones on, working on the dental group’s marketing deck.

Vince appeared from the direction of his house, strolling along the sidewalk.

He wasn’t passing by.

“Hey. You think about it?”

Tyler set the tool bag down. “Yeah. I’m interested.” He wiped his hands on his jeans. “But I’ve got questions.”

Vince waited. Patient. The Zippo clicked open and shut in his left hand — a metronome.

“Your guy Eddie moved to Bridgeport. Fine. But you’ve been running this game a while, right? You know these guys, you know the table. Why do you need me at all? Why not just play them yourself and keep the whole pot?”

Vince's mouth moved — not quite a smile. More like the expression of a man who'd been expecting this and had already decided how far to let it run. "Because I'm the host. I run the game, I set the table, I bring the marks. I can't be the house and the shark. They'd catch on inside a month."

"So get another shark. You live on a street full of guys. Why the engineer three doors down?"

Vince looked at him. The click of the Zippo stopped. His eyes moved from Tyler to the house — to the window where Megan sat, her profile lit by the laptop screen, headphones on, one knee drawn up — and his gaze stayed there long enough that Tyler noticed.

"All right," Vince said. "I'll level with you. Eddie was good. Eddie won money. But the game was just a card game, you know? Guys showed up, played tight, went home. The pot topped out around six, seven hundred a night. That's the ceiling when it's just cards." He took a drag. "These guys play bad on their own. But they play *worse* when there's a woman in the room. Way worse. And your wife—"

He paused. Not for effect. It was a real pause, the kind a man makes when he's trying to describe something he's been thinking about for too long.

"I've seen her. Getting out of the car, getting the mail, on her runs. There's no women like that around here. Not in this zip code. She walks through that room, these guys won't be able to see their cards. She pours drinks, keeps 'em happy, you play tight, we split what you win. I take a cut for hosting. You walk away with the rest."

Tyler's throat tightened. The particular discomfort of hearing another man describe his wife — the runs, the mail, the car. Vince had been watching her. Of course he had. Everybody watched her. Tyler had been watching men watch Megan since the first frat party she'd walked into sophomore year.

But the discomfort was short, because the answer had done something the gas station pitch hadn't — it had made sense. Not just the logic of it, but the specific, slightly embarrassed way Vince had offered it, like a man admitting a weakness in his own plan. *The game needs a woman. Your wife is that woman. That's why I need you.* Tyler was the delivery mechanism for something Vince couldn't get on his own.

It was flattering, actually. Vince needed him because Megan was extraordinary, and Megan was his.

"She bartended through college," Tyler said. Neutral. Testing.

"Same thing, different room. She pours 'em doubles, they get sloppy, you clean up. Here's the play—" Vince leaned in, conspiratorial, man-to-man. "She mixes your drinks and mine without the booze. Keeps us sharp while the marks get hammered. She's not just eye candy, Tyler. She's the weapon."

The pitch was good. Tyler could see the whole thing now — the hustle framing, the team dynamic, the clean division of labor. Megan as an accelerant, making the marks dumber, which made Tyler's edge bigger. And the answer to the question that had been nagging him since the gas station was simple: Vince had come to him because his wife

was the most beautiful woman on this block, and probably in this zip code, and the game didn't work without her. That was the angle. That was the whole angle.

"What's the split?"

Vince laid it out. Hosting cut—twenty percent off the top, standard for running the game and providing the space and the marks. Tyler kept everything else. Tips for Megan were hers. The money would be cash. Friday nights, eight to midnight.

"And nobody touches her," Tyler said.

"They're gonna look. That's the whole point. But these guys are old, they're lonely, they wanna play cards and look at a pretty girl. Nobody's gonna do anything." Vince spread his hands. "I know these guys. They listen to me. You'll be right there."

Tyler believed it. He was the smart one. Vince was the facilitator. The men at the table were simple creatures with full wallets and empty heads. If anything went sideways, Tyler would see it coming—he managed complicated things for a living.

"I need to talk to Megan."

"Sure, sure. Take your time." Vince stepped back. The Zippo came out, the wheel flicked, the flame caught the Marlboro. "Friday's the next game. Just let me know."

He walked back toward his house. Tyler watched him go—the thick-shouldered amble, the smoke trailing, the gold chain catching the last of the evening light—and felt a small, unfamiliar thrill. This was going to work. He could feel it. He was going to sit down at a table with men who underestimated him and take their money while his beautiful wife poured their drinks and they never saw it coming.

These guys were idiots.

He picked up the tool bag and went inside.

He told Megan on Thursday night.

They were in the kitchen. She was at the counter slicing a lime for her water—a leftover habit from the life where they bought limes for cocktails instead of hydration—and he was leaning against the fridge with his arms crossed. Watching her. The way he always did when he had something to pitch: relaxed, confident, already halfway to the close.

"So Vince—the neighbor, three doors down—he runs this card game on Fridays."

Megan didn't look up. "The scary one?"

"He's not scary. He's just—" Tyler searched for the word. "Scruffy."

"He stares at me when I run."

"Everyone stares at you when you run."

"He does it from a lawn chair."

"Yeah, he's a little—look, he's rough around the edges. But he's got this poker game. Some older guys, friends of his. They've got money, they can't play cards, and they show up every Friday and lose a thousand bucks between them." He paused. "He wants me to play."

She looked up now. The lime knife paused. “You want to play poker at that man’s house.”

“I want to win poker at that man’s house. There’s a difference.” He smiled. She didn’t. “Meg. I’m good at cards. You know I’m good at cards. These guys are amateurs with cash—Vince basically said as much. I sit down for three hours, I walk out with a grand. Maybe more.”

“And?”

She knew there was an and. Eight years. She could read the sequence of his pitch the way he could read a blueprint.

“And he mentioned it would help if you came. Poured drinks. These guys play worse when there’s a woman in the room, apparently, and you’re—” He gestured vaguely at all of her. “You know.”

“I know what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say it.”

“You’re hott, Megan. You walk into a room and men forget how to count. You pour drinks, they stare, I take their money.”

His eyes dropped to her chest when he said it. He couldn’t help it—and the memory that followed was immediate. The farmer’s market last September. She’d thrown on a white t-shirt, no bra—hadn’t thought about it, had been lounging around the apartment all morning. Ten minutes in, Tyler noticed every man at the tomato stand had stopped pretending to shop. The guy behind the register was holding a bag and staring. The thin cotton hid nothing—the full shape of her tits visible, the raised profile of each puffy nipple pressing through the fabric—and the stand had gone quiet. Megan noticed at the same moment he did. Her face went scarlet. She crossed her arms so fast she nearly toppled a display of peaches and didn’t uncross them for the rest of the morning. She’d been silent in the car. She’d never left the house without a bra since. The mortification had been total—a woman who tucked in her shirts and crossed her ankles and did not, under any circumstances, put herself on display for strangers.

But Tyler remembered the silence at that tomato stand. He remembered what her body did to a room without even trying.

“So I’m the distraction.”

“You’re the weapon.”

She set the knife down. Crossed her arms—the default posture when she was thinking, which pushed her breasts up against the neckline of her shirt and Tyler’s eyes went there for a half-second and came back.

“Who are these guys?”

“Some older dudes. Friends of Vince’s.”

“What kind of friends?”

“The kind who show up on Friday nights with cash and too much cologne.”

“Tyler.”

“I’m not going to lie to you and say they’re accountants. They’re Vince’s guys. A little rough probably. But that’s the whole point—rough guys, bad at cards, easy money.”

“And I’m just there to pour drinks.”

“And look gorgeous. Which you can’t help. So really you just have to pour drinks.”

She almost smiled. He saw it—the corner of her mouth twitching, the effort of maintaining the skepticism against the flattery and the number and the pitch. She was competitive. She was broke. And she was married to a man who could sell ice to Eskimos when the cause was urgent enough.

“How much?” she said.

He told her the number.

Something moved across her face that she couldn’t control—a flicker of recognition. The Visa minimum. The electric bill. Three weeks’ worth of breathing room. He saw her see it. He recognized it because the same thing had happened to him at the gas station.

The number was its own pitch.

“Three nights,” he said. “We knock out the Visa, stack some breathing room, and we’re done. These guys will never know what hit them.”

“If one of them puts a hand on me, we’re leaving.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m serious, Tyler.”

“So am I. One hand out of line and we walk. I’ll be right there the whole time.”

She held his gaze. He held hers.

The kitchen was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator. She picked up the lime knife.

“Fine. But I’m wearing what I want, I’m drinking their liquor, and if your scary neighbor friend calls me ‘sweetheart,’ I’m charging double.”

He grinned.

She fought the smile and lost again, and when it broke through it was the real one—the warm, conspiratorial smile of a woman who was about to do something stupid with the man she loved.

“We’re going to crush them.”

“We’re going to destroy them.”

She pointed the knife at him. “If any of them have a hot tub, I’m leaving.”

He crossed the kitchen and kissed her, one hand on her hip, and she leaned into it. They were in this together. Partners in a con they were running on men they’d never met, and the feeling of it—the team dynamic, the us-against-them—was the first clean, uncomplicated thing they’d shared in months.

Friday came and Megan stood in front of the closet.

She pulled out the fitted jeans—dark wash, from the old life, the ones that cost two hundred dollars and still fit like they’d been poured on. A top. Something appropriate. The white one from Nordstrom—fitted, clean neckline, thin fabric. She held it against herself in the mirror. It said *bar on a Saturday*, not *I dressed up for you*. Right.

She laid the jeans on the bed and stepped out of her sweatpants. Her legs were bare and long, the muscles from years of running visible in the warm light of the bedroom. She unhooked the stretched-out cotton bra she’d been wearing around the house and reached for the good one. White. Underwire. The one that took her breasts and organized them into something manageable—shape instead of spectacle. She put it on and felt the wire settle under each breast, the cups lifting and compressing, the band snug against her ribs. Her tits filled the cups to the edge—the top curve of each breast swelling above the lace trim, the kind of fit that a salesperson would call *supportive* and that every man who saw the result would call something else. She adjusted the straps. Checked the mirror. The bra did its job: contained, shaped, controlled.

She pulled on the jeans. The dark denim slid up her legs and caught at her thighs where it always caught—the shimmy she’d been doing since high school, working the fabric over her hips, tugging the waistband into place and buttoning. The jeans fit the way expensive jeans fit a body like hers: tight through the thigh and ass, sitting on her hips in a way that outlined everything underneath. She pulled the white top on over the bra. Smoothed it down. The neckline was modest. The fabric showed shape but no detail.

She looked at herself. A woman you’d notice. A woman you’d buy a drink for. Not a woman putting on a show.

She nodded at the mirror. Fine.

Tyler appeared in the bedroom doorway. She caught him in the mirror—his eyes moving from her legs to her waist to the place where the top met her chest.

“You look great,” he said. He leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed and his head tilted and the expression on his face was the one he wore when he was about to talk her into something. “But you look like you’re going to brunch.”

“I’m going to a card game at our neighbor’s house. Brunch would be an upgrade.”

“These guys are supposed to lose their minds, Meg. That’s the play. You walk in looking like you’re meeting your mother for lunch, they’re going to play normal poker.” He pushed off the doorframe and walked to the closet. She watched him in the mirror, one eyebrow raised. He reached past her work blouses and pulled out the denim shorts—the short ones, cutoff, frayed at the hem, the pair she wore to the beach and around the house on weekends and absolutely nowhere else. He held them up.

“No.”

“And this.” He reached to the shelf and pulled down a ribbed white tank top—thin, fitted, the kind that clung to everything it touched.

“Tyler. No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll look like I’m—” She stopped. Her mouth pressed into a thin line, the same line it pressed into when someone used the wrong fork or said something vulgar at a dinner party. “Those shorts barely cover anything.”

“That’s the point. These guys need to be distracted, not mildly interested. You wear this, they won’t be able to hold their cards.”

She looked at the shorts in his hand. The tank top. Then at her own reflection—the tasteful jeans, the Nordstrom top, the put-together woman who wouldn’t turn a single head in this outfit that she hadn’t already turned a thousand times.

Tyler’s confidence was irritating because it was contagious. He had the look he got when he was certain—the half-smile, the easy posture, the absolute sureness that he’d already figured out the room and everyone in it. He held out the shorts.

“Trust me. We walk out with double.”

She took the shorts from his hand.

She turned her back to him and stripped off the jeans—the denim peeling down her legs, stepping out one foot at a time. She stood in the bra and her underwear, bare legs, and pulled on the shorts. They were soft from a hundred washes and short enough that the pocket lining would peek below the hem if she moved wrong. She buttoned them. The frayed edge sat high on her thighs—four inches above the knee at least, the pale skin of her upper legs bare, the curve of her ass visible at the hem when she shifted her weight. The denim was tight. It hugged her hips and her ass in a way that the dark-wash jeans had only hinted at.

She pulled off the Nordstrom top and dropped it on the bed. Picked up the ribbed tank. Pulled it on over her head and felt it slide down her body and catch on every contour—the bra, the shape of each breast inside it, the dip of her waist, the flat plane of her stomach. The ribbed cotton was thin and the white was bright and the bra underneath was visible through the fabric—the outline of the cups, the faint shadow of the straps at her shoulders. The tank ended just above the waistband of the shorts. A strip of bare skin showed between the hem and the denim.

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and her stomach turned over.

The woman looking back was not the woman who had been standing there two minutes ago. The shorts showed everything the jeans had hidden—the full length of her legs, the toned thighs, the way the frayed denim barely covered her ass and pulled tight across her hips. The tank was worse. The ribbed fabric clung to her bra and caught the shape of her breasts with a specificity that made *shape* an understatement—the full, round weight of each one visible through the cotton, the line where the underwire ended and the soft upper curve began, the faint shadow of her nipples through the double layer of fabric. Her waist looked narrow between the flare of her hips and the width of her chest. The strip of bare stomach between the tank and the shorts was flat and pale and drew the eye straight to the waistband sitting low on her hips.

She looked like a woman men would do stupid things for. She looked like a woman who was asking them to.

Her reflection stared back and she felt the old unease rise through her chest—the discomfort she'd carried since sixteen, since she'd first understood what her body did to rooms she walked into. She didn't dress like this. Not for strangers. Not for men she didn't know in a house she didn't trust. The woman in the mirror looked available, exposed, like she was advertising something she had no intention of selling.

She reached for the jeans.

"Meg." Tyler was behind her. His hands landed on her shoulders—warm, steady. He met her eyes in the mirror. "You look incredible. That's the whole play. They look at you and they can't think. Three hours and we're done."

"I look like I'm trying to get groped, Tyler."

"You look like a woman who's going to take a thousand dollars off a table full of idiots." He squeezed her shoulders. The confidence again—total, uncomplicated, the certainty of a man who believed he had already solved the room. "We need this."

The words sat between them. *We need this*. The Visa bill. The debt notice in the drawer she wasn't supposed to know about but did. The nine-hundred-dollar rent on a duplex that was the cheapest thing in the zip code. She looked at herself in the mirror. The tank top pulling across her chest. The shorts that were barely shorts. Her breasts, which had been drawing attention she didn't want since she was fourteen, doing exactly what they always did in a top like this.

She exhaled. Straightened her spine. Lifted her chin—the posture, the armor, the reflex she'd been putting on since she was old enough to understand that men were going to stare whether she asked them to or not.

"Fine." She smoothed the tank over her stomach. Turned sideways, checked the mirror, tugged the shorts down a quarter inch. "But if one of them calls me 'sweetheart,' I'm adding a surcharge."

Hair down. She pulled the elastic free and her dark hair fell past her shoulders—thick, heavy, the contrast of the nearly-black waves against the white tank and her pale skin sharp enough to stop a conversation. She ran her fingers through it, shook it out. Touched up her mascara. A light gloss on her lips—nothing that looked like effort. Perfume at her wrists and her neck—the good one, the French scent that cost more per ounce than the wine they'd been drinking, warm and floral and entirely wrong for where she was going. The shampoo underneath it. She smelled like clean hair and good decisions and a life she wasn't living anymore.

She looked at herself one last time. The shorts. The tank clinging to the bra, the shape of her tits visible through the ribbed cotton. The bare legs. The dark hair against the white fabric. The pale blue eyes that held her own gaze in the glass without flinching.

She could do this. She'd bartended worse rooms. She'd handled worse men. Three hours, and she'd be home and in the shower and these shorts would be in the hamper and she'd never wear them for anyone but Tyler again.

"Ready?" he asked from the doorway.

Her reflection didn't look ready. Her reflection looked like a woman walking into something she couldn't undo.

"No," she said. "Let's go."

They walked to Vince's house. Three doors down, opposite side of the street.

Ninety seconds of sidewalk and the longest transition of the evening.

The streetlights were just coming on. The block was settling into its Friday sounds—a television through a screen door, somebody's charcoal grill sending up smoke two houses down, the distant bass of a car stereo thumping from the cross street. The air was warm and smelled like cut grass and lighter fluid and the exhaust of a truck that had idled too long.

Tyler's hand found the small of her back as they walked. An unconscious gesture, the automatic proprietary touch that was their shorthand for *I'm here*. She felt his palm through the fabric of her top and the warmth of it steadied something in her chest.

She could feel the new calluses through the cotton.

Vince's house got closer and the details sharpened. The dead lawn. The oil stain on the driveway shaped like a dark continent. The open garage with its shadows and its mess.

The house was lit from inside—yellow light through curtained windows, figures already moving. Music, faint, something with a bass line. Cigarette smoke carrying from the direction of the porch.

She could feel it—the wrongness of the setting, the gap between who she was and where she was going. Her perfume against the charcoal smoke. Her hundred-dollar cutoffs and her ribbed tank on this sidewalk. The French shampoo and the six-dollar wine and the duplex with window boxes on a block where the nicest landscaping was an empty above-ground pool.

"This is going to be terrible," she said.

"It's going to be easy," he said. "I'm going to take these guys apart."

She almost smiled.

They reached the porch. Tyler squeezed her hand once, quickly, and then his hand dropped because they were here and the door was in front of them and the evening was about to begin.

Vince opened the door.

Megan stepped inside and the smell found her first—old cigarettes saturated into every surface, layered with fried food and something underneath both, something damp and biological that had stopped being fixable years ago. The smell of a house that had given up on itself.

Wood paneling on every wall, warped at the seams with humidity. Carpet that might have been beige twenty years ago and was now the color of a headache.

She saw the stain on the kitchen counter—brown, ring-shaped, wide as a dinner plate. She saw the paneling buckle near the floor where moisture had been winning a long war.

Her mouth tightened. She didn't wrinkle her nose. She wanted to.

Vince stood in the doorway. He wore a dark button-down that was open one button too many, revealing the gold chain resting against a thatch of dark chest hair. The slicked-back hair caught the overhead light with a greasy shine. The stubble. The deep-set eyes. He looked at her—face first, then down, slowly, to her chest, where his gaze settled for a full beat before continuing to her legs and back up—and the look wasn't subtle. He didn't pretend he wasn't doing it. The appraisal was patient, specific, proprietary, as if he was confirming something he already knew.

“Hey. Come in, come in.” His voice was lower than she'd expected, or maybe just closer. Direct, no preamble.

He shook Tyler's hand—a grip that looked firm and brief. He didn't shake Megan's. He put a hand on her upper arm, his rough fingers wrapping briefly around the muscle, too familiar for a first real interaction. The touch lasted a second. He let go and stepped aside and the smell of him—cigarettes, a musk that was close and heavy, something greasy that might have been hair product or cologne or just Vince—replaced the house smell for a moment before the house reclaimed the air.

The interior tour took thirty seconds. Living room: sagging couch, a recliner with duct tape on the arm, a TV on a stand that looked like it had been assembled wrong. Kitchen: the stained counter, a Mr. Coffee maker with a cracked carafe, a dog bowl by the back door but no dog. On the wall near the kitchen, a framed photograph of an older woman—heavysset, dark hair, the same deep-set eyes as Vince. His mother. The house had been hers.

The poker table stood in the center of the living room, the couch pushed against the wall to make space. Folding legs, green felt top, six mismatched chairs pulled around it. Chips in a plastic carousel. Cards still in the cellophane. Against the far wall, the bar setup: a card table with bottles—mid-shelf bourbon, gin, vodka, a handle of rum—a cooler full of ice from a gas station bag, a sleeve of red Solo cups.

Megan assessed the bar. She'd served worse in basements in college where the bottles were plastic and the ice was optional. At least these were glass. At least there was actual ice.

She was wrong here. Not wrong the way a misplaced object is wrong — wrong the way a living thing is wrong in a dead room. The straight spine, the ankles crossed where she stood, the chin that stayed level even as her eyes catalogued every stain and buckle and accumulated failure of the space. She held herself the way she always held herself — poised, composed, the unconscious inheritance of a woman who grew up where the furniture matched and adults spoke in complete sentences — and in Vince's living room that composure was an announcement. It broadcast in every direction at once: *I do not belong here*. The posture alone was enough. Add the face, the body, the

dark hair falling past her shoulders, and she wasn't just wrong for the room. She was an insult to it. A woman men would put on a pedestal, marooned in a room where the carpet couldn't remember its original color.

And the men would feel it. She could already see it forming — the way Vince's gaze had lingered, patient and proprietary, the way the room seemed to reorganize itself around her presence. A woman like her in a place like this wasn't just beautiful. She was a provocation.

Before the other men arrived, Vince settled into the best chair at the poker table—the one at the head with a clear sightline to the bar, to the door, to everywhere Megan would be standing for the next four hours. He sat the way men like him sat: spread, weight centered, as if the furniture existed to hold specifically him.

“Look,” he said. “These guys are gonna look. That’s the whole point, right? They look at her, they can’t think straight, you clean up.” He directed this at Tyler but his eyes slid to Megan and stayed. “If anything gets out of hand—anything—you give me a signal. You need a word. Something you can say out loud that doesn’t sound like a signal. Something the bartender would say.”

Megan thought for a second. “‘Last call.’”

Vince pointed at her. “That’s it. You say ‘last call,’ I shut it down. Wrap the game, clear the room, everybody goes home. They won’t even know it was you.” He looked at Tyler. “Either of you can say it. But it won’t come to that.”

Tyler nodded. Megan nodded.

He let that land. The room was quiet for a moment. Then the pivot, and his voice dropped half a step—still casual, but closer, man-to-man, the tone of a partner letting his crew in on the real play.

“But just... go with it a little. Whatever makes ’em feel good. You’ll know where the line is—that’s what the signal’s for.”

“Go with what, exactly?” Megan asked.

Vince met her eyes. The look was steady, unbothered. “The attention. The comments. These guys are gonna tell you you’re the best-looking woman they’ve ever seen, because you probably are, and they’re gonna be loud about it. Let ’em. It’s part of the play. The more they think they’ve got a chance, the worse they play. That’s the hustle.”

Megan said nothing. Tyler said nothing.

“One more thing.” Vince leaned forward, elbows on the felt. “Don’t let on that you two are together.”

Tyler frowned. “What?”

“These guys’ll play different if they think she’s somebody’s wife. They’ll hold back, get careful. We want ’em loose. So tonight, she’s just... Megan. She’s here because I asked her. You’re here because you play cards. You don’t know each other.”

“We walked here together,” Megan said. “From three houses down.”

“And they don’t know that.” Vince shrugged. “Easy.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. But she was smiling—the edge of a laugh breaking through.

Tyler was looking at her hand. Her left hand, resting on the back of the chair. The ring.

“Meg.” He nodded at it.

She looked down. The band caught the overhead light—thin, white gold, the one he’d slid onto her finger three years ago in a garden with sixty people watching. She understood before he said it.

“Right.” She twisted it off. The metal slid easy—her fingers were warm—and her hand felt bare and wrong without it. She held it for a second, then slipped it into the front pocket of her shorts.

Vince watched them agree. His face showed nothing. His hand went to his slicked-back hair and ran through it once, and when it came away his palm had a shine.

The doorbell rang.

Wicks came through the door talking.

“Vince! Where’s this girl, man? Where’s the—oh.”

He stopped in the living room doorway.

He was smaller than Megan expected. Thin, wiry, vibrating with a restless energy that entered the room a full step before he did. Bad denim—jeans that sagged at the knee and a jacket he didn’t need in June. Sharp features, a jawline that might have been something twenty years and a thousand cigarettes ago. Bad teeth—yellowed, one chipped, the canine on the right side dark with decay.

Watery blue eyes that were already moving, scanning, unable to land on anything for more than a second until they landed on Megan and locked.

“Holy shit.” He said it to the room, not to her. His voice was nasal and too loud.

