Chapter 5: Last Call

Sunday morning the blue lace was in the bathroom wastebasket under a wad of tissue, a twist of pale blue gone dark and stiff at the cups. Tyler left it there. He ran the cold tap and scrubbed the front of his jeans with hand soap until the stiff patch went soft, and the scabs on two of his knuckles opened and pinked the water.

He knew what had stiffened it. Wicks had come across her face and breasts, and it had run off her nipple into the lace while she sat full of Dale and Vince, looking straight at Tyler, and she hadn't wiped it off. His cock stirred against the wet denim at the sink. He shut the tap off hard.

She kept out of his way all day. When he came into the kitchen she was leaving it with a mug, in his faded UConn shirt and cotton shorts, braless the way she always was at home. His eyes went where they always went, to the heavy sway of her under the thin cotton, and today he knew whose hands had held them up for the room. He got hard anyway. She lowered herself onto a kitchen chair the way you'd sit on a bruise. Once she reached for the fan switch, stopped halfway, and let a breath out through her nose. He thought he knew which one of them she was feeling. He'd been a foot away for all of it. There were faint pink lines around her wrists where her own stockings had cinched, and when she caught him looking she turned her hands over in her lap.

He took the couch with a ballgame on mute. Monday the cabin owner would call the prosecutor, and the paper in the bottom desk drawer would stop being a felony. Vince had

promised that in the cab of the Ram. Tyler had paid his half last night at Vince's poker table, in the same chair he'd won his first pots from.

By evening the house was quiet enough to hear the refrigerator cycle. Two things kept knocking together in his head.

Thursday, the county holding cell. A regular with a drinker's nose, talking to pass the time. *Last winter. Guys like him remember.*

Last night, Wicks standing over her with his mouth running, and somewhere in the stream: *since winter. Since winter.* Then Vince, flat, from underneath her: *Wicks.* Tyler had heard it and let it go. He'd been watching her face.

He picked at the scab on his index knuckle. At the gas pumps on Route 9, Vince had pitched him with a story about a regular named Eddie who'd moved to Bridgeport. Tyler had asked *Why me?* and been pleased with himself for asking. The answer had come back fast. He kept thinking about how fast.

The man in the cell had said winter too. A neighbor on Vince's street had picked up the phone. Who on Ridley would call the cops on Vince Barella? Tyler never had. If Megan had, she'd have told him.

Except that in January he'd been gone four days, Matt's bachelor weekend in Vermont, home on the Tuesday.

His feet came off the coffee table.

She was at the sink, rinsing a glass that was already clean. She heard him in the doorway and her back straightened. "I'll be out of your way in a minute."

"Last winter," he said. "In January, when I was up in Vermont for Matt's thing." Her hand stopped under the tap. "Did you call the cops on Vince's house?"

She shut the water off and turned with the glass dripping in her hand, brow pulled together. "What? No. Why on earth would I call the police on—"

"For noise. Late. One in the morning, maybe. A weeknight."

She started to say no again, then looked past him toward the bedroom, toward the wall that faced the street.

He watched it come back to her. The color left her face from the forehead down, and the freckles across her nose stood out like somebody had flicked them there.

"Oh my God," she said.

"You did."

"You were driving home the next day." She set the glass down without looking at it. "The bass was coming through the bedroom wall. I could feel it in the headboard. I called the non-emergency number. An officer came to the door and asked which house, and I pointed down the street and went back to bed. Thirty seconds. I'd forgotten it by Thursday, Tyler. I swear to God."

"He didn't."

She looked up. "How do you know about this? I never told anybody."

He brought both sheets from the bottom desk drawer and laid them side by side on the kitchen table under the light. The pink one was the debt notice he'd hidden since before the first game. The white one had his name on it in a government font.

She came to the table slowly and read the pink one first because it was closer. He watched her find the total. Her lips parted and stayed that way.

"We'll come back to that," she said.

Then she read the white one.

"This is a court date." She touched it with one finger, as if it might be hot. "'Larceny.' Tyler. This is dated Thursday."

"The transmission I told you about. The shop in Millbridge." He made himself say it plainly. "There's no transmission. The truck's in the county impound lot."

"Why is your truck in impound?"

"Because it was hooked to a trailer full of copper when the deputies came up the track. The wire I put in that cabin. Vince had set it up."

She sat down.

"You were in jail?" she asked.

"Yeah — there was a guy in the cell with me," he said. "He did ninety days with Vince last winter. Because a neighbor called about a party. One in the morning, on a weeknight."

She'd said those words herself four minutes ago. He watched her hear them come back.

"Vince was on parole. The noise call got them in the door, and they found his father's shotgun in a closet. He lost ninety days and his truck." Tyler held her eyes. "The guy said Vince knew exactly who made the call."

Megan turned toward the street side of the house. "Go on," she said, without turning back. "Why were you stealing the wire out of your own job?"

"I didn't catch my hand on a box." He held it up. "Last Sunday night, when I told you I was going out to clear my head. I walked to Vince's at one in the morning. He opened the door like he'd been waiting up and said, 'Took you a while.' And I hit him in the mouth."

She looked at the knuckles, then at him. "You hit him."

"Once. It landed."

"Good," she said, very quietly. "And then?"

"He put me on his carpet. Then he showed me a photo on his phone. He took it from inside the basement. That Saturday. I'm in it. Up in the window over the couch, in the dirty glass. With my hand down my jeans."

Megan went still.