“Vince, you didn’t tell me she was *this* hot.”

No handshake. No *nice to meet you*. No small talk. She was the event. Wicks had declared it.

Dale entered behind him.

Dale came in behind him, and the doorway shrank.

He was an enormous black man. Six-two, two-fifty, broad across the chest and neck and shoulders — a body built by twenty years of hauling freight, never a gym, the mass distributed across a frame that made the room’s dimensions feel like a miscalculation. His skin was deep, rich dark — the unbroken black-brown of polished wood catching the overhead light. Close-cropped grey hair sat tight against his dark scalp. A heavy face: wide nose, full mouth, a jaw that carried hard bone beneath the softening of age. Heavy-lidded eyes that gave him the look of a man half-asleep, except he was watching everything. A gold chain — thicker than Vince’s, real — sat in the crease of a neck wider than Megan’s thigh.

He didn't rush. He moved through the room the way a man moves through a room that belongs to him regardless of whose name is on the deed. He set a bottle on the counter — whiskey, better than anything Vince had — and turned to look at Megan.

The look. He didn't comment. He didn't narrate. He looked at her chest — patient, direct, his dark eyes holding without blinking, without pretending it was anything else — then raised them to her face with the same certainty.

“Megan.” His voice was deep and chest-deep, a low rumble she felt in the floorboards. Not a question. Not a greeting, exactly. He said her name the way a man says the name of something he's been told about and is now confirming exists.

The weight of his attention was physical. She could feel it settle on her the way you feel a change in air pressure. She held his eye contact. She was the one who broke it — looked down at his hand on the whiskey bottle, the dark forearm thick with veins, old scars faded white against that deep skin. When she glanced back, something in his expression had settled. Satisfied. Confirmed.

He extended his hand. It engulfed hers — large, warm, dry, dark against her pale fingers — and his grip was certain. He held for a beat longer than necessary. Up close the smell of him was dense: cigar smoke, the stale residue of cheap cigars clinging to his clothes, his skin, his breath, layered with a warm cologne that was the only evidence any of these men had tried. The combination filled whatever space he occupied and pushed outward.

“Vince undersold you,” Dale said. The voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. “Considerably.”

Wicks shook her hand. Clammy, eager, too many small bones.

His fingers were stained yellow at the tips—nicotine that didn't wash out.

“Vince, where'd you find her?” Wicks was already talking to the room, not to her. “God damn. Look at her. Look at —” He gestured at all of Megan with both hands, a frantic up-and-down sweep. “Are you serious right now?”

“I'm standing right here,” Megan said. Cool. Level. The voice she used on contractors who tracked mud on her floor.

Wicks blinked. His grin faltered for half a second — the briefest recalibration of a man who'd forgotten the object of his monologue could hear him. “Oh — hey, no, I'm — that's a compliment. That's all that is.” He put both hands up, palms out, a mock surrender that didn't reach his eyes. “My bad. I just — you're gorgeous. That's all I'm saying.”

“Thank you.” Flat. The two words were a door closing.

Wicks looked at Dale for backup. Dale was already seated — he'd taken the chair at the far end without asking, the biggest seat, his mass settling into it the way water fills a container. He didn't help Wicks. He lit his cigar, the Zippo clicking open and shut, and watched Megan through the first curl of smoke.

“Sit down, Wicks,” Dale said. Low. Not a suggestion.

Wicks sat.

Vince, from the head of the table, smiled at Megan — the smile that was supposed to be reassuring. “Don’t mind him. He talks before he thinks. You good? Bourbon’s on the left.”

“I’m good.” She met his eyes and held them and her chin was level and her posture was perfect. She was not going to flinch for these men. Not for the skinny twitching one and not for the enormous one watching her through cigar smoke and not for Vince with his greasy patience.

But underneath the composure, a current ran. She had never been this close — this *available* — to men like this. Not in college behind a bar with bouncers at the door and forty other women in the room. Not passing them on a sidewalk with distance and daylight and somewhere else to be. Here there were no bouncers. No other women. No distance. Four men, one woman, a locked door behind her and an evening stretching ahead, and they were looking at her the way men look at something they believe they’ve been given access to. The hunger was visible. Wicks wore it like a billboard. Dale wore it like a uniform. Even Vince — casual, proprietary — wore it beneath the host’s smile.

She had poured drinks for men who wanted her a hundred times. She’d never poured them in a room where the wanting had no walls.

Tyler sat at the poker table. His jaw was set. He picked up a chip and turned it between his fingers. He was nobody to them — just some card player Vince had invited, unconnected to the woman behind the bar.

Megan stepped behind the bar table and picked up the bourbon. “What’s everyone drinking?”

She was working. She was the bartender. She could do this.

The game began and Tyler started winning.

He sat at the table with Dale to his left—massive, watchful, the cigar already lit and trailing smoke toward the stained ceiling tiles—and Wicks across from him, bouncing his leg and shuffling his cards wrong and providing a running commentary on every hand. Vince sat at the head, the position from which he could see everything: the table, the bar, and Megan moving between the two.

Megan ran the bar. She was good at this—the bartender muscle memory from college snapping back into place like it had never left. Heavy pours for Dale and Wicks. She watched the bourbon glug into the Solo cups and made the drinks strong enough to taste like a bad decision. For Tyler and Vince, she mixed cocktails that looked identical to the real thing but held nothing harder than ginger ale and a splash of bitters for color. She was keeping the marks drunk and the team sharp. She was part of the hustle.

And she was enjoying it. The first round she delivered to the table, she set Dale’s drink at his elbow with a smile that was pure bartender warmth—professional, calibrated, designed to loosen wallets—and watched him take a long swallow without

checking the pour. *Three shots in that cup and you don't even taste it, sweetheart.* She felt a flicker of satisfaction as sharp as a card turning over.

When Wicks started shuffling his cards wrong for the third consecutive hand, she leaned against the bar table and said, “You know those go face-down, right?” The table laughed. Even Dale’s mouth moved. Wicks clutched his chest in mock offense and Megan sipped her wine and felt, for the first time in months, like the most competent person in a room. These guys were exactly as dumb as Vince promised. She was smarter than all of them and they were paying for the privilege of her company and the irony was delicious.

Tyler played the first hand cautiously, reading the table. By the third hand, he knew. These guys were exactly what Vince had described—older men with cash, playing loose, making choices that no serious card player would make. Wicks folded too early on strong hands and bet too heavy on garbage. Dale pushed his chips in like money wasn’t the point. Vince lost a hand and shrugged like it was weather.

Tyler won the first three hands.

The winning locked into place. Three hands, three pots. Each one clean—reading Wicks’s nervous tells, catching Dale’s loose bets, folding when he knew to fold. Tyler stacked the chips and felt something he hadn’t felt in months. Not relief. Competence.

They were losing on purpose. Tyler didn’t see it. He saw what he expected to see—old guys, loose play, sloppy folds.

He won another hand. Stacked the chips—precise, satisfied.

Wicks tipped first. She brought his bourbon — three shots deep, the way she poured for marks — and when she set it on the felt, his hand came up and pressed a twenty into her palm. His fingers were clammy. They closed around hers and stayed. She could feel the dampness of his skin, the nicotine-stained tips, the small bones working against her knuckles as his thumb traced across her wrist.

“For you, gorgeous.” His voice was too loud, too close. “Best bartender I’ve ever had.”

She pulled her hand back. Pocketed the bill. Smiled the bartender smile.

Dale’s tip came two hands later. She was walking back to the bar, her back to the table, when she felt it — his hand. Not on her arm, not on her waist. On her ass. His fingers found the back pocket of her shorts and tucked a folded fifty into the denim, and his palm stayed. Flat. Deliberate. His hand was enormous — she could feel the span of it covering her entire back pocket, the heat of his palm through the thin fabric, his thick fingers pressing into the curve of her ass — flat, deliberate, certain it belonged there. The touch lasted two full seconds. Three. His thumb shifted, tracing the seam where denim met the crease of her thigh, and she felt the drag of each callus through the fabric.

Then the hand withdrew. Slow.

Megan’s step hitched. She kept walking. Her face was warm. She set the tray on the bar and her fingers gripped the edge of the card table and she stood there for a moment

with her back to the room, breathing. The phantom of his palm was still on her. The size of it. The certainty. She could feel exactly where each finger had been.

She glanced at Tyler. He was mid-hand, cards fanned, reading the table. He looked up. Their eyes met across the room and the contact carried weight — she was asking and he was answering and the answer was a small nod that cost him something he didn't itemize. *Play ball*. The tip was part of the hustle. The pat was part of the hustle. Everything was going to plan.

The comments started during the fourth hand.

Wicks couldn't help himself. The man was a faucet—thoughts entered his head and exited his mouth without passing through any filter, and three drinks in, the filter's absence was total. Wicks talked about Megan the way men talked about women when no husband was present. Freely. Explicitly. He'd been studying her body since he walked in and had no reason to censor the observations.

"Where'd Vince find you?" he asked her, leaning back in his chair, the grin showing every bad tooth he owned. His eyes were on her chest, not her face.

"I'm just here for the tips." She gave him the bartender smile—warm, professional, a wall dressed up as a window.

"Better question," Dale said, low, not looking up from his cards, "is can he keep you."

Wicks cackled. "Seriously, what's your deal? You got a boyfriend? You can't be single. No way a woman looking like that is single."

"I'm here to pour drinks, not answer questions." She set his refill on the table and stepped back.

"That's a non-answer," Wicks said. He looked at Dale. "That's a non-answer, right? She's deflecting. She's single." He turned back to Megan, delighted with his own deduction. "You're single."

She rolled her eyes and poured herself a glass of wine. For the nerves.

Wicks swiveled to Tyler. The watery eyes narrowed with genuine curiosity. "What about you, man? You haven't looked at her once. Not once. She's walking around here looking like *that* and you're over there counting chips like it's tax season."

Tyler shrugged. "I'm here to play cards."

"He's here to play cards." Wicks repeated it to the table the way you'd repeat something a psych patient said. "She's got the best tits I've ever seen in my life and he's *here to play cards*." He looked at Dale. "Is he gay? He's gotta be gay."

"I'm not gay, Wicks."

"Then what are you, blind? Or — wait." Wicks leaned forward, squinting. "How do you even know Vince? No offense, bro, but you don't exactly fit in here. You look like you sell insurance."

"He looks like a cop," Dale said. Low. Not looking up from his cards.

"I play cards," Tyler said. "Vince needed a player."

Wicks studied him for another second, then gave up—his attention span for anything that wasn't Megan's chest had a half-life of about three seconds. He turned back to the bar.

But the comments didn't stop. They escalated — not by leaps but by degrees, each one a half-step past the last, and without the governor of a husband's presence in the room, the escalation was faster and more explicit than anything Megan had fielded behind a bar.

Wicks, three hands later, while she bent to retrieve an empty from the floor near Dale's chair: "I can see her nipples through that tank, Dale. Both of 'em. The whole shape — they're poking right through the fabric. Jesus, Megan, do you know what you look like bent over like that?"

She straightened up fast. Her face was hot. She pressed her lips into a thin line — the reflexive expression of a woman whose mother taught her that some things simply aren't said in company — and carried the empty to the bar.

"Do you talk to every woman like that," she said, not turning around, "or just the ones you think can't leave?"

Wicks's grin faltered. "Hey — it's a compliment."

"It's not." She turned, wine glass in hand, her posture very straight. "Just so we're clear."

Silence. One second. Two.

Vince leaned forward at the table. "Wicks. Ease up." His voice was mild, almost bored — the tone of a man managing an employee. "You're gonna scare her off and then what are we looking at for the rest of the night? Your face?"

Wicks put his hands up. "I'm just saying —"

"Say less." Vince looked at Megan. The look was warm, conspiratorial — *you and me, these idiots*. "He can't help himself. Don't hold it against us."

"I'll try." She sipped her wine. The exchange had given her something: the illusion that Vince was the reasonable one. The adult in the room. She noted it without examining it.

But Wicks couldn't stay reined. Two hands later, his voice carrying across the room: "Vince, I swear to God, if she looked at me like that in a bar, I'd follow her home. I'm serious. I'd be outside her house."

"That's genuinely frightening," Megan said. "You understand that's a crime."

Dale laughed. A single deep sound, more felt than heard. "The man has no filter," he said, his heavy-lidded eyes on Megan. "You'll get used to it."

"I don't plan to get used to it."

"Mm." Dale's mouth moved — something close to a smile, or the memory of one. He looked at her over the fan of his cards. "Then I'll enjoy watching you not."

Wicks was not deterred. He was simply incapable of deterrence. Three drinks in, the monologue resumed—enthusiastic, oblivious, already forgetting the last five minutes had happened.

“I think about it, though.” He leaned back in his chair, grinning, watery eyes bright. “What she sounds like. I bet she tries to be quiet. Bites the pillow. But I also bet —” He looked directly at Megan, grin splitting his face. “I bet the right guy could make her loud. I bet she’d be so fucking loud the neighbors would know his name.”

Megan set her wine glass down. The sound was precise — glass on laminate, deliberate, final. Her jaw tightened and her eyes went cool and her voice dropped into the tone she used on men who overstepped.

“I think,” she said, “you should play your cards.”

The sentence was six words and it closed a door so firmly that even Wicks felt the temperature change. He looked at Dale. Dale was watching Megan—focused, still, something confirmed.

“I like her,” Dale said. To the room. To no one. The deep voice sat in the air like a weight on a scale.

The silence held for three seconds. Then Vince dealt the next hand and the game moved on, but the quality of the room had shifted. Megan poured her second glass of wine. Her hands were steady. Her pulse wasn’t.

And Tyler. Tyler sat at the poker table and heard every word. Every crude observation, every explicit thing Wicks said about his wife. He heard Dale’s low comment when she collected his empty — “You smell good” — three words that carried more weight than anything Wicks had said all night. He watched Megan’s face go warm. Watched her say “Thanks” without lingering. Felt something in his jaw he couldn’t unlock.

He couldn’t react. He didn’t know her. She was just Megan, Vince’s girl, the bartender. The ruse was his cage. Every crude fantasy Wicks described, Tyler had to absorb in silence. His jaw set. His knuckles whitened on his cards. But he played ball. The hustle required it.

And underneath the anger — through it, fused with it — he was hard. Hard at this poker table listening to a man with rotting teeth talk about making his wife scream. He pressed his thighs together under the table and willed it down and it didn’t go down. His cock was stiff against his jeans, responding to the same words that were making his knuckles white, and the shame sat in his stomach like acid but the shame didn’t soften him. He hated Wicks. He hated himself more. He shifted in his chair and the friction made it worse and he stopped shifting and sat perfectly still and won another hand. Stacked the chips. Didn’t look at Megan.

The touches began with logistics.

Wicks put a hand on her lower back to guide her past his chair when she crossed behind him with a tray of empties. The hand was unnecessary — there was room to pass — and it slid down from the small of her back toward her waistband before she stepped forward and the contact broke. His palm was clammy and warm and the fingers splayed

wide, pressing into the fabric of her tank top, and she could feel the dampness left behind when the contact broke. She didn't mention it.

Two hands later, Dale's hand. She delivered his drink and his hand came up to her hip — not grabbing, just landing, his dark palm settling on the denim of her shorts. No hesitation, no testing — he put it exactly where he wanted it and let it rest, like the hip was already his. The span of his fingers reached from her hipbone to the top of her bare thigh where the shorts ended. The hand stayed. His thumb moved — a slow stroke along the seam, pressing heat into the skin beneath. She could feel each callus. The rough drag of workman's fingers against thin denim, and below the denim, the warmth spreading into muscle.

She glanced at Tyler. He looked up. Their eyes met and the communication had to be invisible to the room — she was asking and he was answering and they weren't supposed to know each other. He gave her a small nod. The nod meant *play ball* and it meant *I see it* and it meant something neither of them could articulate with Dale's hand on her hip. She turned back to the bar.

An hour in, Dale won a hand — the pot sliding toward him across the green felt. He stacked the chips without looking at them. He looked at Megan.

"Come sit." The deep voice. Not a question.

"I'm good standing." She lifted her wine glass. Smiled the bartender smile.

"I won the hand." He leaned back in his chair — the wood creaking under two hundred and fifty pounds — and patted his thigh twice. The sound was flat, deliberate, like calling something over. "Lucky charm. Sit here till I lose one."

"That's not — I'm the bartender." She laughed, but the laugh was too short. She looked at Vince.

Vince shrugged from the head of the table. "It's his money. He wins, he picks the prize."

Dale wasn't looking at anyone else. His heavy-lidded eyes were on her and the patience in them was the patience of a man who has already decided the outcome. "Tell you what," he said. "I win this next hand, you take the pot. But you sit right here." He tapped his thigh again. "Till I lose."

She looked at Tyler. Tyler's jaw was tight. But they'd been winning all night. Dale had won one hand — he'd lose the next. Two minutes. The money was good. The hustle was working.

She crossed the room. Stood beside Dale's chair. Up close the mass of him was something she could feel in her own body — a gravitational distortion, the sheer size of the man reshaping the space around him. The smell rose — cigar smoke, warm cologne, something deeper and animal underneath, dense and male. His thigh was enormous. Thick, solid, wider than the chair arm she'd been perched on.

She sat.

Not on the arm of the chair. On him. Her ass settled onto his thigh and the contact was immediate and total — the hard muscle of his leg beneath her, the heat of him

radiating through her shorts like a furnace, the sheer width of his body behind her. She was small on him. Perched on one thigh like a woman sitting on a bench, except the bench was alive and warm and breathing and the smell of him enveloped her. His hand came to her waist. Settled. His fingers spread across her ribcage — five points of contact, each one burning through the thin cotton of her tank top.

“There,” Dale said. Low. Satisfied.

She sat for one hand. He won it. She sat for another. He won that too. She should get up. She didn’t get up. Tyler was still winning on his side of the table and Dale’s hand was on her waist and his thumb traced slow circles through the fabric of her tank top and she could feel every ridge of every callus. His forearm rested against the side of her breast — the weight of it warm and certain — and she knew it wasn’t accidental and she knew she should move and she didn’t move.

Then she felt it.

Below her. Against the back of her thigh, pressing upward through his pants. His cock—stiffening, swelling—a thick, unmistakable hardness growing beneath her weight, pushing against her through layers of fabric with a size that made her breath stop. He was getting hard. She could feel it — the length of it, the width, growing against the underside of her thigh, hot and rigid and *enormous*. Bigger than anything she’d felt through clothing. Bigger than she’d imagined any man could be. The cock pressed against her and she went perfectly still.

Dale didn’t move. His hand stayed on her waist. His thumb kept its slow circle. The cigar burned between his other fingers. His breathing didn’t change. He was hard beneath her and he didn’t shift, didn’t apologize, didn’t pretend it wasn’t happening. The certainty of it — that he felt no need to acknowledge what she could so obviously feel — made her face burn.

She stared at the poker table. At the cards. At anything. The room was loud with Wicks’s voice and the shuffle of chips and she was sitting on Dale’s lap with his cock stiffening against her thigh and nobody at the table could see it and nobody would stop it and the heat was spreading from the point of contact upward through her stomach into her chest.

Two more hands. She sat through them without breathing properly. Then Dale lost — finally, blessedly — and she stood.

“My charm ran out,” Dale said. The voice was easy. Amused. His heavy-lidded eyes tracked her as she stood, and she could see the slight adjustment he made below the table — open, unbothered, his dark hand settling the bulge in his pants without a trace of shame.

She walked to the bar on legs that felt different. Poured herself a glass of wine — the third — and drank half of it standing.

Wicks won the next hand. He nearly vibrated out of his chair.

“My turn. My turn, right? That’s the rule. Winner gets her.” He was bouncing his leg so hard the table rattled. “Megan. Come on. Same deal.”

She looked at his bony lap. His thin legs jittering. The stained fingers drumming on his thigh. She sat — barely. Perched on the edge of his knee with as little contact as possible, her weight forward, ready to stand at any moment. His hands came up immediately — one on her waist, one on her bare thigh below the hem of her shorts — and his fingers were clammy and twitching and his grip was too tight and she could feel his erection against her hip, small and insistent, and his breath was on her neck, hot and stale with menthol.

“Oh my God,” Wicks said. He was talking to the room, to no one, his voice cracking. “Oh my — she’s on my lap. Dale. Dale, she’s on my lap. I’m going to die.”

“Play the hand, Wicks,” Dale said.

Wicks lost immediately. He played his cards without looking at them — his eyes on Megan’s thigh, on his own hand on her thigh, on the place where her shorts rode up — and folded on a pair of kings.

Megan stood. The relief was physical. She wiped her palms on her shorts and didn’t look at him.

Vince won the hand after that. He leaned back in his chair — the head of the table, the best seat — and gestured with two fingers. “Come on. Rules are rules.”

She hesitated. Vince was different. Vince was the one who’d said *ease up*. Vince was the one who’d given her the signal, the safety net, the illusion of control. She sat on the arm of his chair — not his lap. Her hip against the chair back, her legs crossed at the ankle, her hands in her own space.

Vince didn’t grab. His hand rested on the arm of the chair, an inch from her thigh, not touching. He played his cards. His body was still — no jittering like Wicks, no spreading like Dale. Just the faint smell of his cologne, the greasy musk, and his dark eyes occasionally sliding sideways to her legs before returning to the table.

“Comfortable?” he asked. Mild. Almost polite.

“Fine,” she said.

He lost the hand. She stood. His hand brushed her lower back as she rose — brief, courteous, the kind of touch a man makes helping a woman from a chair. It was nothing. It shouldn’t have unsettled her more than Dale’s groping or Wicks’s clammy grip. But it did. The restraint felt like patience.

She topped off her wine and felt the edges of the evening soften.

Tyler won the next hand.

“Oh, come on.” Wicks slapped the table. “Rules are rules, right? Even pretty boy. Get over there, Megan. Fair is fair.”

She looked at Tyler across the room. He was already looking at her — a quick, careful glance that had to pass as a stranger’s mild interest. The hesitation lasted a beat. She crossed the room and sat on his lap.

The difference was immediate. His thigh was lean and familiar in a way the others hadn’t been — the shape of him, the warmth, the clean smell underneath the evening’s accumulated smoke. She knew this body. She’d slept against this body for eight years.

Even through the performance, through the distance the cover required, the relief of him was physical — the right temperature, the right proportion, the right man after three wrong ones. His hand came to her waist and the touch was careful, measured, the deliberate restraint of a man who wanted to pull her close and couldn't.

"Comfortable?" Tyler asked. The same word Vince had used, but different in his mouth — dry, light, the undertone meant only for her.

"You're the least terrible chair so far," she said. The bartender voice. Playing her part.

Wicks groaned. "She's sitting all the way on him, Dale. All the way. That's more than I got. I got one cheek. One cheek, and he gets the full treatment. That's bullshit."

"Play the hand, Wicks," Dale said. The same low instruction. But his heavy-lidded eyes were on Tyler and Megan and the look had something in it — a dark, private satisfaction, the quiet enjoyment of a man watching a husband hold his own wife on his lap and pretend she was a stranger.

Then she felt it.

He was hard. Stiff against the back of her thigh, straining upward through his jeans with an urgency he couldn't disguise. Her husband — her careful, controlled husband who played every hand with steady fingers and a locked jaw — was rock hard beneath her. She went still. Not the shocked stillness of Dale's lap, where the size and the strangeness had frozen her. This was different. This was recognition. She knew what Tyler's cock felt like. She knew its size, its shape, the specific pressure of it against her body. And it was harder than she'd felt it in months.

She stared at the table. The cards. Tyler's hand on her waist, thumb motionless, holding himself in check while his cock told her everything his face wouldn't.

Why?

The question moved through her before she could stop it. Was he hard because she was on his lap? Because of her, the way he was always hard for her — the morning kitchen, the bedroom, the eight years of wanting that hadn't dulled? Or was it the other thing. The thing she'd felt building in the room all night. Was he hard because he'd spent two hours watching men touch his wife and talk about what they wanted to do to her and describe her tits to each other and he'd sat there and absorbed all of it and his body had answered in the way his face refused to?

She didn't look at him. She couldn't. Looking at him would mean seeing the answer and she wasn't ready for what the answer might be.

Tyler lost the hand. She stood. His hand fell from her waist and the absence of his touch was worse than the absence of anyone else's had been. She walked to the bar and didn't look back.

Wicks, emboldened by beer and the fact that nobody had stopped anything yet, pushed past commentary into dares.

“Stand up,” he said. “Do a spin. Let’s see the whole thing.” He was grinning the grin — too many teeth, the watery eyes bright with something that had passed beyond appreciation into appetite.

Megan looked at him. The request was stupid. It was beneath her. But the logic was quick and familiar: the spin was nothing. A spin meant nothing. She’d done worse for tips in college — twirled for drunk fraternity boys while they hooted from their barstools. This was the hustle. She was the distraction. The faster these men got what they wanted visually, the sloppier they played, the more Tyler won. It was simple.

She stood. Looked at Wicks with the flat expression she gave men who crossed lines — the look that said *I see you and you’re beneath me*. Then she did a spin. Quick, mocking, eye-rolling, her arms out in an exaggerated model pose. The room watched. She stopped. “There. Happy?”

Wicks clapped. Dale didn’t. Dale watched her settle, his dark eyes tracking the way her breasts shifted with the spin, the way the ribbed white tank stretched.

The spin was the warm-up. It meant nothing and everyone knew it.

Then Wicks dealt the next hand. And when the cards were fanned and the bets were placed, he looked at Megan and said: “I want to raise the stakes.”

“You’re already losing,” Megan said. “What stakes do you have left?”

“Not money.” Wicks was grinning, bouncing, the watery eyes locked on the bra straps visible at the neckline of her tank. He’d been tracking them all night — the straps, the line of the underwire beneath the fabric, the way the bra shaped her and constrained her. “If I win this hand — the bra comes off.”

She stared at him.

“Under the top,” he added quickly. “You’re still dressed. Completely dressed. It’s just — one less layer. You can work it off without taking the tank off, I’ve seen girls do it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re still wearing the tank top. Nobody sees anything.” He looked at Dale for support. “Right? She’d still be dressed.”

“You won’t win the hand,” Dale said. Low. Certain. He was looking at Megan, not Wicks. “But if you did. She’d still be dressed.”

“Wicks, you haven’t won a hand all night,” Vince said from the head of the table. His voice was mild — the reasonable one, the mediator. “What are you putting up against it?”

“Three hundred.” Wicks slapped crumpled bills on the felt. “Three hundred to her. Cash. If I lose.”

“And if you win?” Megan’s voice was cool. She was engaged now — the competitive instinct, the bartender who could work a room, the woman who was smarter than all of these men. This was a bet she couldn’t lose. Wicks folded on pairs. Wicks had lost every hand tonight.

“The bra,” Wicks said. “Under the tank. That’s it. That’s all.”

Dale added two hundreds to the pot. Flat. No fanfare. His dark hand placed the bills and withdrew. “Five hundred.”

Five hundred dollars. For an underwire. Under a shirt.

She looked at Tyler. Tyler’s face was tight. His jaw was set. *Last call*. Two words and this was over. The bet was on the table and everyone was waiting. He didn’t say them. His eyes held hers and his mouth was a line and the words stayed where they were.

And Wicks couldn’t win. He hadn’t won all night. The money was free.

The hand played out. She watched the cards. She watched Wicks fidget. She watched Tyler play tight, calculated, the same way he’d played every hand. The flop came and Wicks — for the first time all evening — didn’t fold. The turn came. He bet. The river. He went all in.

Tyler folded. Vince folded. Dale leaned back and let his cards fall face-down.

Wicks turned his hand over. Full house.

The room went quiet. Wicks’s grin split his face in half — all those bad teeth showing — and his watery eyes were on Megan and the victory was the ugliest thing she’d ever seen on a human face.

She stood very still. The bet was on the table. The money was on the table. Five hundred dollars she’d already lost. And the room was watching.

She could say it. Two words. *Last call*. She could look at Vince and say them and this would stop — the escape hatch, the safety net, the phrase that meant *done*. She felt the shape of it in her mouth. But saying it meant — what? That she couldn’t handle a poker game with some old drunks? That she’d blown the hustle over a bra she was wearing under a shirt? Tyler hadn’t said it. Tyler was watching with his jaw set and he hadn’t said it, which meant the hustle was still on, which meant this was part of the play, which meant —

And the money. The creeping thing she wouldn’t name: they needed the money. Every bill on that table was a bill that wasn’t going on the Visa. And it was just a bra. Under a shirt.

She reached behind her back.

The room went still. Wicks stopped bouncing his leg. Dale’s cigar paused halfway to his mouth. Vince was motionless in his chair, his dark eyes fixed on her with the focused attention of a man watching something he’d built begin to operate.

She unhooked the bra. The clasp released and she felt the tension give, the underwire loosening, the sudden absence of structure against her ribs. She reached into the left sleeve of her tank top and found the strap and pulled it down her arm, working the cup free from beneath the fabric. Then the right side. The bra came out in her hand — white, plain, functional, still warm from her body. She dropped it on the poker table, on top of the cash.

“Happy?”

Then the room saw what no bra meant on Megan Calloway.

The breasts held their shape. Heavy, firm, projecting forward with the pronounced conical profile that was their signature—not the soft round droop of gravity but an aggressive, jutting silhouette that pushed against the ribbed white cotton and redefined the tank entirely. The puffy nipples were immediately visible through the thin fabric—the swollen, raised profile that announced itself even at rest, the kind that couldn't hide behind a single layer of anything. The pink was there, faint, just barely discernible through the white. Every contour. Every line. The top that had been bar-appropriate five seconds ago was now something else. She was technically dressed. She was effectively on display.

The room held its breath. The silence that the spin couldn't earn—the silence that no comment or dare or hand on her hip had produced all night—arrived now at maximum voltage. Every man stopped. Dale's cigar was suspended in the air. Wicks's grin had frozen into something slack and open and hungry. Vince, in his chair, hadn't moved. His dark eyes were steady and his mouth was closed and the stillness was the most controlled reaction in the room.

Two seconds of silence. Two seconds where the only sound was the faint hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen and the blood in Megan's ears.

Then Wicks: "Jesus Christ. Jesus *fucking* Christ." His voice cracked. "Those are the most perfect tits I have ever seen in my life. In my entire life. Vince — are you seeing this? The nipples. You can see the whole shape — they're pink. They're fucking pink through the tank. Dale. Dale, look at them."

Dale hadn't spoken. He was looking at her chest and his expression had dropped every pretense it owned—the heavy-lidded eyes wide, the jaw set different, hunger stripped of everything civilized. His hand, below the table, adjusted something in his lap. He didn't hide it. He wanted her to see.

Megan picked up her wine glass. The movement was deliberate — defiant — but when she reached for it, her breasts shifted with the motion and every eye in the room tracked the movement and she felt it. She felt the fabric slide against her bare nipples and the friction was new and present and she could feel every thread. She took a sip and held the glass and looked at the room and her chin was up and her back was straight and the composure was real and also the thinnest thing she'd ever worn.

And then — underneath the defiance, underneath the composure she was holding like a shield — something else. The attention of three strange disgusting men focused entirely on her chest. The heat of it. The weight. Dale's open hunger. Wicks's cracked, trembling narration. The room's silence pressing against her skin like a hand. She felt a flush spread from her chest up her throat and she told herself it was embarrassment and it was embarrassment and it was also something else, something warmer and lower, pooling in her stomach and radiating downward. Her nipples tightened. She felt them stiffen against the ribbed cotton — the puffy mounds contracting, hardening into points that pushed against the fabric with a visibility she couldn't control. The sensation was

involuntary, traitorous, her body responding to the room's attention with a clarity that horrified her.

Wicks saw it. Of course Wicks saw it.

"Oh — oh my God. They just — did you see that? They just got hard. Dale. *Dale*. Look — you can see them getting harder. She's — Megan, are you —" He was leaning forward, his chair tipping, his voice cracking with something between disbelief and worship. "She's turned on. She's actually turned on. The nipples just — look at them *now*."

She wanted to cross her arms. She didn't cross her arms. She held the wine glass and kept her chin level and her jaw tight and the heat between her legs was unmistakable and she was furious at her own body and the fury didn't cool anything down. The men were staring at her chest and her nipples were hard and visible and the evidence was there for everyone in this room to see.

Tyler watched from the table. The bra on the felt. The way the tank changed — everything she had suddenly visible, the nipples he'd looked at a thousand times showing through ribbed cotton for every man in the room. The puffy profile. The pink beneath the white. Three men seeing what he saw every morning.

He should leave. He should stand up, take her arm, walk out. He could feel the impulse building—legs tensing, shoulders squaring—and he crushed it. Sat still. His pulse was hammering between his legs and the territorial fury and the arousal were the same current running through the same wire and he was trying to separate them and failing. *Stop it. Stop*. His jaw ached. His cock strained against his jeans. His face showed nothing.

He won another hand. His hands were steady.

"Dude." Wicks was staring at him from across the table. The grin was gone — replaced by something closer to bewilderment. "*Dude*. Her tits are right there. Through the shirt. I can see her nipples from here and you're stacking chips. What is *wrong* with you?"

Tyler didn't look up. "Good hand."

"Good hand. He says 'good hand.'" Wicks looked at Dale, then back at Tyler. "I'm serious — are you and Vince, like—" He wagged a finger between them. "Together? Is that what this is? Because that's the only explanation I got."

"Jesus, Wicks," Vince said.

Dale's heavy-lidded eyes moved from Megan to Tyler. Settled. Studied. "Man knows how to focus," Dale said. A private amusement sat in his voice — warm, knowing, the kind of joke that only worked if the audience didn't get it. "I respect that."

Tyler met Dale's gaze. Held it. Nodded once — the nod of a man accepting a compliment he didn't realize was a knife.

The final hour of the night ran on a different fuel.

Midnight approached and the game was winding down but the energy in the room had only thickened. The air was dense with smoke and spilled beer and the heat of five bodies in a room that had never been ventilated well. The particular tension of men who had been looking at a Megan Calloway braless for an hour and knew the looking was about to end gave the room a quality it hadn't had at eight o'clock—urgent, compressed, greedy with the last of the evening.

Every movement Megan made was loaded. She reached for a bottle on the bar and the stretch lifted the hem of her top and she felt the cotton drag across her bare skin and knew—could feel it in the sudden silence behind her—that every man in the room had just watched. She bent to collect empties and the fabric fell forward with the weight it held and she heard Wicks's breathing hitch. She walked from the bar to the table and the sway of each step was something she couldn't control, the soft bounce visible in her peripheral vision, and the room tracked her the way a room tracks a flame. She was aware of all of it. The attention on her chest had become a physical pressure—not heat anymore but weight, heavy and constant, pressing against her from every direction at once.

She passed Dale's chair and his hand found her. Not her hip this time — the bare strip of skin between the hem of her tank and the waistband of her shorts. His dark fingers settled on her stomach, just above the denim, and the contact was skin-to-skin and the heat of his palm soaked into her and she sucked in her stomach reflexively and felt his thumb press into the soft flesh beside her navel. His hand was enormous and warm and his skin was rough against hers and the touch had moved past the fabric and she hadn't said anything and the not-saying-anything was becoming its own kind of answer.

Wicks was drunk. His commentary had passed from fantasy into real-time narration. "They're moving," he said, watching her cross to the bar. "Every step. Watch—see how they bounce? Megan. Megan, stop for a second." She didn't stop. "Her nipples got hard again, Dale. Look. The left one—she's cold or she's turned on and either way I'm about to lose my fucking mind." He was three feet from her. The card game was forgotten. There was only Megan's chest and the running inventory of everything he could see through the cotton.

"I could die happy," Wicks said. "I could die right now and I'd be fine." He was looking at her chest. "Megan, I need you to not be offended. If you came home with me right now, I would treat you like a queen. Breakfast in bed. Foot rubs. Whatever you want. That's what I'd do. That's what's on the table."

"Wicks," Megan said. "Didn't you just tell us about how you live in an apartment above a laundromat?"

Dale laughed. A single, deep sound that shook his chest. Wicks looked wounded for a half-second, then cackled. Even Tyler, at the table, allowed a smile—a thin one, mostly jaw—because Megan was still Megan even braless in this room around these disgusting old men.

Dale's commentary, when it came, was sparse and certain. He waited for her to pass close and said, without looking up from his cards: "You're the best-looking woman I've ever seen in my life."

The voice sat in her chest. Deep. Immovable.

Then, lower: "I want to put my mouth on every inch of you. I want to taste what's between your legs. I want to find out how wet you get when a man tells you what he's going to do to you." He looked up from his cards. The heavy-lidded eyes found hers. "And I think you want to find out too."

She turned to the ice cooler and stayed there until her face cooled.

Tyler heard it. All of it. Every word Dale said about what he wanted to do to his wife. Every graphic detail. His hands were steady on his cards. His jaw was locked. The muscles in his forearms stood out like cables.

Wicks leaned across the table. "You hearing this, Tyler? Dale's over here writing poetry about our bartender and you're just — sitting there." He shook his head. "Most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Tits out. And you're playing poker." He said it like he was diagnosing a medical condition. "I genuinely do not understand you."

"Maybe he's smart," Dale said. He was looking at Tyler again — the same warm, knowing look from before, the same private joke. "Man who can sit still while the rest of us lose our minds? That's a dangerous man."

Tyler said nothing. He dealt the next hand.

Vince leaned in. Close—closer than the others got. She could feel his breath on her neck, smell the grease in his hair, the cheap cologne, the deeper animal musk underneath. His mouth was an inch from her ear.

"You've got every man in this room by the balls," he whispered. "You know that? They're done. They can't see their cards. They can't see anything but you."

His lips brushed her ear when he pulled back. She didn't know if it was intentional. The heat where his breath had been stayed on her skin.

She stepped away. Picked up her wine glass. Her hands were steady. Her pulse was not.

There was a moment, late, when their eyes met across the room. Two seconds. He was seeing her braless, nipples visible through ribbed cotton, among men who had spent the last hour describing what they wanted to do to her. She was seeing him seeing her. Something passed between them that neither could have put into words—fury and shame and heat fused into something that scared them both.

She looked away first. Then he did.

Vince called last hand. The room relaxed a degree—the tension shifting from anticipation to something that resembled satisfaction. The proof of concept had worked. The marks had paid. The product had performed.

Vince settled up at the table. Cash—counted out from a roll in his pocket, twenties and fifties fanned across the green felt. Eleven hundred to Tyler. Tips in Megan's

pockets and purse. Tyler folded the bills and put them in his front pocket and the weight against his thigh was solid and satisfying—not as relief but as confirmation. He'd been right. The system worked. He'd read the room, played the cards, and walked away with more money than he'd make in three days of pulling wire. He was the smartest person in this room.

The goodbye was quick. Dale stood, his mass unfolding from the chair, and nodded at Tyler—not warm, not cold, the nod of a man who'd gotten what he came for. He looked at Megan one last time. The sweep went from her shoes to her face, lingering at the chest, and the look said what his words had said all night: *I see you. I see all of you.* “See you next time.” He stated it, flat and certain, like an appointment already on the books. She didn't correct it.

Wicks shook her hand again—clammy, too long, his thumb rubbing her knuckles—and was still talking: “Same time next Friday, right? Vince, tell her same time. I'm serious. I need this on the calendar.”

Vince walked them to the door. His hand found the small of Megan's back as they moved through the living room toward the front—the same spot Tyler's hand found, the same proprietary pressure, and the mimicry was either unconscious habit or precise calculation.

“You guys killed it,” Vince said at the door. “Same time next week if you want.”

They stepped outside. The night air was cool and clean after four hours in Vince's house, and Megan breathed it in through her nose and held it and let it out slowly. The cigarette smoke and cologne and cigar residue and the musk of male bodies was on her clothes, in her hair, on the skin where hands had been. She could smell it on herself and the smell was a record of everywhere she'd been touched.

Tyler could smell it too.

They walked home. Three houses. They walked faster than they'd come.

Walking home. Megan was buzzing.

Flushed, amped, talking fast—the adrenaline of performance mixing with three glasses of wine and the giddy relief of being outside and away and done. The bartender coming off a shift, downloading the night in a breathless monologue that was half debriefing and half exorcism.

“Those guys are disgusting,” she said. “But that was literally the easiest money we've ever made. Dale had his hand on my ass for the entire last hour. And Wicks—did you hear what he said about what he'd do to me? I thought he was going to climb across the table.”

Tyler laughed. It was a real laugh but it was a degree off center, a half-step thinner than his usual. “He couldn't climb across a table. He weighs a hundred and ten pounds.”

“He'd find a way. He'd army-crawl. He'd slide across the felt like a snake.” She was performing the evening, making it funny, making it manageable, turning the night into a story she could tell herself. She did an impression of Wicks's nasal voice

—“*Vince, where’d you find her? Am I dreaming?*”—and it was dead-on and Tyler laughed harder and for a moment it was just them, debriefing, a team that had pulled off a heist.

She made fun of the way Dale said everything in four words. Of Vince’s cologne. Of the bra on the poker table—“That bra cost more than everything in Vince’s kitchen combined.” Tyler added his observations—the way Wicks folded on obvious hands, the look on Dale’s face when the bra came off, the way Vince watched without playing but never stopped watching.

But underneath the banter, both of them were carrying something they hadn’t turned into words yet.

Dale’s hand was still on her hip. Gone, but still there—the exact pressure, the heat, the slow drag of his thumb. She kept walking and kept talking—faster, louder—because the silence would leave room for the other thing. The bra coming off. The room going still. Every man stopping. And the heat that had hit her between her legs when she stood there with her nipples visible through the cotton, the attention pressing against her skin like something physical. She was wet. Still wet, walking home in the cool air, and the wetness was evidence she couldn’t argue with. She talked about Wicks’s apartment and the way Dale barely spoke and Vince’s cologne and didn’t stop talking because stopping meant feeling it.

Tyler’s jaw ached from clenching. His cock was still half-hard — had been for the last hour — and the walk hadn’t fixed it. The bra. The tank falling different. That silence. Every man in the room had stopped breathing and Tyler had been one of them. He’d felt the same hit they felt—the surge low in his gut—and the fury at himself for feeling it hadn’t killed it. Hadn’t even dented it. He wanted to hit Dale. He wanted to be inside Megan. He wanted both at the same time and the wanting was making him sick.

They reached the duplex. The house smelled clean. Their world. She kicked off her shoes at the door and the gesture was so normal, so domestic, that it felt like putting on a costume. He put the cash on the kitchen counter. Eleven hundred dollars in twenties and fifties, green on white formica. They looked at each other across the kitchen.

The looking had a different quality now. Something in it that hadn’t been there this morning.

They didn’t discuss it.

Megan came out of the bathroom. She hadn’t showered. Tyler was on the bed—jeans on, shirt off—and when she appeared in the doorway the look between them lasted one second and decided everything.

She crossed the room and kissed him. Hard, both hands on his jaw, pushing him flat. She tasted like wine and her mouth was hot and the kiss was different from anything in months—less careful, hungrier, tasting like something that needed to be used up before it turned. He could smell the evening on her skin: cigarette smoke woven through her shampoo, the ghost of Dale’s cigar clinging to the fabric at her waist where his hand had

been, something muskier underneath—Vince’s cologne, or the room itself, or the accumulated smell of men’s want soaked into cotton. She smelled like that house. She was kissing him like she needed to replace the taste.

She pulled his jeans open. Took him in her hand—already hard, already aching—and then her mouth was on him.

The sound hit first. Wet, soft, obscene in the silence of their bedroom. The slick pull of her lips around him, the faint clinging sound when she drew back. Then the heat—the tight, soaking heat of her mouth sliding down, her tongue pressing flat against the underside—and his hips jerked and the bed frame creaked.

Tonight was different. The rhythm was faster. Deeper. She took him further than she usually did and a sound escaped her throat—a small moan, muffled, involuntary—that vibrated through his cock and up his spine. Her dark hair fell around his thighs. Her hand gripped his base, slick with spit, and the wet sounds of her mouth working him filled the bedroom. Steady. Rhythmic. Filthy. Each one went straight through him.

Tyler’s head was on the pillow, eyes closed, and the images from the evening were right there — vivid, unavoidable. Dale’s hand on her hip. The nipples pressing through ribbed cotton. The silence when the bra came off. He opened his mouth.

“Every guy in that room wanted you.”

Low. Barely a whisper. The words left him the way a flinch does—involuntary, from somewhere deeper than decision. He heard himself say it and his whole body went cold even as his cock throbbed against her tongue, because he’d said it, the thing he’d been crushing down all night, and now it was in the room and he couldn’t take it back.

Her mouth stopped.

One second. His cock in her mouth, her hands on his thighs, nothing moving. He felt the blood leave his face. He’d crossed a line. Her mouth was frozen on him and he was about to hear—

She moaned. Low and involuntary, the sound muffled by him, and then her mouth resumed. Wetter. Faster. Her lips slid down his shaft further than she’d ever taken him and the sound she made around him was hungry—desperate, greedy, a sound that bypassed everything and went straight to the base of his spine.

She liked it.

The thought hit him like a wall. His wife—his careful, composed, controlled wife—was sucking his cock harder because he’d told her other men wanted her. He could feel the difference in her mouth. The increased suction. The way her hand tightened at his base. The way her breathing through her nose had gone ragged and fast.

He kept going. Couldn’t stop.

“The bra.” His voice was rough, cracking. “When you reached behind your back and unhooked it. The way the tank changed after. I could see your nipples through the cotton — the shape of them, the pink — every man in that room could see them.”

Her rhythm stuttered. A whimper escaped around him—high, involuntary, swallowed by the act—and then she was working him harder, her head moving with an

urgency he hadn't felt from her in years. The wet sounds were louder now. Sloppier. The sounds of a woman who had stopped thinking about technique.

"Wicks couldn't stop staring." Tyler's voice was shaking. His hips had started moving—shallow thrusts into her mouth that matched her rhythm. "Dale's hand on your hip all night. Those big, rough hands on you. He touched you for an hour and you let him—you sat on his lap and let him put his arm around you while I—"

Sensation cut him off. She did something with her tongue—a twist, a press against the underside—and his spine arched and his sentence died and all he could hear was the wet pull of her mouth and their breathing and the creak of the bed.

This is what they'd want to see. The thought surfaced unbidden, horrifying, and he couldn't kill it. *Dale. Wicks. This is what they'd give anything to see—her mouth on a cock, her hair falling around his thighs, the sounds she's making. They'd kill for this.*

He was close. She knew — eight years of reading his body. The tension in his thighs. The way his hips pushed up. She could feel him swelling against her tongue.

She pulled off.

The same way she always did. Her mouth withdrew — seamless, automatic, the boundary that had been in place since before him, since before anyone. No man had ever finished in Megan Calloway's mouth. She pressed her lips together and wiped her chin with the back of her hand and her breathing was ragged and her eyes were dark and she looked up at him from between his thighs with a face he'd never seen on her before — flushed, ruined, hungry for something she hadn't found yet.

He pulled her up. Kissed her — tasted himself on her tongue, tasted wine — and rolled her onto her back. His hands found the waistband of her underwear and pulled them down her legs and off and he slid down the bed, his mouth on her ribs, her stomach, the jut of her hip bone, lower.

His mouth found her and he froze.

He knew her body. Eight years of this body. But he'd never seen her like this — the neat pink slit he knew was swollen, puffy, the lips thickened and parted, flushed a deeper pink than he'd ever seen. Slick. Glistening. Her pussy looked *fucked* and nobody had touched her. Just the room. Just the night. Just the attention of men she should never have been near.

She was drenched. Soaked through. Not the gradual warmth of foreplay — the slick, unmistakable flood of a woman who had been wet for hours, whose arousal had been building since a room full of men watched her strip off her bra and her nipples stiffened under their gaze. He could taste it immediately — salt, musk, the concentrated taste of her need, thicker and more present than any time in their eight years. His tongue pressed flat and she was *dripping*, the wetness coating his chin, his lips, running toward the sheets.

"Jesus," he said against her. The word came out raw. "Megan."

She whimpered. Her hips pushed toward his mouth and her fingers found his hair and gripped. He slid his tongue against her and she gasped — a sharp, high sound, her

thighs clamping around his ears. He knew where to press and how to move and tonight everything he did landed like a livewire. She was responding faster, louder, her hips grinding against his mouth with a desperation that scared him. He licked slow and she moaned. He pressed harder and she bucked. She was so wet he could hear it — the soft, soaked sounds of his mouth on her, of her answering every touch with a readiness that had nothing to do with him and everything to do with what had been building in her all night.

He couldn't stop himself. His mouth against her, his voice rough: "You're this wet from them watching you."

Her hips jerked. A moan tore out of her — not the careful, buried sound she made in this bed, not the bitten-back whimper she hid in the pillow. Something open. Something honest.

He kept going — his tongue, his lips, the slow drag that always undid her — and the words kept coming: "Dale's hand on you all night. Sitting on his lap. His cock getting hard under you and you just — sitting there —"

She was close. He could feel it in her thighs, in the rhythm of her hips, in the way her grip in his hair had gone white-knuckled. And then —

"They wanted me."

Tyler went still. His tongue stopped. His blood stopped.

Megan's voice. Above him. Low and broken and nothing like her — nothing like the prim, composed, carefully-spoken woman who shared this bed. Her voice was stripped raw.

"All of them." Her hips moved against his mouth, chasing the contact he'd stopped. "They couldn't stop looking at me. Dale — when I was on his lap — I could feel how hard he was and he was *so* —"

She cut herself off. A gasp — his tongue moving again, pressing, unable to stay still — and her hips locked and her back arched and she came. Fast. Violent. Her thighs clamped around his head and the sound she made was a whimper that crested into a moan that crested into something she buried in her own forearm, her whole body shaking, her hips grinding against his mouth through wave after wave. She came harder than she'd come in months. In years. She came the way a woman comes when her body has finally outrun her mind.

Tyler stayed. Tasted her through it. His cock was aching, straining, and underneath the arousal something sick and hot sat in his stomach — shame, fury, the devastating knowledge that his wife had just come harder from talking about another man's cock than she'd come from anything he'd done in years. He was furious and he was so hard he could barely see.

He wiped his mouth. Crawled up her body. She was still shaking — small aftershocks, her eyes half-closed, her chest heaving. He pushed inside her and she gasped, arched, her fingers digging into his back. Soaked. He slid in without resistance

and the sound she made was a whimper of relief, of fullness, of a woman who needed to be fucked and was finally getting it.

“Don’t stop,” she said. Two words. Barely audible. The same broken voice that had just told him about Dale’s cock beneath her.

He didn’t stop. He fucked her harder and the bed frame hit the wall and he couldn’t tell anymore where the fury ended and the wanting began and he suspected there was no border — they were the same thing, had always been the same thing, and tonight had just burned away the pretense.

He came inside her with a groan that came from deep in his chest. Collapsed. The ceiling fan turned above them. Their breathing slowed.

Neither mentioned what she’d said. Neither mentioned the words that had left her mouth in the dark — the prim wife, the woman who never talked in bed, who had just whispered about another man’s cock while her husband’s tongue was inside her. The words hung in the dark, dissipating the way smoke does. But the smell would stay.

Afterward, in the dark.

She was on her side, facing the wall. He was on his back, staring at the ceiling fan’s slow rotation.

Megan fell asleep first. Or seemed to. Her breathing evened and she went slack against the mattress and Tyler lay awake beside her and let the night replay.

It came in fragments. Not in order. Dale’s hand on Megan’s hip. The fifty tucked into her back pocket, the flat pat. Wicks’s voice describing what he’d do to her—the specifics, the crude enthusiasm, the running narration that turned her into a woman being consumed by words. The bra on the poker table, white against green felt. The way the tank changed after — the way everything she had was suddenly visible, offered to a room full of men who wanted her. Dale’s hand on her waist. Vince’s whisper, close to her neck, close enough that Tyler could see his mouth moving but couldn’t hear the words. And underneath all of it, the thing that replayed loudest: the words she’d said. His mouth on her. How fast she came. And her voice — the prim wife who never talked in bed, whispering about Dale’s cock against her thigh.

He was hard. Lying next to his sleeping wife, stiff and aching, aroused by the images of other men wanting her. He stared at the ceiling and hated himself and the hating didn’t make him soft. His hand twitched toward himself and he forced it still and ground his teeth and the images kept coming and he let them come because he couldn’t stop them and eventually, long after he should have, he slept.

Saturday morning. The kitchen. Coffee. The normalcy of it felt like a set being rebuilt after a show—the same furniture in the same places but the air different, the light different, something in the room altered at a frequency too low to identify. Neither of them mentioned what she’d said. Megan was quieter than usual. Not distant—just somewhere else, her gaze settling on the middle distance while she held her mug, processing something she hadn’t finished processing.

Tyler watched her over his coffee. He saw the woman who had come hard last night — who had whispered about another man's cock while Tyler's mouth was on her. He saw his wife in one of his old t-shirts, no bra, her hair messy and her face clean and her legs tucked under her on the kitchen chair, and the image was the same image he'd loved for eight years, except now it was backlit by everything that had happened in the dark. He didn't know what to do with what he'd seen. In her. In himself.

His phone buzzed on the counter. He picked it up. Vince.

Guys want to do it again next Friday. Same deal. They loved her.

Tyler read it. His thumb was already typing before his brain caught up.

We're in.

Sent. He stared at the two words on the screen. He should have talked to Megan first. Should have thought about the bra on the table and the silence after and what both had done to him in the dark last night.

He put the phone face-down on the counter. Drank his coffee. Didn't look at it again.

Across the street, three doors down, Vince Barella read the reply. He set his phone on the arm of the folding chair in the garage. Lit a Marlboro. Looked at the Calloways' duplex through the smoke.

The machine worked.

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THE HUSTLE

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is walking towards the camera on a concrete sidewalk at night. She is wearing a black, form-fitting, short-sleeved dress with a deep V-neckline and black high-heeled shoes. The scene is illuminated by warm, yellow light from a street lamp on the left and cool, blue light from the background. The background shows a blurred view of a house and trees.

Part 2: Solo
Sire Rickenbach

Table of Contents

[Chapter 2: Solo](#)

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Chapter 2: Solo

The basement smelled like him. Cigarettes and motor oil and the chemical sweetness of the Brut he kept on the shelf by the water heater. Vince sat in the folding chair with the camera in his lap, scrolling through the memory card one-handed. The clamp lights were off. Just the glow of the LCD against his face, the dropped ceiling tiles grey above him, the white backdrop sheet hanging limp from its curtain rod.

He stopped on the one from Tuesday. The sports bra. Grey, strained at the seams, her tits bouncing with every stride. He'd caught her mid-step — one foot off the ground, her arms pumping, her mouth slightly open around whatever breath she was pulling. The image was sharp from the waist up, soft below. He'd been shooting from behind the garage door, the zoom maxed, braced against the workbench. She never looked. Six months of this and she'd never once turned her head toward his house while she ran. Like he wasn't there. Like the ninety days hadn't happened.

He scrolled. The mail one. Thursday. The grey cotton shorts that rode up when she bent, and she'd bent deep — the package was big, flat, propped against the door. The angle gave him everything: the full shape of her ass stretched tight in thin cotton, the crease where her thighs met the cheeks, a shadow between her legs that could have been fabric or could have been the heat of her through thin material. Her dark hair falling forward. The pale stripe of lower back where her tank rode up.

His cock was already hard. Had been since he sat down. It pushed against his jeans and he pressed the heel of his palm against it, holding. Feeling the pulse of himself.

But it wasn't the photos tonight. It was Friday.

Friday kept coming back in flashes. Specific frames. Her in that thin ribbed tank after the bra came off, those nipples pressing through the cotton like they were trying to announce themselves. He could see the shape of them — the raised, swollen profile, the pillow-soft puffiness that made them look hard before anyone touched her. The flush that crept up her chest when she was on Dale's lap. The way she'd gone still — perfectly, completely still, her spine locking, her thighs clamping — the moment Dale's cock pressed against her. He'd seen it from across the table. Stillness — spine locked, thighs clamped — the kind that hits when you feel something you didn't expect and you choose to hold very, very still.

He unzipped. Pulled himself free. Thick, dark from the permanent tan, the foreskin sliding back as he gripped. The chair creaked under him.

He thought about her mouth. Those full lips, always slightly parted like she was about to say something she'd decided against. He'd imagined them around him so many times the fantasy had details now — the way she'd fight it at first, the primness cracking on her face, the wet sound when she finally opened. What those pale blue eyes would look like staring up at him with his cock on her tongue. She'd gag. She was too proper for anything else. The reflex would hit and her eyes would water and that composure —

the straight posture, the direct gaze, the mouth that went thin when Wicks said something crude — would crack apart. And he'd see the woman underneath. The one who went still on Dale's lap and thought nobody noticed.

That face was the other half of it — the magazine face on this block, blue eyes and dark hair and a mouth built for saying *excuse me* in rooms that matched. He wanted that mouth ruined. Wanted the pretty wiped off it with spit. Wanted those eyes looking up at him the way they looked past him on the sidewalk: finally seeing him.

He noticed everything.

His hand moved. Slow. He wasn't rushing this.

The noise complaint. January. Concrete under a mattress so thin he could feel the seams of the pad through it. Ninety nights counting fluorescent tubes. She'd dialed like it was nothing — like this block had a suggestion box — and then waved at him from the mailbox his first day back. Smiled. The little neighborly wave — bright, empty. She barely knew his name. She'd forgotten the phone call that cost him everything. He was nobody to her. That was the part he was going to fix.

He stroked harder. The LCD dimmed to sleep and he tapped it awake with his thumb. The sports bra shot. Her tits mid-bounce — heavy, barely contained, the grey fabric dark with sweat between them, each stride throwing them against the restraint like they were trying to get free. He'd watched that bounce for six months. He was going to take the bra off the equation.

He could rush this. Could have her at the next game if he wanted — enough cash, enough pressure, Dale holding her in place. She'd fold. The way she folded on the bra, the way she sat on laps she'd said she wouldn't sit on. The resistance was real but the resistance was thin, and underneath it — he'd bet everything he owned on this — was a woman who'd been keeping herself on a short leash so long she'd forgotten she was leashed. That husband of hers, the college boy with the clean jaw and the project-manager handshake — Vince imagined him in that bed. Gentle. Grateful. Asking before he touched anything. A man who'd never made a woman shake.

But he didn't want to rush it.

He wanted to watch her walk into it. Step by step. Each one small enough to justify. Each one a door she opened herself and couldn't close behind her. The rationalizations stacking — the money, the hustle, the *these idiots don't know what hit them* — until she was so deep that telling Tyler meant confessing to everything she'd let happen. And then the shame kept her there. The shame was the lock. The shame of having wanted it.

That was the con nobody understood. Dale just wanted to fuck her. Wicks couldn't see past her tits. But the real machine wasn't the poker game. It was Megan's own pride. Her pride. The same pride that dialed the cops on a Tuesday like the neighborhood owed her quiet — like ninety days of a man's life was a reasonable price for bass through a wall. The self-image that said she was better than every man on this block. He was going to use that against her, piece by piece, patient — not just to get in her, to collect. And she'd keep coming back — for the secret. Because confessing meant

admitting she'd liked it. And Megan Calloway would burn down her marriage before she admitted that to anyone, including herself.

He came. Thick, pulsing, his hand slick with it. The image on the screen blurred as his grip tightened on the camera body. He let out a breath through his nose — just the release.

He wiped his hand on his jeans. Stood. Lit a Marlboro from the Zippo in his front pocket, the wheel rasping under his thumb. Exhaled toward the dropped ceiling.

He looked at the camera one more time. The sports bra. Mid-stride. Those tits bouncing, those blue eyes he was going to make look up at him from somewhere she'd never planned to be.

Saturday. The game moves to Saturday. He'd text Tyler Tuesday — a conflict for Dale, that was the excuse. And then the cabin job. The rewire two towns over, the hollow where phones went dead. Eight hundred cash and Tyler would jump at it. Tyler always jumped. And Megan would be alone on a Saturday night with the men and the cameras and the basement he'd been building for her since the day he came home from county.

Vince turned off the camera. Took the cigarette from his mouth, looked at the coal, put it back.

Vince texted Tyler on Tuesday.

Tyler read it at the kitchen table — Megan across from him with her laptop open, the dental group's marketing deck glowing on her screen. The text was short: *Games moving to Saturdays. Dale's got a conflict. Also tell her to dress up a little — the guys tip better when the view's worth paying for.*

He set the phone face-down. Picked up his coffee. Drank. Set it down.

"What?" Megan said without looking up. She was typing.

"Vince. The game's moving to Saturday."

Her fingers stopped. She looked up. "Saturday."

"Saturday."

"That's our day."

"I know." He rotated the mug on the table. "But the money's the same. Better, probably. He says they tip heavier on weekends."

"Tyler, Saturday is the *one day* we —" She stopped. Pressed her lips together. The number was in the room before either of them said it — the Visa minimum, the power bill, the rent due in eleven days. "Fine. Whatever. Saturdays."

"You sure?"

"I said fine."

He picked up his phone. Thumbed a reply. Then, carefully: "He also said you should dress up a little. For the tips."

Megan's eyes went flat. "Dress up."

"His words. I'm just relaying."

“Dress up how, Tyler? Like a cocktail waitress? Like a stripper? What does *dress up* mean to a man who wears motor oil as cologne?”

“Like — more than the cutoffs, I think. A skirt. Something nicer.” He held his hands up. “You don’t have to.”

“How much did we make last week?”

“Eleven hundred.”

She looked at her laptop. The dental deck. *Smiles That Inspire Confidence*. Four hundred dollars if the client bit.

“I’ll figure something out,” she said.

Saturday afternoon. Megan stood in front of the closet and hated everything in it.

The denim skirt. Fitted. Short — shorter than she’d remembered when she bought it two summers ago for a beach bar in Newport. She held it against her hips. It would sit high on her thighs. The hem would shift when she moved. She could already feel Dale’s eyes following it up when she crossed her legs.

She put it on the bed.

The top. She pulled three options and held each against her chest in the mirror. The white blouse — too buttoned-up. The red tank — too obvious. The black one. Fitted, thin, a V-neck that opened on the top of her cleavage and kept opening — the kind of neckline that made the rest of an outfit a framing device for her tits. She held it up and the mirror gave her the problem immediately: even flat against her, the V promised the lace, the lift, the soft inner curve that stopped sentences. The fabric was thin enough that her bra would show beneath it — the lace edge, the straps, the structure. She could live with that. Living with it was the point.

She dressed. The denim skirt slid up her legs and the hem sat four inches above her knee. The black top over her good bra — the one that lifted and organized, the underwire sitting firm, the lace trim visible through the thin fabric — and the V did exactly what she’d known it would: put her tits forward as the first fact of the outfit. High, heavy, the cleavage a clean shadowed line. Wedge heels — low enough to walk in, high enough to change the shape of her calves. She smoothed the skirt. Checked the mirror. Pale blue eyes, dark hair, that mouth. She looked like she was going somewhere nicer than Vince Barella’s living room, and the lie of it was half the heat.

Tyler appeared in the doorway. His eyes went to her chest first — he always did, even after eight years — then her face, and his mouth opened and she said “Don’t” before he could speak.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“You were going to say I look hot.”

“You look like every man in that house is going to forget how to hold cards.” His voice was rough with it. “Your tits in that top — Megan —”

“I know.” She turned back to the mirror. Adjusted the neckline, which only made the cleavage worse. “That’s apparently the whole point of me.”

He crossed the room and put his hands on her shoulders. She watched him in the glass — his face above hers, his fingers on her bare skin where the top's neckline cut wide.

"Three hours," he said. "Same deal. I take their money, you take their tips, we come home."

"And they take what?"

He didn't answer. His hands squeezed her shoulders once and dropped.

They walked out together. The ring stayed in the dish by the door — she didn't even pause this time. The evening air was warm and thick with the smell of charcoal and cut grass. Tyler's hand found the small of her back. The walk was ninety seconds and neither spoke.

Vince's house. The porch light on, the screen door propped open, bass from something playing inside. Tyler dropped his hand from her back before they reached the step — the rehearsed transition, the moment they stopped being married and started being strangers.

Inside, the cigarette smoke was immediate — saturated into the wood paneling, baked into the carpet, the permanent musk of a house that had stopped trying. She wrinkled her nose before she could stop herself.

The men were at the table. Wicks bouncing his knee, already grinning when he saw her in the doorway. Dale in the big chair at the end, settled deep, his cigar going, those dark eyes tracking her as she crossed the room — past the table, past Wicks's stare, past the smell of them — to the bar.

"Oh, *shit*." Wicks. Predictable. "Is that a skirt? Vince, she's wearing a *skirt*." His watery eyes on her thighs, then up, then stuck — the V, the lace, the way her tits sat in the black top like the rest of the outfit was an afterthought. "Where was this last week? You've been hiding these legs from us. And those — Jesus, look at the front of her."

"I think what he means is you look nice," Megan said, setting up behind the bar. "Somewhere in there."

Dale said nothing. His gaze started at her heels and climbed — deliberate, inventorying. When it reached her chest it stopped climbing. The black V-neck. The lace edge. The heavy push of her breasts against thin fabric. He looked at them the way a man looks at something he's already decided he's getting. Then — only then — her face. The blue eyes. The mouth that wasn't smiling at him.

"That's better," he said. Two words. Low. Like she'd corrected something that had been wrong before.

Tyler was already at the table, chips in front of him, his posture easy. The stranger. The card player. He didn't look at her when she walked past.

Vince slid into his chair. "Before we start." He spread his hands on the felt. "New thing tonight. Dale?"

Dale shifted forward. The chair protested under his weight. His voice came from the bottom of his chest. "Winner takes the pot or a favor. From the bartender." His dark eyes slid to Megan. "Winner takes the cash, the favor passes to second place."

Wicks's grin widened. Tyler's hand paused on his chips.

"What's a favor?" Megan said from behind the bar. Her voice cool. The bartender voice.

"Whatever the winner asks for," Dale said. "Within reason."

"Whose reason?"

Vince stepped in. "Same shit as last week. A drink poured standing close. A spin. Sitting on a lap. Formalized, is all. Makes the guys feel like they're playing for something." He looked at her. "You don't want to, you don't want to. But the guys'll tip twice as heavy if they think they're winning something."

"I didn't agree to that last week," Megan said. "That was your rule. This is different."

"It's the same thing with a name on it." Vince shrugged.

Megan looked at Tyler. A glance, quick, the periphery of her vision finding the periphery of his. He gave her nothing. His face was a wall.

"Fine," she said. "But I decide what 'within reason' means. Not him." She tilted her chin at Dale.

"Always," Vince said. Then, to the room: "Drinks first. Megan, help me with the ice."

She followed him to the bar. He grabbed the ice bucket, his back to the table, his voice dropped low enough that the felt absorbed it.

"Last call. Same as always. You say it, everything stops."

She held his eyes. "Good."

"They don't need to hear it. Between us."

She nodded once. He handed her the ice and walked back to the table, and the arrangement folded around the room like it had always been there.

"Let's play some fucking cards," Wicks said.

The game ran. Tyler won the first hand — two-twenty on the felt — and took the money. The favor passed to Wicks.

"Pour me a drink," Wicks said. "Standing right here." He patted the arm of his chair. "Standing close."

"I can pour you a drink from the bar," she said. Arms crossed. "That's where the bottles are."

"Standing. Close." He held up a fifty. "For the service."

She rolled her eyes. Brought the bottle. Stood next to his chair and poured three fingers of Jim Beam while he looked up at her chest from eight inches — close enough that his breath warmed the inner curve, close enough that the lace edge of her bra through the fabric was a map he could have traced. Her tits hung in the V above his face,

heavy, shifting with each tilt of the bottle, and he watched them the way other men watched the cards.

“That good?” she said. Flat.

“Perfect.” His eyes locked on her cleavage, unblinking, his mouth slightly open, a thread of spit at the corner. “You could put those on the table and I’d fold every hand.” She walked back to the bar. She could still feel the heat of his stare between her breasts.

Tyler won the second hand. Two-ten. Cash. The favor passed to Dale.

“Give me a turn,” Dale said. “Slow.”

Megan stood from her stool. Turned. A slow rotation, her arms slightly out, the skirt moving with her hips. When she came back around, his eyes hadn’t shifted.

The turn did what turns do to a chest like hers — the weight shifting, the V deepening for a second as she came through the back half, her breasts moving a half-beat behind her shoulders. She felt it. She felt him watching exactly that.

“Again,” he said. “Take your time.”

“I’m not a music box, Dale.”

“Slower.” Flat. The voice didn’t rise. It didn’t need to.

She did it again. Slower. Felt his attention on her skin like heat from an open oven — her stomach, her hips, the backs of her thighs. He nodded once. Satisfied.

Tyler won the third hand. Two-fifty. Cash. The favor passed to Wicks. He held a fifty between two stained fingers.

“Same thing. Pour.” He tucked the bill into the waistband of her skirt as she stood beside his chair. The backs of his knuckles against her hip, the crumpled bill sliding between fabric and skin. His fingers lingered.

She extracted the fifty herself and walked back to the bar.

“You seeing anyone?” Wicks called after her. Grinning. “How’s a girl like you single? I still can’t figure it out.”

“I’m here to pour drinks, Wicks.”

“That’s a non-answer.” He swiveled to Tyler. “What about you, man? She’s wearing *that* and you’re counting chips. You’re made of stone or something.”

Tyler shrugged. “I’m here to play cards.”

“He’s here to play cards.” Wicks looked at Dale. “You believe this guy?”

“Some men have discipline,” Dale said. Low. The corner of his mouth pulled.

Dale won the fourth hand. Two hundred on the felt. He looked at it. Looked at Megan.

“Favor.”

The two hundred stayed on the felt — rolling into the next pot.

“On my lap,” he said. “Back to me.”

She walked to Dale’s chair. Turned. Lowered herself onto his lap with her back to his chest.

His thighs were enormous under her — hard, thick, the denim stretched over muscle that hadn't gone soft. And he was hard. She felt it the moment her weight settled — he'd been watching her all night, watching her spin and pour and bend, and the evidence had been building in his jeans for an hour. The thick ridge of his cock pushed up between her cheeks through denim and the tight weave of her skirt, undeniable, angled along the crease of her ass. She bit the inside of her cheek. She was wet before his hands moved.

His arms came around her and her tits sat on the shelf of his forearms — lifted, compressed, the V shoved fuller by the hold. She could see the tops of them from her own chin. Across the table Tyler could see them too: his wife's chest presented on another man's arms, lace and cleavage and the flush already climbing. She kept her face blank. The blankness was doing its own work — pretty and closed while her body was anything but.

His hands slid from her hips to her thighs. Dark fingers on pale skin. He placed his palms on her bare thighs and held them there — openly, for the room. His thumbs on the inside. One inch from the hem.

"Play," Dale said to the table. His voice rumbling through her spine. "I'm comfortable."

Vince dealt. One hand of play while she sat on Dale's lap and his cock pulsed against her and his thumbs circled on her inner thighs and every circle sent a matching pulse between her legs. She kept her spine straight. Didn't let the blankness slip.

"You smell good," he said. To her. His lips grazing her ear. "What is that?"

"Shampoo."

His hips pressed up — one subtle, grinding push. She caught a sound in her throat.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

Tyler won the fifth hand. The pot sat at four-thirty — two-thirty plus the two hundred rolled from Dale's. Tyler reached for the cash. Every bill.

She stood. The relief was a physical unwinding — muscles she hadn't known she'd clenched. She walked to the bar and poured wine into her glass with a hand that fought the bottle's neck.

The favor passed to Vince. Brief, mild — a close pour, his hand on the outside of her arm for three seconds. The reasonable one. Done.

Across the table, Tyler stacked his bills. Four hundred and thirty dollars from one hand. He was good at this. These men couldn't play, couldn't think straight around Megan. The money was easy. Inevitable. Three more nights and the Visa was cleared.

Tyler won the sixth hand. Three hundred on the felt.

He looked at the money. He looked at Megan at the bar, her wine between her hands, her legs crossed on the stool. The favor would pass to second place. He could see who

that was — Dale, the half-lidded patience, the half-lidded patience, already certain what he was about to ask for.

Last call. Say it. End this.

But the money was three hundred dollars and the cover was intact and stopping meant admitting he was the husband and admitting he was the husband meant the game ended and the game was all they had. He reached for the cash. His fingers closed around the bills.

Something cracked open in Tyler for one breath: *Three hundred dollars. The cost of sitting here with his cock hard against his thigh while another man puts his hands on her and her breathing changes and her eyes go somewhere he can't follow. Three hundred. He took it.*

The favor passed to Dale.

“Come stand right here,” Dale said. He patted the air between his knees.

Megan set down her wine. Walked to him. Stood between his spread knees. He was seated; she was in the wedge heels; his face was level with her stomach — close enough that when she inhaled, the underside of her breasts nearly brushed his brow. She could smell him fully — cigar smoke and that warm, dense cologne, the heat of a big man's body. His dark hands came to her hips.

“Dale —” she started. The word went nowhere.

He drew her closer. One inch. Two. Until his breath was warm through the fabric of her top, aimed at the soft skin just under the V, and her tits filled the space between his face and her throat like the only subject in the room. His thumbs traced her hip bones. His fingers curled over her ass through the skirt. His forearms brushed the outside of her thighs. He looked up once — past the cleavage, to her face — pale blue eyes trying to stay bored, mouth pressed thin — and the corner of his mouth pulled like he'd won something.

“Now turn. Let me see the back.”

She turned. His hands on her hips from behind. He pulled her back — her weight still on her heels but her ass pressed against his lap, bent into his grip, the thick ridge of his cock grinding between her cheeks through all the layers. One slow press upward. She gasped. Caught the sound before it could fill the room. She was facing the table now. Facing Tyler.

Tyler's hands were steady on his cards. His face was the mask. But his cock was hard against his thigh and his stomach was sick with it — the arousal and the self-contempt fused into something he couldn't pull apart. He could see her face — the pretty, expensive face that still looked wrong in this house — heat in her cheeks, lips parted, blue eyes somewhere he couldn't follow. He could see her tits from across the felt, lifted by the angle Dale had her bent, the V deeper, lace flashing. Dale's dark hands on her hips through the skirt. He could infer from the subtle lift of Dale's hips what was pressing against her, and the inference ran through him like a current that found his cock and his shame at the same time.

“That’s the hand,” Vince said. Breaking the moment. The dealer calling time.

Dale released her. His palms sliding down her hips as they withdrew. She walked to the bar. Her legs shook and she locked her knees against it. Poured wine. Swallowed half the glass.

Wicks won the seventh hand. A hundred and fifty on the felt. He took the favor. The pot rolled.

“Lean against me,” he said. “Just lean.”

She perched on the front edge of his chair. Leaned back against his chest. His arms came around her — thin, wiry, stained fingers splayed on her ribs, then higher, cupping from below so her breasts sat in the cradle of his shaking hands through the top. His cock pressed into her lower back through his jeans — insistent, twitching. His fingers found the underwire of her bra through the fabric and traced the ridge, following the curve beneath each breast, lifting them an inch like he was testing the weight. His breath was menthol and want against her neck. His hands trembled against her.

“That’s enough,” she said. Thirty seconds. The words sounded almost normal. She stood and walked back to the bar, putting twelve feet of carpet between herself and the table.

Tyler won the eighth hand. Three-thirty on the felt — a hundred eighty from the new pot plus the hundred fifty rolled from Wicks’s. He took the cash. The second-place favor was waved off — the game cooling, Wicks yawning, Dale checking his phone. The night’s energy ebbing.

A few more transit hands. Tyler winning the small pots with calibrated ease. Megan behind the bar, her wine replenished, her legs crossed tight on the stool.

Vince settled up. Cash counted from a roll in his pocket. He subtracted the twenty percent — the house cut, same as last week — and pushed the rest across. Fifteen hundred and forty dollars.

Wicks pulled on his jacket. Dale stood — his mass unfolding — and nodded at the room. “Saturday,” he said. Flat. An appointment already on the books.

They went out the front. Car doors. An engine pulling away.

Vince caught Megan’s eye. Tyler was counting his cash.

“Come here a sec. Both of you.”

He led them down the basement stairs. The air cooled. Fluorescent tubes buzzing, supplemented by three clamp lights aimed at the far wall. The setup. A white sheet hung from a curtain rod, smooth and stretched. A stool in front of it. Umbrella reflectors on stands. A DSLR on a tripod. Along the wall, a rack with a few pieces hanging — a robe, something red, and a tiny white string bikini with triangles smaller than her palm.

“Photography,” Vince said. He picked up the camera. Pulled a tablet from the shelf, swiped, turned it to show them. Photos. A woman — face hidden, body in frame. Well-

lit. A silk robe slipping off one shoulder. Another from behind, her back visible through sheer fabric.

“She made three grand in two hours,” Vince said.

Megan looked at the photos. The woman was attractive — toned, tan. But Megan looked better and she knew it immediately, and the knowing felt like competitiveness before she could reshape it into distaste.

“These guys are idiots,” Vince said, tilting his head toward the stairs. “They’ll pay stupid money to be in the room while I shoot. You wouldn’t have to wear any of that.” He gestured at the rack. “Just you in something nice, looking like you look.”

Tyler was looking at the lights. The backdrop. His expression was the one he wore when he was calculating.

“That’s not —” Megan shook her head. “No. I’m here to pour drinks. That’s it.”

She waited for Tyler to say *absolutely not*. For the husband-voice.

What Tyler said was: “It’s up to you.”

Four words. Delivered to the floor. A half-shrug. She stared at the side of his face — waiting for the correction, the *actually, no*. The silence where his protection should have been gaped open and she stood at its edge and he didn’t pull her back.

Vince shrugged. “Just throwing it out there. No pressure.” He put the tablet back. “Dale said he’d pay five hundred for one picture.”

“I said no.”

“You said no.” His hands up. “That’s it.”

They went upstairs. Tyler pocketed the fifteen hundred and forty dollars. Megan left her wine glass on the counter because washing it felt like belonging here.

The walk home. Three houses. Faster than they came. Tyler’s hand found her back the moment the screen door closed — the strangers becoming spouses in the dark between streetlights.

Last week they’d walked home buzzing — Megan performing Wicks’s voice, Tyler cataloguing bad plays, both turning the night into a comedy they’d survived together.

Tonight neither spoke.

Inside, she kicked off her heels. Tyler locked the door. The cash sat in his front pocket and he pulled it out and set it on the kitchen counter — fifteen hundred and forty dollars in wrinkled bills. He smoothed the stack.

“You okay?” he said.

“Fine.” She poured water from the tap. Drank standing. “Dale’s hands are —”

“I know.”

“Do you?” She turned. Looked at him. “Because you sat there. The entire time.”

“What was I supposed to do? Start a fight? Say *that’s my wife* and watch the whole thing collapse?”

The words *my wife* sat between them. He’d said them here, where they were allowed.

She looked at the cash on the counter. Fifteen hundred dollars for three hours of being a stranger to the man she'd married.

He was behind her. His hands on her hips — the same hips Dale's hands had been on twenty minutes ago. She felt the comparison land before her mind could block it. Tyler's hands were narrower. Lighter.

He pressed against her from behind. Hard. His mouth on her neck. She could smell Vince's house on her own skin — the cigarettes, the musk, Dale's cologne where his chest had been against her back.

She turned and kissed him. Hard, open, tongue in his mouth while his lips were still parting. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to burn off whatever was alive in her before she had to look at it. Her hand found his cock through his jeans — hard, ready — and he groaned into her mouth.

The counter. She turned around, her back to him, and his hands shoved her skirt up her thighs — bunching the denim at her waist. He hooked her underwear and pulled them down and she stepped out of one leg and he was fumbling with his belt, jeans dropping, and then he gripped the counter's edge behind her and pushed inside her in one stroke. She was wet enough that the first thrust was frictionless. She gripped the counter's edge and pushed back against him.

Tyler gripped her hips and his mind flashed — Dale's thumbs on the inside of her thighs, dark fingers on pale skin, her breath changing. The image made him thrust harder and the harder was the problem and he couldn't solve it. He didn't say it. Buried it in the rhythm.

She came fast. Her face pressed against her forearm, Tyler's hands pulling her back onto him. But her mind was somewhere dark and smoke-filled with hands that were bigger and a weight against her back that was heavier and a voice that said *on my lap* like it owned her.

She didn't say any of it. Tyler came inside her, his forehead between her shoulder blades. She stayed bent over the counter until he pulled out. Waited for the dirty talk — for him to say what he'd said last week, to narrate, to make it theirs.

He didn't.

He pulled up his jeans. Kissed her shoulder. "I'm gonna shower."

She stayed at the counter, his cum sliding down her inner thigh. The distance between them was new. Last week the sex had been a bridge — filthy, shared, the night turned into something they could hold together. Tonight they'd both been somewhere else and neither said where.

The job came through Vince. Of course it did.

Tuesday evening. Tyler at the kitchen table with his laptop, scrolling temp agency listings. Megan across from him with her coffee — the dental group had finally picked a tagline, four hundred dollars for a week's work, and neither of them mentioned that four hundred dollars used to be a dinner out.

Tyler's phone buzzed. He glanced at it. Picked it up.

"Vince has a thing," he said. "A cabin rewire. Two towns over, Route 11. Full knob-and-tube replacement — the owner's got a lakeside property."

"What kind of money?"

"Eight hundred. Cash. Weekend work — Friday through Sunday." He scrolled the text. "Vince says the owner's got multiple places up there. This weekend's the audition. If he likes the work, there's a full summer of contracts."

The calculation ran behind his eyes and Megan could see it — the quick, competent math of a project engineer who'd once managed budgets ten times this size. Eight hundred for a weekend. His hands, his license, his training. The kind of money that came from what he could do.

"That's serious money," she said.

"It's real work." The emphasis on *real* was slight but she heard it — the contrast with Friday nights at Vince's, where the cash came wrapped in something neither of them could look at directly.

"The game is Saturday," she said.

"I know." He set the phone down. "Vince said the game still runs either way. You pour, the guys play, he keeps working them. I still get my cut." The words came easy — Vince's phrasing filtered through Tyler's certainty. "So it's the cabin money plus the game plus your tips. Not a trade-off."

"Me alone at the game."

"You've done it twice now. They're harmless."

"Dale is not harmless."

"Dale is —" Tyler waved his hand. Dismissive. He'd decided it was safe because admitting otherwise meant refusing eight hundred dollars and a summer of steady work. "He's a big guy who likes to flirt. You handled him fine."

She wanted to say: *His cock was between my cheeks for twenty minutes and I was wet before his hands moved.*

What she said was: "Fine."

"Plus the cabin's the audition." Tyler was already typing the reply. "One good weekend and we've got steady contracts all summer. Real money. Real work."

"I said fine."

That week, the basement kept showing up.

She'd be at the kitchen sink running water over a plate and the image would surface — the white sheet, the clamp lights, the stool. The tiny string bikini on the rack. The woman in Vince's photos with the robe slipping off her shoulder. And the knowing that she'd looked at that woman's body and immediately known she was better — that flash of competitiveness she couldn't reshape fast enough into distaste.

Wednesday night. Tyler asleep beside her, his arm heavy across her waist. She lay in the dark and the thought drifted past the photos, past the bikini, to Dale's chair. The

width of his thighs under her. His cock pressing up against her through denim. The way *on my lap* had sounded in his chest. The way her tits had sat on his forearms — lifted, offered — while Tyler watched from across the felt and said nothing. She could still feel the ghost of that hold. And then, circling: *It's up to you*. Tyler's words. Tyler's half-shrug. Tyler, who was supposed to be the wall between her and whatever was down those stairs — looking at the floor instead.

Her hand moved under the covers. She stopped it. Pressed her thighs together. One of her own palms found the underside of her breast without permission — the weight, the soft give — and she pulled it away like she'd touched a stove. Turned onto her side. The thought kept circling for an hour, and by Thursday the basement had settled into her body like a low-grade fever — present, ignorable in daylight, waiting for the dark.

Friday afternoon. Tyler packed a duffel — work clothes, his voltage tester, the knee pads. Two hours to the cabin on Route 11. The property owner wanted him on-site Friday evening to walk the job before Saturday's start.

"Call me tonight?" Megan said at the front door, his truck running in the driveway.

"Might be spotty up there — the owner mentioned the whole hollow's a dead zone. But I'll try."

He kissed her. Quick. One hand on the back of her neck, the familiar pressure of his mouth. Then keys, boots, the step.

"Easy money," he said again.

She watched the F-150 back out. Watched it turn. Watched until the street was just the street — dead lawns, parked cars, Vince's garage door open three houses down.

She went inside. Locked the door. The duplex was quiet in a way it wasn't usually quiet — emptied, his boots gone, his keys gone.

She waited up. Laptop closed. Wine on the nightstand barely touched. The phone face-up on Tyler's pillow.

Eleven o'clock. Nothing.

She tried calling. One ring. Voicemail — his voice from a year ago. *Hey, it's Tyler. Leave one.*

She tried again. Same thing. The dead zone swallowing his signal like the geography had been designed for exactly this purpose.

She texted: *Hey. Hope the walk-through went ok. Miss you. Call when you can.*

The blue bar stalled. No response.

She turned off the lamp. Lay in the dark with the phone's glow fading on the ceiling. Tomorrow night she would walk into Vince's house alone. The thought settled in her chest and stayed.

She could cancel. Text Vince right now — *something came up, not feeling well*. She could.

But the money. The routine. Cancelling required a reason she could say out loud, and the real reason was tangled up in Dale's hands and the basement and the word *fine* she'd been saying all week because the honest word was something else entirely. Tomorrow. She'd deal with it tomorrow.

Two hours north, Tyler sat on the cabin's porch with a beer the owner had pressed on him. The hollow was dark — pines close, a creek below, stars he hadn't seen since leaving the suburbs. His phone showed no bars.

She was fine. Of course she was fine. She'd handled Dale's hands, Wicks's mouth, the whole room. She was the smartest person at any table she sat down at. She'd pour drinks, take tips, walk home.

He finished the beer. Went inside to the cot the owner had set up in the kitchen. Fell asleep thinking about the eight hundred dollars and the wiring he'd start at dawn and the pride of being needed for something that paid in cash and required his hands and his training and had nothing to do with his wife in a skirt.

He chose not to think about Saturday night without him in the room. The choosing was effort.

Saturday. Five o'clock. The light in the bathroom was harsh and honest and Megan stood in front of the full-length mirror in nothing.

She'd showered. Shaved everything — legs, underarms, the careful razor work between her thighs that left her smooth and bare. She hadn't thought about why. It was Saturday. She was going out. This is what she did.

The mirror gave her back a woman she sometimes forgot she was. Pale skin unbroken from throat to toes — luminous in the overhead light, the faint freckles scattered across her chest. Her hair hung wet and heavy past her shoulders, dark against all that white skin, falling onto the tile. She was twenty-eight and looked it — all the college volleyball in her long legs, the running in the flat stomach. And then the face: pale blue eyes catching the light like they'd been put there on purpose against the near-black hair, full lips parted around a breath, the clean bone structure that made cashiers stutter and women go quiet. She looked like she belonged on something glossy.

Her breasts. Full, heavy, sitting high on her frame — the shape that made every neckline a provocation, the size that strained any fabric and made strangers lose the thread of sentences. They were the reason. The rest of her was beautiful; these were the event. The nipples were soft now, the puffy pink areolae relaxed into their natural state — that swollen, pillowy quality that looked indecent even at rest. She cupped one. The weight filled her hand and overflowed. Dale's hand would swallow it entirely. She imagined that for one second — dark fingers vanishing her pale flesh — and the image went straight between her legs. She dropped her hand and grabbed a towel.

She turned. Her waist narrowed and her hips swelled and her ass was full and round, the single dark mole high on the left cheek. She turned back. Her eyes dropped to

the smooth skin between her thighs — bare, waxed, the neat seam barely visible where her thighs pressed together. Pink. Tight. The kind of detail only Tyler ever saw.

She dried off. Put the towel on the hook.

The dress was on the bed. Black. Short — mid-thigh, fitted through the hips and bust. The one from the Christmas party two years ago in Cedar Heights, before the layoff, before the duplex. Tyler had been three glasses of champagne in and couldn't keep his hands off her. It was too much for a poker game in Vince's basement. She put it on anyway.

The fabric hugged her. Every line readable through it — and first among them her tits, held high and forward by the cut, the dress doing the work of a hand, the soft heavy outline so plain a blind man could have drawn it. Then the indent of her waist, the flare of her hips. The hemline sat high enough that crossing her legs would give someone across the table a view she should care about. She pulled at the neckline. It didn't change. Nothing about this dress was going to make her less of a problem in that room.

The underwear. Black lace from the back of the drawer — sheer enough to see skin through. She stepped into them and pulled them up and the lace settled against her like a whisper.

Heels. Black, pointed, three inches. She buckled them and the woman in the mirror looked expensive and reckless and alone.

Hair down, dried smooth. The French perfume at her wrists, behind her ears, between her breasts — the one luxury she wouldn't give up. Makeup: simple, precise. Dark lashes, pale lips, the warmth on her cheekbones.

The wedding ring. She looked at it in the ceramic dish by the door — sitting among the keys and loose change. Tyler wasn't here to say *your ring*. She picked it up. Turned it in her fingers. Put it back.

The ease of the gesture unnerved her. Last time, Tyler had prompted it. This time, her fingers knew the choreography on their own.

She texted Tyler. *Heading over. Miss you.*

Waited. The screen blank. No bubbles. No response. The same silence — the dead zone holding.

She tried calling. One ring. Voicemail. His cheerful voice from a year ago.

She put the phone in her clutch and looked at herself one last time in the hall mirror. The black dress. The heels. The perfume. The bare finger. The woman looking back had a face that still read as careful — makeup precise, mouth set — and a body that read as the opposite: tits straining the bodice, legs bare to mid-thigh, everything about her announcing itself on a block that didn't deserve the announcement. She knew what she looked like. She went anyway.

The front door. The lock. The night air on her bare legs. The sound of her heels on the sidewalk — sharp, metronomic. The air carried charcoal and the chemical tang of the above-ground pool two doors down and underneath it the permanent smell of this

block — hot asphalt and cheap grass seed. She didn't belong here. The perfume said so. The dress said so.

Vince's house three doors down. Porch light on. The faint sound of music through the walls.

On the porch she stopped. One breath. The dress clung when she inhaled — she felt her breasts rise against the fabric, felt the cool night find the tops of them — and she caught her reflection in the dark glass of Vince's storm door: blue eyes, dark hair, mouth she hadn't quite set. A sex object about to walk into a room that had been waiting for one. She hated the accuracy of the thought.

She knocked and the door opened and the smoke and the music and the men's eyes found her all at once.

Vince opened the door and his gaze went down her body and back up and the smirk spread before he could stop it. "Jesus, Megan."

"Don't."

"Just observing." He stepped aside.

The living room. Same as always — the stained carpet, the poker table, the bottles on the counter. But without Tyler the room was a different shape. His chair sat empty. The emptiness filled more space than he ever had.

Dale was in the big chair at the end of the poker table, settled deep, his thighs spread, his cigar going. When she walked in his eyes found her legs first — the heels, the bare calves, the hem cutting across her upper thighs — and climbed. Slowly. They stopped on her chest the way a hand stops on a rail. The black dress holding her tits up and out. The soft deep line between them. He looked until looking became touching without contact.

"Damn," he said. The word dropped from his chest. His tongue crossed his lower lip.

Wicks came out of the bathroom. Stopped in the hall. "Oh *shit*." Eyes wide, his gaze dropping to her chest and staying — the dress, the lift, the way her nipples were already starting to announce themselves in the air-conditioned living room. "Vince — look at her. Look at those fucking tits. Are you kidding me? In *that*?"

"It's a dress, Wicks."

"It's a fucking *weapon*." His Adam's apple bobbed. He licked his lips. "She's gonna kill somebody like that."

Wicks sat down and drummed his stained fingers on the table and grinned with all his bad teeth showing. Dale's eyes hadn't left her.

"Let's play," Vince said.

The game ran different from the first hand. Without Tyler at the table, the stares didn't break when she caught them. Wicks's commentary came at full volume. Dale's silences pressed harder.

The favors were shorter, bolder. Vince won the first hand and his favor was a close pour — she stood beside his chair while he took the glass, his hand finding the outside of her thigh below the hem, the rough pad of his thumb on her bare skin. He held there for three seconds while he drank. She could feel the calluses.

Dale won the second hand and his favor was simple: “Right here. Closer.” She stood between his spread knees for thirty seconds while he looked at her. His face was level with her stomach — seated, he was still enormous, the width of his thighs taking up the whole chair — which meant her breasts were level with his mouth. His dark hand landed on her hip. His thumb traced the bone through her dress, slow and certain, and his heat pressed against her — cigar smoke and cologne and the deeper warmth underneath, the furnace of a big man running hot. His eyes climbed from her hemline to her chest and stayed. He didn’t hide it. He studied the shape of her in the dress the way he’d study a map — the weight, the hold of the fabric, the faint press of nipple where the air had cooled her. She gave him thirty seconds and walked back to the bar with her pulse in her throat and the ghost of that stare still on her tits.

Dale won the next hand too and his favor was the same — “Right here” — but this time his hand found her waist and pulled her one inch closer, and his thumb slid under the hem’s edge and pressed against her bare thigh. The skin-on-skin was a jolt. His thumb circled there — on her inner thigh, three inches above the knee — and she could feel his cock pressing against his jeans, the thick ridge visible even in her peripheral vision. She stepped back before the thirty seconds were up. He let her go with a look that said the letting was temporary.

Wicks won a hand and reached too far: “Straddle me.” She shot him a look that could have stripped varnish. “A drink, Wicks. Your favor is a drink.” He took it, grinning with his bad teeth. Dale tipped her a fifty between hands — folded, pressed into her palm, his dark fingers warm against hers for a second too long. Wicks tucked twenties into her hand between deals, his stained fingers lingering. Tips gathered beside her glass — close to a hundred by the time the cards stopped mattering.

The game lasted forty-five minutes. Loose, unfocused, the men playing like men who were waiting for something else to start. She poured heavy — for them, because the hustle was the hustle, and for herself, because the gin steadied something that needed steadying. Her second glass. She reached for it during a hand she wasn’t pouring for — just reached, wrapped her fingers around the cool glass, brought it to her mouth. For courage, she told herself. For the nerves. Her third glass came after Dale’s second favor. She poured it at the bar with her back to the table and drank half of it standing there because the memory of his thumb on her inner thigh was still warm and the gin was the only thing between that warmth and whatever it would become if she let it.

Then Wicks said it.

They were between hands. He was telling a story — something about hot sauce, a ranking of available sauces — and mid-sentence, the way Wicks did everything, without seeing the cliff until he was over it:

“— like when we were inside, the commissary list was —”

“Wicks.” Vince’s voice. Flat. Blade-sharp. A single word that cut the sentence dead. Wicks stopped. Looked at Vince. The grin faltered. “I’m just saying —”

“Don’t.”

Three seconds of silence. Megan at the bar, her glass halfway to her mouth. The word *inside* sitting in the room. The commissary. When *we* were all —

She looked at the three of them. Vince with his flat stare on Wicks. Dale unchanged, cigar between his fingers, expression telling her nothing. Wicks with the nervous grin, scratching his arm.

These men were in prison together.

She set down her glass. The gin tasted different now — sharper, thinner, the warmth gone out of it.

She didn’t ask what they’d been in for. The question pressed against her teeth and she swallowed it, because asking would mean admitting she was afraid, and admitting she was afraid would change what she was doing here from a hustle into something else. Something with a different name. Something she couldn’t leave by choosing to leave.

So she let her imagination fill the silence instead. Armed robbery. Assault. A knife, or a fist, or something worse — the kind of thing that left marks on other people. She looked at Dale’s hands on his thighs — the scarred knuckles, the thickness of his fingers, the way they’d felt on her hip thirty seconds ago — and she imagined those hands doing other things in other rooms. She looked at Wicks — jittery, grinning, scratching his arm where the nicotine stain ended and something paler began — and she imagined a bunk, a wall, the fluorescent-lit patience of a man who counted days. She looked at Vince and he was already looking at her and his expression told her nothing and his silence told her everything.

She was alone in this house with three men who had done time together. Who had a shared history in a place with locked doors and concrete floors. She had no phone signal. Nobody knew she was here. Her husband was two hours away in a hollow that swallowed radio waves, and these men — who knew where she lived, who could walk to her front door in ninety seconds — were between her and Vince’s front door.

The fear settled. It didn’t spike — it settled. Into her legs, her stomach, the base of her spine. The specific worst she’d imagined — the violence, the force — receded into a more practical fear: these men wanted something from her, and the wanting was patient and organized and had been patient and organized since before she walked in the door. And the worst part — the part she couldn’t look at and couldn’t look away from — was that she was already doing what they wanted and the fear was one of the reasons why. Because compliance felt safer than refusal. Because refusal meant testing what these men would do when told no by a woman alone in their space. Because *yes* was the path that kept the room calm and *no* was a word she could feel the weight of, and the

weight was heavier than she could carry alone in this basement with three ex-convicts and no signal and no help.

“I want to go,” she said. Flat. No quip.

“Okay.” Vince held up his hands. No resistance. “No problem. I’ll let the guys know we need someone else for Saturdays.”

“Someone else?”

“Another girl. For the game. Dale’s been asking about this woman he knows —”

“You’re replacing me?”

“I’m not replacing you. You said you want to go.” The shrug — the one that looked like surrender and felt like a hand closing around her throat. “So go. We’ll figure it out.”

She stood there. The clutch was five feet away. The door was eight steps. The walk home was ninety seconds.

But the money. The fifteen hundred from last week. The eight hundred Tyler was making this weekend. The Visa and the power bill and the rent. And underneath the money, running silent and steady: these men knew where she lived. She had no phone signal. She was alone. And leaving might be riskier than staying — might burn the arrangement that was paying their bills, might leave her with nothing. And something underneath the fear and the money that she wouldn’t look at.

She sat back down. The stool felt different under her — harder, colder, the seat she’d been warming for an hour suddenly wrong. She’d chosen to stay. The choosing changed everything and nothing. Her spine was straighter. The gin in her glass caught the light and she picked it up and drained it and set it down empty — the third glass gone, the nerves giving way to something looser, something that made the room possible.

The game resumed. She stayed behind the bar. The men played two more hands — Vince took one with a pair of jacks, Dale folded the other — and a thought flickered — *Are they losing on purpose? Could they be* — The thought sat in her stomach for three seconds. Then she crushed it. Drunk men. Bad cards. The hustle was the hustle. She poured herself another finger of gin.

Thirty minutes later, Vince set his cards down. Caught her eye. “Help me with the ice.”

She followed him to the bar. He pulled the bucket out, his back to the table, his voice low.

“Remember what I showed you and Tyler downstairs?”

“Vince.”

“These guys will pay stupid money.” He tilted his head toward the table. “You saw the setup. You saw the photos.”

“I told you no.”

“I mentioned it to Tyler before he left.” Casual. Like an afterthought. “Told him if you wanted to do the photos, I’d take care of it. Tyler said your call.”

The words hit her in the chest. Tyler knew. Tyler knew this might happen and he drove to that cabin and he left her here and he said *your call*. The same non-answer that was an answer.

She couldn't verify it. No signal. Tyler in a hollow, unreachable. Vince could be lying. But Tyler had said *it's up to you* when Vince showed them the setup. He'd said it to the floor. Had he said it again? She couldn't ask.

"I'd pay five hundred for one picture," Dale said from his chair. His voice carried without effort. "In that dress."

"I've got three hundred," Wicks said. Eyes too bright. Leg bouncing.

Cash materialized. Dale pulled hundreds from his pocket and set them on the card table. Wicks scrambled for crumpled bills. Vince added two hundred. A thousand dollars on the felt. For pictures of her in a dress she'd worn to Christmas parties.

She walked back to the table. Stood where they could see her.

"Nothing weird," she said. To the room. "No touching. I say when it's over."

Vince walked back to the bar. She followed. His voice, close, just for her:

"Last call. Same as before. You say it, I stop everything. They don't even need to know you have it."

She nodded.

He walked back to the table. She stood in the doorway between the bar and the room and looked at the thousand dollars and the men and the basement stairs.

"Fine," she said. "Let's go."

Vince gathered the cash — folded it, held it up for her to see, set it on the bar where she could reach it on the way out. He pushed back from the table. The cards lay abandoned on the felt, the chips scattered. The poker was over. Whatever happened next was the real reason these men were in this house.

"Downstairs."

The basement stairs. The temperature dropped with each step — the living room's cigarette warmth giving way to cool concrete. The fluorescent tube buzzed overhead. Then the clamp lights came on — three of them on adjustable stands arranged in a triangle around the center of the room, warm white, angled inward. The basement transformed. Still ugly at the edges — the dropped ceiling tiles, the raw concrete floor, the stacked boxes — but in the center, a pool of warm light that made something almost professional. The stool. The white backdrop sheet on the wall behind it. The tripod with the DSLR mounted. A sagging brown chaise longue dragged into the light pool, covered with a clean sheet. Against the far wall, the old couch with a folded blanket over one arm. A card table with a folding chair, an ashtray, and the drinks. A plastic crate stacked with old magazines at the edge of the light pool. The garment rack with the robe, the red thing, and the white string bikini.

She heard the men come down behind her. Their weight on the stairs — heavy, multiple, three sets of footsteps between her and the door. Dale settling onto the couch with a groan of springs. Wicks pulling his phone from his back pocket as he dropped

into the folding chair, the screen glowing before he was seated. Vince closing the door at the top.

The door was closed. She was in a basement with three ex-convicts and a camera and no signal and the only way out was back up those stairs past all of them.

She smoothed her dress. Pushed her hair back with both hands — the gesture that lifted her chest and she knew it and they knew it and nobody said anything.

“Where do you want me?”

Vince moved to the camera. Lifted the lens cap, checked the settings with hands that knew where everything was. He looked through the viewfinder. Adjusted the tripod height.

“Just stand there for a sec. By the stool.”

She was near the stool already — the clamp lights warming her from two angles, flattering light that smoothed skin and deepened shadows. She held her gin and tonic. Sipped.

Click.

She looked up. The shutter was already going.

“Don’t stop. Just be you.”

Click. Click.

He turned the camera and showed her the screen. The image — her, candid, the glass in her hand, her dark hair catching the warm light, her face caught between amusement and annoyance — and below the face, the dress doing its real work: her tits held up in black, the cleavage a clean soft V, the kind of frame that made the rest of the shot optional. She looked good. Actually good. Hot in a way that had nothing to do with pouring drinks. The woman in the photo looked like someone she’d almost forgotten she was — someone from Cedar Heights, from champagne and the kind of restaurant where the chairs matched, from a life where men wanted her and the wanting was flattering and there was nothing underneath it. Down here the wanting had underneath.

“See?” Vince said. “Easy.”

“Easy for you. You’re not in the frame.” But she was looking at the screen with something that felt like satisfaction.

He took more. Megan on the stool — legs crossed, the dress riding up her thigh, the line of her calf sharp in the heels. Leaning against the backdrop — one hand on her hip, head tilted, a half-smile she didn’t mean to give. Each time he showed her the screen. Each time the woman on screen was more present, more desired than the woman who poured drinks and worked taglines for dental groups.

“Give me something,” Vince said. “You’re holding back.”

“I’m standing here in a dress. What else do you want?”

“Give me what you give the mirror when nobody’s watching.”

She felt her mouth pull. Shifted her weight to one hip. Let her shoulders drop — which lifted her chest into the light, the dress tightening across the heavy front of her.

Lifted her chin and looked at the camera the way she looked at herself at five o'clock — the assessment, the knowledge, the quiet certainty on a face that had no business being this pretty in a room that smelled like cigarettes and wet concrete.

The shutter burst — three rapid frames.

“That,” Vince said. “Right there.”

From the couch, Dale's voice, low: “Arch.”

She did — barely — and her breasts pushed the neckline into something indecent. Vince shot from below — the full inner curves, the soft shadowed cleft, the way the dress barely kept them. From behind — the dress clinging to her ass, the hem high, the dark mole just visible. Side profile — her breasts straining the fabric into a hard clean outline, the nipples starting to press through as the basement air cooled her skin. Wicks made a sound like a laugh that had died.

“Lean toward me,” Vince said. “Just the shoulders.”

She leaned. The dress gave up another inch of cleavage. The clamp light poured into the space between her breasts and every man in the room watched the light do it. Vince's shutter went greedy. Dale didn't speak. He didn't need to — the shift of his weight on the couch was the commentary. She held the lean for three more frames because stopping felt like admitting what the lean was for, and then she straightened with her face hot and her mouth set and the knowledge that they'd just bought the view she'd spent eight years refusing Tyler on a phone screen.

“One more set in the dress,” she said, “and then we're done. I have a curfew.”

She said it to the room and to her own reflection in the black of the lens — pretty face, expensive mouth, tits still announcing themselves through fabric — and the sentence sounded like control. It wasn't. It was a woman trying to put a lid on a boil.

“Try this.” Vince held up the bikini. White. String. The triangles were smaller than her palm. The bottom a narrow strip between two strings.

Megan didn't take it. She looked at the triangles, then at him. “No.”

“It's part of the shoot.”

“I said one more set in the dress. That was the set.” She kept her hands on her hips. The gin glass cold against her fingers. “I'm not putting that on.”

Wicks laughed — sharp, nervous. “Come on. It's a bikini.”

“It's dental floss with ambitions.” She turned toward the stairs. “We're done. You got your photos.”

Vince didn't move to block her. He held the bikini out the way he held everything — like the next step had already been decided and he was waiting for her to catch up.

“Dress shots are warm-up. This is the set.”

“I'm going upstairs.”

Dale's voice from the couch, low enough that she felt it in her ribs. “Put it on.”

Not a request. The same tone he'd used for *on my lap*.

She looked at him. Enormous on the sagging chaise, thighs spread, gold chain dull in the clamp light. Waiting. The size of him made the basement feel smaller. She looked at his hands on his thighs — scarred knuckles, the thickness of his fingers — and the upstairs slip came back whole: *when we were inside*. Commissary. The three of them in a place with locked doors. She was alone down here with that knowledge, and Tyler was two hours away in a hollow that swallowed radio waves, and these men were between her and the stairs.

“I wear what I want,” she said. Thinner than it had been on Thursday. “That was the deal.”

“Deal’s evolving,” Vince said. Mild. Helpful. He dangled the bikini between them. “Curtain’s right there. Nobody watches you change. You come out, we shoot, you go home. Easy.”

Dale reached into his pocket. Dropped five hundreds on the card table without looking away from her. Wicks scrambled — pulled two hundreds. The bills landed soft. She barely looked at them.

The word sat against her teeth — *last call* — bartender-clean, ready. One phrase and Vince stopped everything. He’d proven it upstairs. She could say it. Walk out. Go home.

She looked at Dale. At the still patience of a man who’d waited through ninety days of something worse than this basement and could wait through whatever she tried next. Refusal meant testing what these men did when a woman alone in their space said no. Compliance kept the room calm. *Yes* was the path that didn’t ask what *no* cost.

Vince stepped closer — not into her space, just enough that she smelled Marlboro and cheap cologne. “Take your time.”

She took the bikini. The strings were rough against her palm.

It’s a swimsuit. I’d wear this at a beach.

She walked to the curtain. Her heels clicked on concrete. Behind her, Wicks made a sound like he’d been punched in the chest.

Behind the canvas she was alone. A small mirror propped on a shelf. A bare bulb. The smell back here different — less smoke, more damp concrete and dust.

She set the bikini on the shelf. Unzipped her dress — the fabric exhaling, releasing her. She shimmied it off her shoulders, down her hips, stepped out. Hung it on a nail in the wall.

She stood in her black lace and heels. Unhooked the bra. Her breasts settled — heavy, full, swaying with the motion, the nipples tightening in the cool air, the pink nubs crinkling. She folded the bra. Slid the underwear down and stepped out. Folded. Set both on the shelf.

Naked in heels under a bare bulb, she caught herself in the propped mirror: blue eyes too wide, dark hair falling forward over the tops of her breasts, nipples already tight, the full heavy shape of her looking like something that belonged on the other side

of the curtain whether she put the bikini on or not. She looked like the reason they'd paid. She hated how clearly she could see it.

In the back corner of Vince's basement, she reached for the bikini top. Tied it behind her neck, behind her back. The triangles were almost comically small — the fabric covered her nipples and an inch of areola at most. The inner curves spilled from the sides. The tops of each heavy breast rose above the triangle's edge. The strings bit.

The bottoms. She stepped in. Pulled them up. The front was a narrow strip of white — barely wider than two fingers — covering her slit and nothing else. Strings on her hip bones. The back a thong that disappeared between her cheeks.

Then she saw the photo.

It was on the shelf. Tucked between a box of clamp bulbs and a roll of gaffer tape. The corner visible — skin-colored — and her hand was pulling it out while her mind was still saying *don't*.

She pulled it out.

The same woman from the glamour shots. Same body, same tan. But this wasn't glamour. The woman was on her knees. Her mouth was full — stretched wide, jaw open, lips straining around a cock pushed halfway down her throat. She recognized the man. The dark skin. The size — the girth that made the woman's mouth look impossibly small. Dale. His thick hand on the back of her head, fingers buried in her hair. The shaft was slick with spit, glistening, veined, disappearing between the woman's lips. Strings of saliva connected her chin to where her mouth couldn't contain the volume. Her eyes watered. Sweat beaded on her forehead. The tendons in her neck were taut.

Megan stared. She should have put it down immediately. She didn't. Her eyes traced the image — the woman's jaw stretched to its limit, the skin taut at the corners of her mouth, the way her throat bulged where the shaft pressed. Dale's hand was tangled in the woman's hair, not pulling but holding, his thick fingers gripping at the root as if keeping her head where he wanted it. His other hand was on his own thigh, relaxed, the posture of a man receiving something he expected to receive. The woman's mascara had run in two thin tracks down her cheeks. Her nails were digging into his hip. The detail that held Megan longest: the woman's eyes. Open. Wet. Looking up at him while his cock filled her throat. The expression in them was complicated — tears and effort and something else underneath that looked like yielding, like the moment after resistance fails and what replaces it isn't acceptance but surrender, which is different, which is worse.

Between her legs — sudden, shameful — she clenched. A pulse of wet heat that had nothing to do with thought. The size of him. The visual of that dark, heavy cock stretching a woman's mouth to its limit. She was slick against the bikini fabric. Just from looking. The dampness sudden and damning and she felt the clench land with a flicker of horror that did nothing to stop it.

Was this left here for me?

She looked at the shelf — the photo's corner had been visible from the mirror's angle. Could have been careless. Could have been Vince. The thought sat in her stomach and the worse thought settled beneath it: *This was taken HERE. On this side of this curtain. Under these lights. That woman knelt right where I'm standing. She changed behind this same canvas and then she went out there and she put her mouth on him and the camera was going and that is what it looked like.* She looked at the photo again. The stretched lips. The spit. The cock. *That is what it looks like.*

Her hands shook putting it back. She pressed it flat against the shelf, precisely where she'd found it, as if being caught looking would change something — would mean she'd seen what Dale's cock could do and stayed anyway. She wiped her palm on her thigh. Between her legs, the dampness spread.

What am I doing. What if he tries to — what if they don't stop when I —

Three breaths. She steadied herself the only way she had: *Vince honors the signal. He honored it upstairs. Tonight is the last time. Play a little ball and be done.*

But the photo was still behind her eyes. The woman's face. The size of him. And the treacherous question — the one she could feel forming in the warm dark space between her thighs: *What does it feel like?*

She killed the question. Smoothed the bikini strings. Pushed her hair back. Checked the mirror. The woman in the glass was pale skin and white strings and blue eyes wider than they should have been.

She walked out. And the photo walked out with her.

The room went silent.

She stepped into the warm pool of the clamp lights and three men stopped breathing.

The bikini on her body. White strings on porcelain. Her breasts barely contained by triangles too small for them — the inner curves spilling from the sides, the stiff nipples pressing through thin white cotton, hard from the cold and the photo and the men's silence pressing against her like hands. They looked absurd and perfect and filthy: too much woman for too little fabric, the heavy pale weight of her trying to escape every seam. Above all that, her face — still trying for composure, pale blue eyes brighter than they should have been, mouth soft and uncertain — the pretty contradicting the pornographic and making both worse. Her flat stomach. The narrow waist that made the flare of her hips obscene. The bikini bottom a thin white strip riding low — the smooth bare mound visible on either side of the fabric, the seam of her pussy defined through the thin cotton. Her ass: both full cheeks exposed, the thong string disappearing between them, the single dark mole on the left cheek. The heels lengthening her legs.

Dale shifted forward on the couch. His cigar forgotten in the ashtray. His hands went to his knees and he leaned in — slow, heavy, the look on his face saying he'd been waiting for this exact moment and knew it when it arrived. His tongue crossed his lower lip. His dark eyes went from her chest to the strip of white between her legs and his

nostrils flared — smelling her, she realized, smelling the arousal that had been building behind the curtain, the heat and the musk that the thin cotton couldn't contain.

Wicks — his voice cracking: “Holy shit.” He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing hard. “Vince — look at her. Look at those tits. The fabric — you can see her nipples through it, you can see the whole —” He ran out of sentence. His phone was up and shaking in his stained fingers.

Vince behind the camera, hand on the tripod, frozen for a moment. Then the shutter fired — three frames in quick succession, the sound mechanical and greedy.

“Perfect,” he said. “Right there. Don't move.”

She stood in the light and let them look. Three men and the full weight of their want pressing against her from eight feet away, and between her legs the wetness from the photo was already soaking into thin white cotton and she could feel it — the fabric warming, clinging, the dampness spreading in a slow bloom she couldn't stop.

“It's a swimsuit,” she said. To the room. To herself. *These idiots are paying me for a swimsuit photo.* She gripped that. “Relax.”

Nobody relaxed.

Vince shot fast. Burst mode. Seated on the stool — hands on hips, arch the back. Standing — feet shoulder-width, the bikini bottom pulled tight between her thighs, the strip of white the only barrier. Dale directing from the couch — sparse, logistical: “Feet apart.” “Show me the back.” She complied with diminishing resistance.

Her fourth glass. She'd walked to the card table between poses and reached for it — for permission this time. The gin softened the edges of what she was doing while the alcohol loosened something between her control and her body that she'd been holding together with conscious effort.

The touches started here. Vince left the camera on the tripod and stepped to her side — “adjusting the light” — his arm brushing the outside of her breast as he reached past her for one of the clamp stands. His hand on her shoulder, turning her ten degrees. His rough, stained fingers on her bare waist, lingering one beat longer than the direction required. She didn't call them out. Each one left heat behind.

“On the chaise,” Vince said. “Hands and knees. Facing away.”

The command landed in her stomach. She looked at the chaise — the clean sheet, the warm light falling on it. The position he was asking for. She knew what it would show them. She knew what it would look like from behind — the bikini bottom a joke of coverage, the thong string the only thing between her ass and three men with cameras. The sequence of small yeses — the dress, the stool, the bikini, the standing turns — carried her forward because each one had been trivially more than the last and stopping now meant admitting that all the previous yeses had been mistakes.

She set her glass on the card table and walked to the chaise. Knelt on it, palms forward on the clean sheet. The fabric was rough under her knees. The warm light was on her back. The men were behind her.

“Arch your back.”

She arched. Her spine curved deep, her ass rising, her heavy breasts hanging in the tiny triangles — the weight pulling the cups away from her body, the full round underswell exposed, the soft pale flesh swinging free of anything like modesty. They hung. That was the word for it and the sight for it: hanging, heavy, the nipples pointing toward the sheet through thin white cotton, the triangles riding uselessly on top of something they couldn't hold. The breasts swayed when she shifted — a slow pendulous roll — and she heard Wicks's breath break. She could feel the men seeing them move. She could feel her own face burning toward the sheet while her chest put on the show.

“Spread your knees.” Dale's voice from behind her. Low, flat, carrying the full weight of the room. A voice that didn't ask.

She hesitated. One second. The spread would open her to them — the bikini bottom was a strip of cotton between two strings and the spread would pull it tight against her and everything she was hiding would be visible through the wet fabric. She knew this. The knowing sat in her stomach. The small yes carried her past the knowing.

She spread them.

The pose. Her back arched, ass up, knees apart on the chaise. The thong string pulled tight between her cheeks — a single white line bisecting them, framing what it couldn't cover: her tight pink asshole visible above the string's line, the puckered skin smooth and clean, the color the same perfect pink as her mouth and nipples. Below, the bikini strip pressed against her pussy — soaked. The white cotton transparent where it clung to her, darkened with her wetness, the swollen lips visible through the fabric, the slit defined, the heat and slickness unmistakable. Between her parted thighs, the wetness had spread — a darker bloom on the white cotton, spreading slowly, the evidence irrefutable even at eight feet. At three feet — where the camera was — the evidence was anatomical.

The scent of her hit the room. Musky, sweet, the sharp concentrated note of female arousal cutting through the cigarette smoke and the cigar and Vince's greasy cologne and the concrete-dust smell of the basement. The smell was unmistakable and it was hers and every man in the room was breathing it.

Dale inhaled slowly behind her. She heard him — the deep, deliberate pull of air through his nose, the sound a man makes when he tastes something. Wicks swallowed. His Adam's apple clicked audibly. She could hear his breathing — fast, through his mouth, menthol-tainted panting, fast and shallow, his self-control running on fumes.

From this angle, behind her, the men saw: the full shape of her ass — pale, round, the mole on the left cheek — the thong string framing her most private places. The bikini strip clinging to a pussy that was wet enough to be visible, the cotton molding to the swollen lips, the slit defined through damp fabric. The pink of her visible through white cotton. Three cameras aimed at the evidence of a woman on her hands and knees with

her ass raised and her knees spread and her pussy soaked through her last piece of clothing.

The shutter fired. *Click. Click. Click.* Wicks's phone from one angle. Vince's DSLR from behind.

She was on display. Three men documenting the most private parts of her from three feet away in warm light. She was horrified — the woman who'd walked in saying *nothing weird, no touching* on her hands and knees with her ass in the air and her pussy on camera. And she was throbbing — her clit pulsing against the damp fabric with every heartbeat, her nipples aching against the cups, a deep rhythmic pulse between her legs that matched her shame and ran alongside it and would not stop.

She heard Dale move. The heavy footsteps on concrete — one, two, three steps from the couch toward the chaise. She was facing away from him. She felt him first: the displacement of air, the heat of his large body, the dense cigar-and-cologne smell thickening. His shadow fell across her back, across her ass — the light changing as he stepped between her and the clamp behind him. The temperature at her skin rose. He was close. Standing right behind her, standing over her, looking down at the full display from above.

Vince stepped from behind the camera. "Adjusting the angle." His hands on her hips, turning her slightly, his rough palms on her bare waist lingering one beat, two. He traced the line of her spine — "straighten here" — his fingertips on her vertebrae, pressing, his stained thumbnail scraping softly along the arch. The touch was proprietary. The pretense was gone from his hands even if the word *positioning* was still in his mouth.

Dale was directly behind her now. She could feel his breath — warm, cigar-thick — on the backs of her thighs. His body heat was a wall at her back. She could smell him specifically: the cologne, heavier this close, the musk of his skin beneath it, and the deeper male smell of his arousal — the warm, concentrated scent of a hard cock in denim three feet from her face-level if she turned around.

"You look good on your knees," he said. Quiet. For her alone. His voice coming from directly above and behind. She couldn't see his face. She could feel the weight of his attention like a hand on the small of her back. "Real good."

"Don't close your eyes," Vince said. "Look at the camera."

She opened them. Looked at the lens — pale blue eyes wet at the edges, mouth open on a breath she couldn't close, the expensive face of a woman who did not belong on her hands and knees with her ass up and her tits hanging and her pussy soaked through cotton. Her face was hot — the heat across her cheekbones, down her neck, across the tops of her breasts. Her nipples ached against the fabric. Between her legs the pulse was constant — the throbbing a metronome that matched the clicking of the shutter and the sound of Dale breathing behind her.

She sat up on the chaise. Dale stepped back from the foot end and settled onto the couch — the springs protesting under him, his thighs spreading. Wicks was in the

folding chair to the side. Vince moved behind the camera. The men were close now — the distance that had felt safe when she stood at the stool had collapsed, even with the few feet of concrete between them.

“Take it off.” Dale’s voice.

The room stopped.

“Five hundred,” he said. He reached into his pocket. More bills on the card table.

“The top.”

“I’d pay too,” Wicks said. Two hundreds. “For those — for that. Please.”

Seven hundred more. Twenty-four hundred total.

Vince stepped close. His voice low, private: “You’re robbing these idiots, Megan. Seven hundred dollars for one picture.”

“No.” She meant it. Felt the word solid. “That’s not what I agreed to.”

“Five hundred,” Dale repeated. “Thirty seconds. Then it goes back on.”

“I said no.”

Ten seconds of silence. The clamp lights buzzing. Her nipples aching against the tiny triangles.

She thought about the money — twenty-four hundred and counting. She thought about the woman in the photo — who’d had Dale’s cock in her mouth and been paid and walked away and been fine. She thought about Tyler, who’d asked her for nudes three times and been told no each time. Three times she’d said no. No to the phone in bed. No to the camera on the nightstand. No to the laptop and the promise he’d delete it. Eight years of no. And these men — men whose names she hadn’t known six weeks ago, men who smelled like motor oil and menthol and cheap cologne — would have what Tyler never got. Were documenting what Tyler had been denied. The thought, when it arrived, did not feel like shame. It felt like a door being kicked open from the inside.

She reached behind her neck. Found the knot. Pulled. Then the one at her back — fingers fumbling, the second knot tighter than the first.

The strings fell. The triangles dropped — peeling away from her breasts, the fabric releasing them. For one second the cups clung by static and sweat and then they released and she was bare.

Her tits in the clamp light. The reason. Full, heavy, the pale skin luminous under warm white, suddenly and completely without excuse. They sat high on her chest, projecting forward — the aggressive shape that jutted rather than sagged, the size and firmness making a lie of gravity. The nipples tightened in the air — the puffy pink mounds crinkling, the nubs hardening into rigid points, flushed darker pink, the raised swollen profile readable from the couch. Freckles scattered faint across the upper slopes. Three feet from Dale’s face. Under warm light. With cameras going. She was the most naked woman alive and she’d only lost two triangles of cotton.

The room’s silence lasted three seconds. Then Wicks — his voice cracking, different from anything he’d said tonight: “Jesus. Vince. You seeing this?” He

swallowed hard enough that she heard it. “I want to put my mouth on those. Look at the size of them. Look at her fucking nipples. I want to — I need to —”

“Shut up, Wicks.”

Dale said nothing. He leaned back into the couch. His tongue moved behind his lower lip. He knew what came next. His body said so.

Megan’s hands twitched at her sides. The instinct to cover — to cross her arms, to shield. She didn’t do it. Chin up. Composure by millimeters.

The shutter fired in rapid succession.

She stayed topless. The thirty seconds Dale had promised passed and the bikini top stayed on the floor and nobody mentioned it. The camera was clicking. And she was settling into the exposure — the crisis dulling into a state, the air against her bare skin normalizing in increments she could feel but couldn’t stop.

Vince shot her through poses. Arms up — her breasts lifting, the nipples pointing toward the ceiling. Turned sideways — the full profile, the aggressive jut. Leaning forward on the chaise — tits hanging, swaying, the weight pulling them into shapes she could feel the men watching. She walked to the card table and picked up her glass. Her fifth. The gin was insulation now — she drank because she could feel everything and the feeling was too loud and the gin turned the volume down one notch, and the notch was the difference between standing up and walking out and staying on this chaise with her tits bare and men’s eyes on them.

Between poses she caught her own face in the black of the lens — still trying for chin-up composure while her bare tits did the opposite of composure, bouncing when she reached for the glass, settling when she sat, the nipples refusing to soften. The dissonance was the show. She knew it. They knew it.

“Those nipples don’t lie,” Wicks said from his chair. His commentary had shifted — he was narrating what he saw changing in her. “They’ve been hard since the bikini. The color’s darker. She’s getting off on this. Look at her. She can’t hide it.”

Dale: “She likes being seen.”

She had no answer for that. Her nipples were hard and would not soften and the cameras were documenting the evidence and Dale was right.

Then Vince put the camera down.

She noticed the absence of the shutter before she noticed what he was doing — stepping around the tripod, his hands wiping on his jeans. The gold chain catching the light.

“The shadow’s wrong,” he said. “Let me fix the light.”

He stepped close. Reached past her for a clamp light and his arm brushed the outside of her breast — the rough fabric of his sleeve against the soft outer swell. He tilted the light. Stepped back to the tripod. Then crossed back to her in two steps — his hand on her shoulder, turning her ten degrees.

“There.” His hand didn’t leave. His thumb on her collarbone. His rough fingers curling over the top of her shoulder — the contrast vivid: his brown, oil-stained hand

on her pale skin. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat and something greasy underneath.

His thumb traced down. Off her collarbone. Over the upper swell of her left breast — one inch, then two, following the soft heavy curve he'd been photographing all night like the camera had been a warmup for his hands.

She grabbed his wrist.

“We said no touching.”

Vince didn't pull back. The deep-set eyes, shadowed under heavy brows. The smirk almost gone — replaced by something hungrier and more careful. “I'm positioning.”

His thumb pressed. The pad of it against the top of her breast — the full, taut flesh above the nipple — then dragged a slow half-inch toward the puffy pink, stopping short like a man who knew exactly where the line still was and how close he could stand to it. Feeling the density, the warmth, the give. She held his wrist and didn't push. Her nipple tightened harder under the almost of it. The rule had been restated and redefined in the same breath, and her letting the redefinition stand was the real concession.

He stepped back. Palms out. “See? Professional.”

Her skin burned where his thumb had been.

Then Dale stood.

He didn't announce it. The couch protested as his weight came off it and then he was crossing the space — direct, certain. His body blocked the clamp light behind him. His shadow fell over her.

“Get over here.” Three words that hit her low in the stomach.

She didn't move. “Dale —”

“Stand up.” He reached out one massive dark hand.

She stood. His hand was there and his voice was there and the photo behind the curtain was in her head and she couldn't be sitting beneath him while he stood over her.

He pulled her forward. One step. Between his spread legs — standing, feet apart, his hands on her hips. Even in heels, the top of her head reached his chin. This close he was enormous — the width of his chest filling her vision, his arms like walls, the gold chain at his throat. His dark skin against her pale body, the contrast everywhere: his brown hands on her white hips, his dark forearms against her bare stomach.

“These are mine tonight,” he said. Looking down at her breasts. One dark hand left her hip and rose — cupped her left breast from below. The full weight of it in his massive palm, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh. His thumb brushed the nipple — the swollen nub tightening further under his touch, a sharp sensation from her chest straight between her legs.

She gasped. Her hands flew to his wrist. Her fingers didn't meet around it.

He bent to her. His thick neck curving, his broad shoulders rolling forward, the mass of him folding down until his face was level with her chest. She could see the top of his skull — close-cropped grey hair against dark skin, age lines creasing. His full lips parted. His breath warm on her nipple for one second —

His mouth closed over it.

The sound she made was involuntary and open.

His lips sealed around the puffy pink flesh — encompassing the nipple and the swollen areola, taking more of her breast into his mouth than she thought a mouth could take. His tongue flat and hot. He sucked. The full pull of his mouth, cheeks hollowing, drawing her nipple into wet heat that made her legs buckle. The wet sound of it filled the space between their bodies — lewd, rhythmic, a man feeding on her. His tongue worked — flat strokes across the hard nub, pressing it against the roof of his mouth, pulling. Spit welled at the corners of his lips and ran warm down the underside of her breast. She gripped his head — the close-cropped grey hair rough against her pale fingers. Her hands went from his wrist to his skull and she didn't know if she was pulling him off or holding him there. His mouth was relentless — hot, wet, the suction drawing sensation from her chest to her core with every pull. Across the light pool she could feel the cameras taking it: her pretty face tipped back, mouth open, the magazine girl with a fifty-five-year-old man's mouth full of her tit.

He released her nipple with a wet pop — the flesh springing free from his mouth, shining with his spit in the clamp light, darker, abused-looking, the puffy areola glistening. Moved to the other breast. The same mouth. The same suction. The same devouring pull. Her right nipple between his lips, his tongue circling, his teeth barely grazing. She watched — she shouldn't have watched — the pale heavy globe of her vanishing between his dark lips, disappearing, reappearing wet. Her spine curved — arching into him, pressing her breast more fully into his mouth. Involuntary. Her hips shifted. Her pussy clenched with every suck and the clenching was a rhythm she couldn't interrupt.

“You taste like I knew you would,” he said against her skin. His lips moving on her breast, voice vibrating into the flesh. Then his mouth sealed again and she moaned — a real moan, from her chest, filling the room. The sound of a woman who had stopped holding anything together.

The shutter burst. Vince back behind the camera.

Dale's hands slid down her body. From her breasts — reluctantly, the last press of his thumbs across the hard nipples drawing a whimper she couldn't swallow — to her ribs, where he could feel her breathing, the fast shallow pulls that made her ribcage flutter beneath his palms. To her waist, his dark fingers spanning the narrow taper, feeling how small she was between his hands. To her hips. He gripped the hip bones and pulled her toward him — one step, her bare stomach pressing against his chest through his shirt, the body heat pressing through the cotton into her skin. She was small against him. The top of her head at his chin. Her bare tits against the stiff fabric of his shirt, the cotton dragging against her nipples with every breath. His arms around her were walls she'd walked between.

His hands went lower. Both palms sliding down the swell of her ass — cupping the bare cheeks, the bikini thong string between his thick fingers, the fabric meaningless against his grip. He squeezed. Kneaded. Pulled her cheeks apart slightly and her pussy

clenched at the exposure and he inhaled sharply — a single rough pull of air that she felt against the top of her skull. He held her there: her bare tits against his chest, his dark hands on her white ass, his cock a thick ridge between them pressing against her stomach through his jeans. She could feel the heat of it through the denim. The size of it.

“We said —” she started. The words died. His hands on her ass tightened and the thought dissolved.

He pulled one hand away from her ass and found the back of her neck — thick fingers dark against dark strands, curling and gripping at the base of her skull. He turned her face toward him.

She knew what was coming. Knew it in the way her lips parted and her body went still. His face was close — the broad nose, the dark skin, the full lips slightly parted around the smell of cigar smoke. His eyes open and on hers. No question in them.

His mouth found her neck first. Below her ear — lips, warm and full, pressing against pale skin. The weight of his mouth, his breath hot, the scratch of his jaw. He kissed along her throat — slow, deliberate, his lips parting against her skin. She tilted her head. Gave him more. The tilt was involuntary and it wasn’t and the ambiguity was hers.

Then her mouth. He turned her face with the hand in her hair and his lips found hers.

She held still. One second. Two. Her lips pressed together — the last line, the last thing she could hold. His mouth was warm and full and tasted of cigar smoke and whiskey and something darker, something animal and male and wholly unfamiliar. The mouth she’d been kissing for eight years tasted like toothpaste and coffee and the mints he kept in his truck. This mouth tasted like a basement and bad decisions and heat.

She opened.

Her lips parted and his tongue found hers and she kissed him back and the kissing back devastated her — because she opened willingly, her mouth moving against his, her tongue touching his tongue, the taste of him flooding her, and the willingness was hers. His hand tightened in her hair. She gripped his shirt — fistfuls of cotton, pulling him closer, and the pulling was a choice she was making in real time and couldn’t pretend away.

A moan passed from her into him. Small and helpless. Then a second one — deeper, from lower, from the place where his mouth connected to the pulse between her legs. His tongue was slow and thorough and certain and she kissed him the way she hadn’t kissed anyone — open-mouthed, gasping between tastes, her teeth grazing his lower lip. She could taste the whiskey. The cigar underneath it. The salt of his skin. Seven seconds. Ten. His free hand found her breast and squeezed — the full weight of it in his palm, the nipple against his rough thumb — and she moaned into his mouth again. Her hips shifted. Her hands went from his shirt to his neck to the back of his skull, her fingers on the close-cropped grey hair, holding his face against hers. She was the one holding him now. The yielding had become something larger and she couldn’t find the seam where it ended and the wanting began.

He pulled back. One inch. His breath on her wet lips. His dark eyes close enough to see the lighter striations in the brown, the dilated pupils, the calm certainty of a man who had just confirmed what he suspected.

“Knew you’d taste sweet,” he said. Quiet. Just for her. Then louder, to the room: “She kisses back. You get that?”

The shutter fired.

Her mouth was wet. Her lips swollen from his — the pretty mouth used, shining, not hers in the way it had been an hour ago. She’d kissed another man — willingly, with tongue, with a moan. Her nipples were aching points, still spit-shiny from his mouth, the pale slopes of her breasts marked with the faint wet trails of where he’d fed. She was wetter than she’d been all night — the kiss had opened something and she could feel herself soaking into the thin strip of bikini fabric.

Wicks’s hands arrived. She heard his chair scrape on the concrete — a thin, metallic screech. Then something set down on the table — his phone, she realized later, the filming suddenly less important than touching. His footsteps — quick, uneven, jittery, done waiting. His breathing reached her first — fast, through his mouth, menthol and stale cigarettes mixing with the cigar smoke and Dale’s cologne and her own arousal in the close air. Then his palms landed on her shoulders from behind.

His touch was a different language from Dale’s. Where Dale’s hands were certain and heavy and hot, Wicks’s were nervous and thin and clammy — his bony fingers trembling against her skin, the nicotine stains vivid yellow-brown against her pale shoulders. He slid down her arms. Found her ribs. His fingertips counted her bones through her skin, pressing, mapping, the frantic disbelief of hands that kept checking she was real.

He moved lower. His hands on her bare waist, his thumbs tracing her spine, then sliding down to her ass — squeezing, kneading, his bony fingers digging into the soft flesh. He wasn’t gentle about it. His grip was greedy and his breathing was in her ear and she could feel his cock pressing against her lower back through his jeans — insistent, the bulbous head a blunt pressure against her spine.

“Look at her, Dale.” His voice had shifted into something feral — not the cheerful, stream-of-consciousness Wicks from the poker table, but something hungrier and more specific. “Look at her face right now. She’s gone. She’s fucking gone. You put your mouth on her tit and she turned into a different person. Those nipples — the color’s changed, Dale, I swear to God. I’ve been watching them darken for an hour. And the sounds she’s making — did you hear that moan? She’d let you do anything right now. Anything. Look at her. She wants it.”

“Don’t —” she started. The word died mid-syllable. Wicks’s hand slid up her ribcage and his clammy fingers grazed the underside of her breast and the touch — different from Dale’s, thinner, more frantic, the tremor in his fingertips running into her skin — ran through her like a wire pulled taut, and the tautness was not revulsion.

“The bottoms,” Dale said. His hand on her thigh. His dark fingers curling under the bikini string at her hip.

“No.” Barely a whisper.

Vince, close, private, the co-conspirator whisper: “One more set, Megan. These idiots don’t know what they’re looking at. You’re taking them for everything.”

These idiots. Their money. I’m robbing them. She gripped the thought like a fistful of rope.

Dale’s fingers hooked the string. Pulled. Slowly. The bikini bottom sliding off her hip, over her ass, the wet fabric peeling away from her pussy with a sound — quiet, clinging, obscene — that filled the basement.

She lifted her hips. Let it slide down her thighs. Off her knees. Off.

More money appeared — Dale’s four hundreds, Wicks’s two — but the amounts had stopped mattering. Three thousand dollars on the felt and she couldn’t have counted it.

She was nude. In Vince’s basement. With three men and cameras. The heels the only thing left.

Three seconds of silence. The men looking at everything. Her breasts first — always first — still extraordinary, still hard-nippled and exposed, spit-traces dried to a faint sheen, the heavy pale weight of them the thing the room had been built around. Below: the flat stomach, the hip bones, the bare mound smooth and waxed clean. Her pussy — the neat pink slit between pressed thighs, the lips thick and swollen from over an hour of arousal, parted slightly, glistening. The wetness visible even with her legs together — slickness on her inner thighs, catching the warm light. The smell of her cutting through the cigar smoke and cologne — musky, sweet, the concentrated scent of arousal that filled the space between her and the men. Dale’s slow inhale. Wicks’s nostrils flaring. Her face tried to hold the line and failed by a millimeter: blue eyes too bright, mouth soft, the composure cracked where they could photograph the crack.

She stood. Turned. Slowly. Felt every inch of their attention on her bare skin. Her ass — both full cheeks, the dark mole, the crease between. She came back around. Faced them.

“Spread for me,” Dale said.

She shifted her feet apart. The swollen lips, flushed deeper pink. The inner pink visible. Her clit swollen. The wetness glistening on her thighs.

Wicks exhaled like he’d been holding his breath for an hour. “Look at that pussy.” His voice was ruined — cracked, raw, nothing left of the comedian. “Vince, look at it. It’s dripping down her legs. I can smell it from here. I want to lick it off her thighs — I want to get on my knees and put my tongue inside her until she screams.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. His stained fingers were white-knuckled on his own jeans. “She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life and she’s soaking wet in your basement and I can’t — I can’t —”

“Easy.” Dale. Low, steady, the counterweight to Wicks’s frenzy. His eyes on the wetness between her legs, his slow inhale audible. “That’s mine. You’ll get your turn.”

The cameras clicked. Her legs stayed open.

Then she saw the phone. Dale's phone — propped on a crate near the chaise, half-hidden among the clutter she'd walked past a dozen times, screen dark, the tiny lens pointed at her. He must have placed it while she was behind the curtain changing. It had been recording the entire shoot. The knowledge landed in her stomach like a stone — Vince's DSLR and Wicks's phone she'd known about, but this silent third eye had been watching from three feet away while she was on her hands and knees and spread and wet and she'd never seen it.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

"One more set." Vince's voice. "Hands and knees. Like before. On the chaise. Face the camera this time."

The echo of the bikini all-fours pose — the same position, one hour and every piece of clothing later. She knelt on the chaise. Palms on the sheet. Bare, arched, her breasts hanging, her ass up. The men were no longer at a distance — the couch was empty, everyone inside the light pool now.

Dale stepped to the head end of the chaise. He planted his feet wide — shoulder-width, then wider, spreading his stance until his hips dropped six inches. On all fours with her arms extended and her head lifted, the chaise's height put her face at his groin. Level with the buckle. Level with what was behind the buckle. His hands went to his belt. The buckle was brass, tarnished, and she could see the wear on the leather — the crease where it folded every day, the dark spots from his hands. She heard the metal first. The clink of the prong leaving the hole. Then the zipper — the rasp, deliberate, drawn out, each tooth separating with a small metallic tick that filled the basement.

The sound and the photo behind the curtain hit her at the same moment. The woman on her knees. The stretched mouth. The watering eyes. The spit. She could see the photo as clearly as if she were still holding it — every detail she'd stared at too long: the mascara tracks, the jaw at its limit, the dark veined shaft disappearing between the woman's lips. That woman had been here. On this chaise. In this light. And now Megan was on her hands and knees in the same light and the zipper was coming down and the photo was turning real in front of her.

"Dale — no." Her voice. The first full word in minutes. She started to sit back on her heels —

His hand caught the back of her skull. Thick fingers in her hair. Not yanking. Holding. Keeping her where she was — face level with his open fly, the denim gaping, the dark thatch of hair visible above the waistband of his briefs.

"Don't move."

"I'm not — Dale, I'm not doing that. Get your hand off me."

"Nobody's fucking you." Vince, stepping aside from the tripod — Dale's body blocked the DSLR now, but the phones were still rolling from their angles. Mild.

Reasonable. The safe one. “One still. That’s it. Cock in the frame, her face next to it. Looks dirty, doesn’t go dirty. Keep shooting.”

“Vince —”

“One photo,” Vince said. “Then he puts it away. You’ve come this far. Don’t blow the set over a still.”

Dale reached in. His dark hand disappearing into his jeans. She watched his forearm flex. Then he pulled himself free.

The photo made flesh. Dark, heavy, thick — the shaft veined and long, the head swollen and darker than the rest, glistening where it emerged from his fist. He wrapped one hand around the base and stroked once — slow, peeling the foreskin back, the full head revealed, the slit already beading a clear drop that caught the clamp light and hung. He was big. Bigger than the denim had promised. The shaft was the width of her wrist. The head was wider. The length settled under its own weight, pulling slightly down despite the hardness, and the veins along it pulsed under dark skin.

He stepped in. One step. His hips at the chaise’s edge. The head of his cock hanging an inch from her mouth — close enough that her breath moved across it, close enough that she saw the bead swell and threaten to fall.

The smell reached her first. Musk. Heat. Skin. Not cologne, not cigar — the concentrated male scent of his cock, earthy and raw, the inside of him pushed into the air between them. It filled her nose. Then her mouth. Her saliva glands fired before she could stop them — pooling under her tongue, thick and sudden, her lips parting on a breath she didn’t mean to take.

“Women like you cross the street when they see me,” Dale said. Low. Stroking. His dark eyes on hers over the thick curve of his cock. “Can’t look me in the eye at the counter.” Another stroke. The head swelling, the bead stretching. “And here you are.”

“Don’t.” She turned her face — an inch toward her shoulder, away from him.

His hand in her hair turned her back. Easy. Inevitable. He brought her cheek alongside the shaft — not on it, beside it — pale skin against the dark length of him, the heat of his cock radiating against her face without touching her mouth. The head rested near her temple. His balls hung heavy below her chin. The contrast was filthy and perfect and impossible to look away from if you were holding a camera: her prim mouth, closed; his black cock, thick and veined and wet at the tip, filling the frame beside her.

Beneath her, her bare tits hung toward the sheet — heavy, swaying with the small tremble she couldn’t stop — and the cameras had both: the magazine face beside a cock that didn’t belong, and the body that had made the whole night inevitable dangling underneath like the rest of the product.

“Hold still,” Vince said. The shutter fired. Burst. Three frames. Four. “Got it. Beautiful. That’s —”

Dale didn’t put it away.

His hand slid from her hair to her jaw. Thumb and fingers opening her face toward him. He dragged the head of his cock across her lower lip — painting it with the bead of precum, salt and slick, the smooth hot skin of the glans sliding left to right over her mouth. She made a sound. Small. Closed-mouthed. Her lips pressed shut against him and he waited there, the fat head resting on her mouth like a question he already knew the answer to.

“Mouth on it.”

“Dale — Vince said one photo —”

“Photo’s done.” Flat. He pressed forward. The head nudged her lips apart by force of girth alone — not a thrust yet, just the blunt insistence of something too thick to keep out once it wanted in. “You’ve never been this close to a black cock in your life. Go on.”

Her mouth opened. The lean she didn’t plan — or the failure to keep it shut, which was the same thing.

The head pushed past her lips. Smooth. Hot. Stretching her jaw wider than it wanted to go on the first inch. The ridge of the glans slid over her tongue and the taste hit — salt, sharp, and underneath it a deeper musk that coated the inside of her mouth like a film. Heavy. The weight of his cock on her tongue was a fact, not a metaphor: dense, hot, pressing her tongue flat. Her lips strained white around the dark shaft. Spit welled immediately, flooding around him, shining at the corners of her mouth. She heard herself make a sound — low, in her throat — and the vibration ran into him.

Dale exhaled through his nose. His hand settled back into her hair. Gripped at the root.

“Yeah,” he said. Quiet. Certain. “That’s how you suck a black man’s cock.”

Then he pushed deeper — past the still, past the pretense, past the lie Vince had sold her — and the photo behind the curtain stopped being a warning and started being a mirror.

The stretch of her jaw was immediate — aching, her lips straining around the width of him, the girth forcing her mouth wider than it wanted to go. She could feel the ridge of the head sliding past her lips, the smooth taut skin of the glans on her tongue, the heat of him filling her. Heavy. The weight of his cock on her tongue was a physical fact — not metaphor, actual weight, dense and hot, pressing her tongue flat against the bottom of her mouth. Her jaw ached. She tasted him fully now: the precum mixing with her saliva, the musk of his skin, something sharper beneath it that she could only describe as *male*, as the distilled taste of a man’s cock, and the taste was making her clench between her legs with every pulse of it on her tongue.

She moaned. The vibration traveled through her lips and onto his cock and he inhaled sharply — a sound from his chest, the first sound she’d heard from Dale that wasn’t language. His thigh tensed under her bracing hand. She could feel the vibration of her own voice running through the shaft, through his body, and the loop — her mouth

producing a sensation that produced a reaction that made her want to produce more — tightened something in her that she couldn't loosen.

“Look at her tits while she does it,” Wicks said from somewhere behind and to the side, voice wrecked. “They’re swinging. Every time he pushes — fuck — look at them.”

His grip tightened in her hair. He pushed forward — one real thrust, deeper than she'd planned, his cock sliding over her tongue and hitting the back of her throat. She gagged. Her eyes watered instantly — the reflex involuntary, the tears welling and spilling onto her cheeks. Spit flooded her mouth, spilling past her lips, stringing from his shaft. The sound — wet, choking, obscene — filled the basement. His cock pulled back an inch. Then pushed again. Deeper. The head stretching her throat and the gag repeating and the spit running down her chin and the sound the woman in the photo had made — the exact sound, the wet choking gurgle — coming from Megan's throat now. Her free hand flew to his thigh — bracing, fingers digging into the denim, not pushing away. The pose was the photo. Exactly. The mascara she hadn't bothered with saving her from the black tracks but the tears were the same and the spit was the same and the cock was the same.

Then — while Dale's cock was in her mouth and his hand was in her hair and his taste was coating her tongue — she heard movement behind her. Wicks. The scrape of his shoes on concrete, the quick uneven steps, the fast menthol breathing getting closer. He crouched at the foot of the chaise — she could feel the air shift, feel the heat of his body arriving behind her spread knees. His hand landed on her calf. Bony fingers wrapping around the muscle, trembling. He slid up — over her calf, over the back of her knee, onto the inside of her thigh.

His bony hand on the inside of her thigh. Sliding up. The clammy fingers she'd felt on her ribs earlier, the nicotine stains, the nervous tremor — all of it on the inside of her thigh now, climbing. On all fours, knees apart, she was open to him from behind. She couldn't close her legs without losing the pose. She couldn't speak with Dale's cock in her mouth. She felt Wicks's fingers reach the crease of her thigh, trace the edge of her pussy where the wetness had been running down, and find the slit.

He slid through the wetness. Two fingers parting her, sliding along the outside of her lips, the slickness coating his fingers immediately. Then his middle finger pressed inward and slipped inside her. One finger. Thin, bony, curving upward. The first penetration by a man who wasn't Tyler.

The sensation was a collision. Dale's cock on her tongue, filling her mouth, the taste and the stretch and the wet sounds — and now Wicks inside her, his finger hooking, pressing against her front wall, finding the spot that Tyler found on good nights and pressing it with a certainty that had nothing to do with tenderness. She made a sound around Dale's cock — muffled, desperate, involuntary — and the sound vibrated through both of them and she could feel Wicks's finger respond to the vibration and Dale's cock twitch against her tongue.

She was full at both ends. Her mouth and her pussy occupied by two different men at the same time. The sensation was beyond anything she could process — the two points of penetration sending signals that tangled in her spine and arrived at her brain as a single overwhelming current. Her hips pushed back against Wicks's hand. She didn't choose to. She felt her pelvis tilt and press and the pressing was hers and she couldn't take it back.

And she heard footsteps at her flank. Heavy. Deliberate. Vince. Stepping around the camera, his shoes on the concrete — one step, two, three. She couldn't see him — Dale's cock in her mouth, his hand in her hair, Wicks's finger inside her — but she could hear. The rasp of a zipper. His zipper. The metallic teeth separating. Then the sound of his hand — the rough, stained hand she'd felt on her waist all night — gripping himself. The thick wet sound of skin on skin. He was stroking. Moving closer. She could smell him now — cigarettes and grease and the deeper musk — arriving at the side of the chaise, his shadow falling across her ribs, his cock in his hand, approaching with clear intent.

The compound of all three — Dale in her mouth, Wicks inside her, Vince at her flank with his cock out and closing — the triangle sealed around her. She was surrounded. She was filled. She was being touched by three men at once and each man wanted more than he was getting and the *more* was seconds away.

The breaking point.

“Last call.”

She pulled back — three inches, four — Dale's cock sliding from her mouth, spit stringing between her lips and the head in a glistening bridge that caught the light and broke. She was still on her hands and knees, still close enough to feel the heat of him against her face. She said the words. Clear. Steady. The steadiness cost her everything she had left.

Vince stopped. Immediately. Stepped back. Tucked himself away. “Done. We're done.” His voice sharp, directed at the room. “Guys.”

Dale — right as she said it — came. The timing was the cruelty: the signal couldn't recall what was already airborne. His cock in his hand, the orgasm past the point of stopping. His hips jerked. His cum hit her face — across her cheek, her lips, her chin, a lash of it catching her eyelashes — warm and thick against the pale pretty skin, striping the blue eyes, painting the mouth that still looked like it belonged at a Christmas party. She was still on her hands and knees, her face still at his groin, her bare tits hanging, and there was nowhere to go in the half-second it took. The one thing the signal couldn't undo.

She stayed frozen on all fours. Dale's hand loosened in her hair — the fingers uncurling, the grip releasing, his palm sliding down the back of her skull and away. She felt the cum on her face — warm, thick, sliding down her cheek toward her chin, a streak of it across her lips that she could taste, salt and bitter and the musk of him, a line of it caught in her eyelashes and blurring her left eye. The cameras were still on that

face. On the ruin of it. She didn't wipe it. She didn't move. She stayed on all fours with his cum cooling on her skin and the taste of his cock still filling her mouth and her nipples still hard in the cold air like her body hadn't received the signal either.

Wicks pulled his finger free. Shoved himself back into his jeans. Turned away without looking at her.

Dale stepped back. Tucked himself in — slow, deliberate, zipping, buckling, the thick ridge still visible through the denim. He looked at her once. The look said *paused*, not *finished*.

Vince appeared with a blanket. Draped it over her shoulders. She sank back on her heels, her spine curving, her weight folding. His hand on her arm — brief, warm. "You did great. That was — you were incredible." The guardian act. The handler with the show horse. The tenderness was worse than the groping because the man who'd put her in this room was now folding her in a blanket and telling her she'd done well.

She wiped her face with the blanket's corner. Dale's cum smearing across the fabric — warm, then cooling, then gone from her skin but present on the cloth against her shoulder. Her legs closed. Her breathing ragged — she could hear it, the shake in each exhale.

The signal worked. She'd said it and they stopped. She was safe.

She was safe and sixty seconds ago she'd had Dale's cock in her mouth and his cum was on her face and a man's finger had been inside her and she'd been making sounds she didn't recognize.

She reached for her clothes.

She dressed behind the curtain. Her hands were shaking badly enough that the zipper took three tries. The black dress over her body — covering her, containing her, the fabric settling on skin that was still hot and damp. Her bra and underwear were on the shelf where she'd left them, folded neatly by a woman who'd expected to put them back on. She couldn't. The thought of pulling lace over skin that was still slick, still swollen, still humming — she stuffed them into her clutch. Went bare under the dress. The fabric sliding against her bare pussy with every step, against nipples still aching from Dale's mouth.

The photo was still on the shelf. The woman on her knees. Dale's cock in her mouth. Megan looked at it and saw herself — the same stretched lips, the same watering eyes, the same dark hand in the hair. She put it back facedown.

She walked out from behind the curtain.

Vince was at the card table. The money stacked. He counted it — his stained fingers flipping bills, sorting. "Twenty-four hundred," he said. "Photos minus the house. Plus your tips from upstairs — what was that, a hundred? Twenty-five hundred for the night."

She took it. The bills warm from his hand. Twenty-five hundred dollars. She folded the stack into her clutch without a word.

Dale was on the couch. Still. His eyes on her as she moved toward the stairs — that sleepy, certain gaze — the hunger banked to something calmer, the look of a man who'd confirmed what he wanted and could afford patience.

"See you Saturday," he said. Flat.

She didn't respond. Went up the stairs. Vince behind her. The living room — the poker table, the bottles, the stain on the carpet. A house. Not the place where she'd just been naked and touched and wet and had a man's cock in her mouth and his cum on her face and —

Vince walked her to the front door. His hand on the small of her back — the same spot Tyler touched. The same pressure.

"Tyler doesn't need to hear about the photo stuff," Vince said. Quiet. His face close to hers in the porch light. "We keep the poker and the photos separate. His thing and our thing."

Our thing. Two people sharing a secret.

"Did you actually tell Tyler?" she asked. "About the photos. Before he left."

Vince's face didn't change. "I told him if you wanted to, I'd take care of it. He said your call."

"Saturday," Vince said. The next appointment.

She left without answering. The screen door banging behind her.

The walk home. Three houses. The night air cold on her bare legs, cold through the black dress on nipples still tender from Dale's mouth, the fabric dragging across them with every fast step — a private filthy friction on a public sidewalk. Her heels loud. Faster than she'd come. Nothing underneath the dress but skin and the wetness she hadn't finished. The smell of Vince's house in her hair, on her skin, between her legs. Cigar smoke and cologne and the musk of Dale's skin where his mouth had been and between her thighs the drying evidence of what she'd done. She was three doors of ordinary night away from a basement where men had photographed her tits and put a cock in her mouth, and the dress still made her look like she was coming home from somewhere nicer.

Inside the duplex. Lock. Deadbolt. Chain. The dark house quiet and Tyler's boots still gone.

She went to the bathroom. Turned the shower hot. Stood under it.

The water hit her shoulders and ran down. She watched it track her breasts — over the nipples that were still hard, still aching from Dale's mouth, the skin around them red and raw from his stubble, the pale heavy flesh that had been in his hands and in the clamp light and in every lens in the room. She cupped one under the spray without meaning to, felt the weight, felt the tenderness, and the touch almost put her on her knees in the tub. The water washed the spit off first. Then the streaks she'd missed with the blanket — behind her ear, at her hairline, a dried line along her jaw — the last traces of his cum dissolving off the face that was supposed to be the careful one. She could still

taste him. She brushed her teeth twice and the taste survived the toothpaste — the musk, the salt, the bitter trace on the back of her tongue that wouldn't rinse clean.

She soaped between her legs and her hand slowed. The heat of the water and the slickness of the soap and the swelling that hadn't gone down — she was still aroused. Still throbbing. The shower's pressure was doing something to her clit that she could have turned into something else with two minutes and the right angle and she wanted to. She wanted to lean against the tile and close her eyes and let herself finish what Dale's mouth and Wicks's finger had started.

She pulled her hand away. Turned the water cold. Stood in it until the ache dulled into something she could carry to bed.

She toweled off. Got into bed in nothing because everything she owned felt like a costume.

The dark. Tyler's side cold. His pillow still holding Friday morning's dent.

She lay still for ten minutes. Then she got up. Opened her clutch. Counted the bills. Twenty-five hundred dollars. She separated twelve hundred — the number she could explain, the number that sounded like tips and a poker game where the men lost because they were drunk and she was pretty. Twelve hundred was what Tyler expected. Twelve hundred was the lie's price tag.

She put the twelve hundred on the dresser. The remaining thirteen hundred she folded into a tight square and zipped into the inner pocket of her gym bag in the closet. The zipper closed with a sound like a door locking.

She got back into bed. Didn't sleep.

Sunday. Tyler's truck in the driveway at four. The engine cutting. The door slamming. His boots on the step, his key in the lock. He came in smelling like sawdust and sweat and road coffee. Sunburned on the back of his neck. The eight hundred in his pocket.

"How was the game?" he asked. Casual. Already reaching for a beer.

"Fine." She was at the counter, wiping something that was already clean. "Same as always."

The lie. Her first direct falsehood in the history of them. She looked at him and said words that weren't true and let them sit between them like a piece of furniture.

He accepted it. Cracked the beer. "Who won?"

"They all lost. Vince ran the table most of the night." She paused. Made herself look at him. "Wicks kept trying to get me to sit on his lap. I told him to earn it."

Tyler smiled. The easy smile. "That's my girl. Tips?"

"Twelve hundred. Between tips and the poker."

"Jesus." The smile wider. "That's what I'm talking about." He pulled the eight hundred from his pocket. "Two grand this weekend. We're gonna be okay, Megan. We're actually gonna be okay."

She let him kiss her. His hand on her hip — casual, possessive — and she held herself still against the flinch. The same hip. Dale's hand. The size difference.

"Just tired," she said. Stepped back.

"Did Vince behave?"

"Vince was fine. He ran the game. Professional."

"And Dale?"

She held his eyes. The truth pressed against her teeth and she swallowed it. "Dale was Dale. Big. Quiet. Tipped well."

Tyler nodded. Satisfied. He didn't ask what Dale's tips looked like, or what favors he'd taken, or how close his hands had gotten. He took the answers at face value — Megan said fine, so it was fine. She handled things. She always handled things.

Sunday night. In bed. Tyler's arm across her waist, his face close to hers on the pillow, the light off.

She'd been quiet all evening. He'd noticed, and the noticing sat in him alongside everything else — the relief that she was home, the eight hundred in his pocket, the sense that something about her weekend was slightly off-center but nothing he could put a finger on. He rubbed his thumb across her hip bone under the covers.

"Was it weird?" he asked. "Without me there?"

"A little."

"Weird how?"

She didn't want to tell him anything. She wanted to turn onto her side and go to sleep and let the silence hold. But the silence was dangerous — Vince could say anything to Tyler next week, could frame the night however he wanted, and if Tyler heard a version from Vince first, the version from Megan would be the lie. She had to give him something. Had to build the wall before someone else knocked it down.

"Dale won a favor," she said. Her voice low, and the lowness wasn't performance — it was the sound of words being dragged up through a throat that didn't want them. "The same thing as last time. Lap sitting."

She paused. Her stomach clenched. Saying it brought the room back — the cigarette smoke, the weight of Dale's thighs under hers, the cock pressed against her. She swallowed.

"His hands were higher than before. On my thighs. Under the skirt a little."

Tyler's thumb stopped on her hip.

"He's... big," she said. The word came out wrong — too small for the memory, and the memory was pulling other memories with it, the ones from the basement, the ones she couldn't say. She could feel the heat rising between her own legs and the heat horrified her because she was lying next to her husband and the telling was doing this to her. "I could feel him. Under me. Through his jeans."

Tyler's breathing had changed. She could feel his cock growing against her hip. He was aroused and the arousal disgusted him — she could feel that too, the tension in his

arm, the way his thumb had stopped moving. He wanted to hear more and he hated that he wanted to hear more and she could feel both things pressing against her hip.

“Did you say anything?” His voice rough. Rougher than he meant it to be.

“I told him that was enough. He let me up.” She stalled. Gripped the sheet. The next sentence came out cracked: “His hands were shaking.”

“His hands?”

“Like he couldn’t —” Her voice broke. She heard herself and the break was real — the telling was dragging the basement up through her, not the sanitized version but the whole night, Dale’s mouth and the taste and the cum, and her pussy was wet and her eyes were stinging and she was telling her husband about a lap-sit while the truth screamed underneath it.

“Like he wanted more than what he got,” she finished. Barely a whisper.

Tyler was hard against her hip. He was hard and the hardness made him sick — she could feel the fight in his body, the rigid muscles, the way he was holding himself still as if stillness could undo what he was feeling. He wanted to ask her to stop. He wanted to ask her to keep going. He asked: “And did you? Move them?”

She reached down. Found him through his boxers. Wrapped her fingers around the shaft. Not deliberate — desperate. Desperate to end the telling, desperate to give him something physical that would stop the words, desperate because her own arousal was choking her and she needed it to be about Tyler, needed it to be this bed and this man and not the other one.

She stroked him. Her hand shaking. Tyler groaned — a sound that was half want and half something he’d spend the next week trying to bury. His hips pressed into her hand. She felt the pulse under her palm and she thought about Dale’s pulse under her palm and the thought made her grip tighten and Tyler’s breath stuttered against her neck.

He came. Fast. Pulsing into her hand, his hips jerking, a groan muffled against her shoulder that sounded like it hurt on the way out.

She held him until it was over. Wiped her hand on the sheet. Lay in the dark with the basement still alive in her and the telling still echoing and the wet heat between her legs that belonged to a man who wasn’t in this bed.

She’d given him the lap-sit version. The sanitized one. One step past what he’d seen at Game 2 — the hands, the thighs, the cock through denim. She’d told him nothing about the basement. Nothing about the photos or the nudity or the kiss. Nothing about Dale’s cock in her mouth or the cum on her face or Wicks’s finger inside her. The version she’d given him was the moat around the truth, and Tyler’s orgasm was the drawbridge closing.

Monday morning. Tyler left for work. Megan cleaned the kitchen. Did laundry. Tried to work on a pitch deck for a landscaping company.

Tyler came home that evening and set his duffel on the closet floor and the duffel bumped the gym bag and the gym bag tipped sideways, the zipper pocket half-open. She

heard the thump from the kitchen. Came down the hall.

Tyler was picking up the gym bag. Straightening it. The zipper pocket gaped — the fold of cash visible inside, the edge of a hundred-dollar bill.

“Your bag fell,” he said. Holding it by the strap.

“Oh.” She crossed the room. Took it from him. Zipped the pocket shut with her fingers steady and her face calm. “I keep cash in there. For the gym. Water, snacks.” She hung the bag back in the closet. “You know me.”

He smiled. “Cash-only Megan.”

He walked back to the kitchen. She stood in the closet doorway for three seconds with the blood gone from her face. Then she went to the bathroom and closed the door and sat on the edge of the tub and her hands shook against her knees for a full minute.

Thirteen hundred dollars in a gym bag in the closet. The distance between the life she was showing Tyler and the life she was living measured in a zipper pocket.

She didn’t tell him about the basement.

She thought about it. Tuesday night, lying next to him, she mapped what telling would look like: the words, his face, the silence after. The marriage dissolving in the space between one sentence and the next. *Dale’s cock was in my mouth. I put it there. His cum was on my face. Wicks had his finger inside me. They photographed everything. I was wet the entire time.* She imagined Tyler hearing it. The face he’d make. The sound he’d make. The questions that would come after — not about the men but about her. *Did you want it?* And the answer she’d have to give. The answer that was the reason she couldn’t tell him.

Not telling let her keep the version of herself that Tyler loved. The composed one. The sharp one. The woman who handled rooms and took men’s money and came home intact. Telling would replace that woman with the one in Vince’s photos — the one on all fours, the one with spit on her chin, the one who arched into Dale’s mouth and moaned.

She chose the version Tyler loved. She kept choosing it, meal by meal, night by night, and every time she chose it the choosing got lighter.

Never again. She said it to herself Wednesday morning, standing at the kitchen sink. *That was the last time. I’m done.* She meant it. She meant it while her hands were in the dishwater and the sun was coming through the kitchen window and the ordinary world was ordinary and the basement was two days and three houses away. She meant it the way you mean it at noon.

But the ordinary week pressed against her. The dental pitches. The Visa minimum. Tyler’s optimism and his hands on her hips that were too light and too narrow. The apartment quiet in a way that felt like a lid closing. And underneath the quiet, the basement kept replaying — Dale’s mouth, the weight of his cock on her tongue, the stretch, the taste.

Thursday at dinner. Tyler forking chicken. “Vince says the cabin owner wants another weekend. Same money.” He chewed. “Also says the game cut’s coming — he’ll settle up next time I’m at the table. You good for Saturday?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m good.”

The lie came easy now. She watched herself say it — watched the word leave her mouth and land between them and do nothing, cause nothing, change nothing — and the ease horrified her more than the lie itself.

Thursday night. Tyler asleep. His breathing deep and even, his arm warm across her waist.

She lay in the dark and the fantasy built itself.

In the fantasy, she doesn’t say “last call.” Dale’s hand tightens in her hair and he pushes deeper — past the gag, past the reflex, his cock sliding over her tongue and into her throat. She takes it. The sound is wet and obscene and his hips rock and she can feel the pulse of him against her tongue, can taste the salt and the musk, can hear Wicks behind her saying something filthy she can’t make out. Wicks’s finger inside her — one, then two, his bony knuckles pressing against her entrance, his free hand on her hip pulling her back onto his hand while Dale holds her head in place.

In the fantasy her tits hang under her the whole time — heavy, swinging with every thrust of Dale’s hips into her mouth — and his free hand finds one and squeezes like he’s confirming the claim while he uses her face. She can see herself from outside: the pretty mouth stretched, the blue eyes watering, the body that stopped rooms reduced to what it’s for.

Her fingers found her clit under the covers. Already wet. Already swollen. She pressed her thighs apart and circled — fast, tight. Tyler’s arm across her waist. His breathing steady on her shoulder.

In the fantasy, Dale comes. In her mouth. His cock deep and pulsing and the taste of him flooding her and she swallows because there’s nowhere else and the swallowing is the crossing of the last line, the one thing she’s never done for anyone. His hand holds her hair while she swallows and his voice says *swallow it* and the words make her clench around Wicks’s fingers.

And then — shameful, horrifying, unstoppable — the fantasy turns. Wicks pulls his fingers free and replaces them with his cock and the head stretches her open and she pushes back against him. And Vince is there — she can feel his thickness against her cheek, smell the cigarettes and the grease, and she turns her head and takes him in her mouth while Wicks fucks her from behind and the taste of Vince is different from Dale, more bitter, the foreskin sliding on her tongue, and she is being used by three men in a basement and the cameras are rolling and she is making sounds that would make Tyler divorce her if he heard them.

She came. Hard. Her teeth clenched, her stomach rigid, her toes curling under the covers. The orgasm rolled through her in tight, silent waves — clenching and releasing

in rhythmic spasms, every muscle seizing. She didn't breathe until it was over. Tyler's arm didn't shift.

She pulled her hand away. Wiped it on the inside of her thigh. Lay perfectly still with her husband's arm across her waist.

The fantasy had gone further than the night did. It had reached toward Wicks — toward Wicks, the man she could barely stand, the bad teeth and the menthol breath and the jittery hands — and the reaching had made her come harder. She'd wanted him too. All of them. In the dark, next to her sleeping husband, she'd wanted all three, and the wanting was still warm between her legs while the shame spread cold through her chest.

Saturday was coming. The text from Vince was on her phone — *Saturday. Same deal. The guys are in.* — and she hadn't deleted it and she hadn't responded and she hadn't said no.

The basement smelled like sex and cigarettes.

Vince sat in the folding chair with the camera in his lap, scrolling through the memory card. The clamp lights were off. Just the LCD's glow against his face, the white backdrop sheet hanging limp behind him.

He went slow. The dressed set first — Megan in the black dress, the warm light, the poise on her face that still read as armor. Pretty. Professional. And under the poise, the real product already shipping: her tits in that neckline, held up and lit like the camera knew what it was for. The kind of shot that could hang on a wall in another house in another life. The kind of shot that made him hard in this one.

He scrolled. The bikini. White strings on pale skin. Her tits straining the triangles, the nipples pressing through, the bare mound visible through thin cotton. He could see the exact frame where her guard started to slip — the slight loosening around her mouth, the way her shoulders dropped a quarter-inch. She was starting to let go and the camera caught it.

The all-fours set. Her back arched, her ass raised, the thong string framing everything the cotton failed to hide. The wet strip between her legs — transparent, clinging, the pink of her visible through it. He zoomed in on one frame and the image filled the screen: her pussy, wet, swollen through thin white fabric, the dark crease of her slit. The smell was still in the room.

Topless. The triangles falling. Her bare tits in the clamp light — the size, the shape, the nipples tightening. The progression on her face: from refusal to negotiation to the moment she pulled the string and something in her eyes opened. Wicks was in the background of one shot, his mouth hanging open. Dale in another, leaning forward, tongue against his lower lip.

His cock was hard. He unzipped. Gripped himself. Not rushing. The images deserved patience.

The touching set. Dale's dark mouth on her nipple, her back arching, her fingers in his grey hair. The kiss — her face tilted up, Dale's hand in her hair, her mouth open. He could see her tongue. Could see the exact second she kissed back.

Nude. He scrolled slowly through these. The full inventory — her bare mound, the pink slit, the wetness on her thighs. Standing, turning, her ass toward the camera. The legs apart shot — her pussy open, swollen, glistening. He stroked and thought about how she'd smelled when the bottoms came off. How the scent had cut through everything.

The last set. On her hands and knees. Dale's cock out, her face six inches from it, her pale hand wrapped around dark flesh. Then — her mouth opening. The head disappearing between her lips. Her cheeks hollowing. The spit. The frame where Dale pushed deep and her eyes watered and the last of her cracked open.

And the money shot. Her face. The cum. Her blue eyes wide through lashes streaked with it.

He came looking at that one. Thick, pulsing into his hand. He sat with it for a moment — the spent warmth, the slow pulse fading.

He cleaned up with the rag from the workbench. Lit a Marlboro and the Zippo's wheel caught on the first try. Looked at the LCD one more time. The cum shot. Her face. The pale blue eyes that had looked through him for six months like he was furniture.

She'd be back Saturday. She'd wear the dress and walk three houses and knock on his door and the shame would sit on her shoulders like a coat she couldn't take off. The shame would keep her quiet. And the quiet would keep the game going.

Next Saturday: his hands. Longer. Lower. The photography pretense dissolved further. Dale's cock in her mouth again — he'd bet on it. She'd last maybe ten minutes before she opened up. And when she did, Vince would be there. Patient. Waiting. The architect's turn was coming. He could taste it.

He turned off the camera. Took the cigarette from his mouth, looked at the coal. Put it back.

The machine worked. Better than he'd planned. Better than he'd dared imagine, sitting in this chair six months ago, watching her jog past in a sports bra with those blue eyes pointed straight ahead like he was invisible.

She'd look at him next Saturday. She'd know what his hands felt like on her bare skin. And that was the leash he kept himself on — hands only. Dale got the mouth. Dale got his cock down her throat. Vince let him. Let Dale break through the door so Vince could walk in after, when she was already open, already past the point where stopping made sense. His turn would come. And when it did, he wouldn't be sharing.

He looked at the camera one more time. Her face — blue eyes, cum-lashed, the pretty ruined just enough. The open mouth. And in the frame below, out of focus but unmistakable: the pale heavy hang of her bare tits, still in the shot, still the reason he'd built the room.

Next Saturday.

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