"He saw you," she said.

"He said he could've waved."

She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and kept them there.

"That's what the copper was for. He'd delete the photo if I stripped the cabin one night."

She stared at him. "A felony," she said. "For one picture."

"For that picture."

"You told me you set it up." Her voice had gone very even. "Thursday night. At this table. You told me to look it up."

"He gave me that. Every word. He needed you to believe it was my idea." Tyler swallowed.

"And the price was—" She stopped. Her eyes dropped to her own wrists, to the faint pink bands, and her hands went into her lap to hide them. "Me. On that table. With you in the chair."

"There's one more thing," he said, and the worst of it came up his throat. "On the carpet I asked him why you were even there that night. No game. Me supposedly at the cabin." He wanted to look anywhere else and didn't. "He said you came to him. A Thursday afternoon. You asked for one more night down there, and you didn't want me to know."

Her face did nothing at all.

"And you believed him," she said.

"I'd just watched you through the glass. I heard you offer to—" He stopped. She'd been there. "Yeah. I believed him."

She stood up so fast the chair legs barked on the linoleum.

"He came to *me*." Her voice cracked high on it. "Thursday. He stood on our step, right out there, while you were at work." She was breathing hard. "I'd texted him the Friday before. *I'm done*."

"You texted him."

"I meant it. Not just the bar. All of it." Her arms crossed over her chest and held on. "Wednesday I went running on the creek path, and he was sitting on the bench on the stretch with no houses."

"Vince."

"He got up and walked over like a concerned neighbor. He said the guys were furious I'd quit. He reminded me they had photos of me on their phones. That Wicks had video."

Tyler's grip found the back of the chair. "Video."

"He said, 'They did time, you know that.'" Her voice dropped on it, as though someone outside the window might hear. "He said they knew where I lived and when I ran. That he was the only thing keeping them off me."

Tyler saw her alone on that stretch of path with no houses, out of breath, and Vince getting up off the bench. His grip on the chair went hard. "He said that to you out there."

"Out there. Where nobody would hear me."

"I didn't finish the run," she said. Then, backing up: "Before that, the Sunday, Wicks's car was parked across from Vince's with the engine off. He never once looked at me. Monday there

was a Marlboro on our step. Vince's brand. I picked it up with a paper towel."

"Thursday he was on our step with a way out. One more night. Lap dances, a strip tease, look but mostly don't touch. No cameras. I'd walk out with the memory cards, he'd wipe the phones, and I'd never see any of them again." Her chin was shaking and she lifted it anyway. "Once I was down there, every time they went past what he'd promised, I couldn't leave. If I left early I'd have done all of it for nothing, and they'd still have everything."

He came around the table toward her, and she put a hand up. "Not yet."

"And this Wednesday Wicks was back out there, lifting two fingers off the wheel at me." Her mouth went thin. "Thursday I told you I needed to tell you about Saturday, all of it, and you said 'I know.'" Her voice dropped to almost nothing. "I thought you meant everything. The car. The path. I thought maybe that was part of what you wanted."

"Jesus, Meg. No."

"I know that now." She scrubbed at her face with the heel of her hand, hard, as if she were angry at it.

He stepped in close, and this time she let him. Under the drugstore soap she'd scrubbed with all day, her hair still held a stale note of Dale's cigar. He put his hand on her arm and she let it stay there for three seconds.

Then her eyes went to the dark window over the sink and narrowed, and she stepped back to get the whole of him in view.

"Wait," she said. "The window. Vince didn't have anything on you that night. There was no photo yet. There was no copper. Nobody made you get down in that hole."

"Friday, on the back step, you told me you came twice out there. In the dirt, watching them." Every consonant came out clean. "Was that in his script, too?"

"No."

"And last night." Her color was coming back, high and hot. "Fine. He made you sit in the chair. He had the charge. Did he make you stay hard for two hours? Did he make you come in your jeans while they laughed at you?"

"No." It came out of him torn. "He didn't make me do any of that."

"Then what—"

"I wanted to kick the door in." He heard himself getting loud. "That night. I went around front and tried the knob."

"And?"

"It was locked. I stood there." His hands were shaking on the chair back. "And then I went back to the window. Nobody made me. I went *back*, Meg." He couldn't stop now. "And last night. Your rule. If I stand up, you stop. You looked at me over the table with Vince in your mouth, and I sat there thinking, if he tore up the picture right now, and the charge with it, would I stand? And I didn't know."

He made himself say the rest of it, lower.

"You wouldn't have stopped either. At the end. After they laughed at me, you started riding them. Nobody told you to. All night you'd been checking my face, and after that you were still looking at me, but you weren't doing it for me."

Her face went dark red from the neck of the t-shirt up. For a second he thought she'd slap him. Her mouth pressed into a thin line instead.

"No," she said. "It wasn't for you."

She looked past him at the window over the sink, at her own reflection in it.

"Did he even give the SD cards back?" Tyler said.

"He gave them back. They're in my nightstand, under the chargers." She said the next part to the glass. "I put them in the laptop on Tuesday to make sure they were real. They were. I went through every one, on our bed." Her voice went small and precise, the way it went when she was reading a contract aloud. "The last one is my face. Right after Dale. Hes on my cheek and my mouth and in my eyelashes, and my eyes are open, and I look—" She stopped. Started again. "I look like I want more of it. I made myself come looking at that one, Tyler. On our bed."

Turn around, he told himself. Get a glass of water. He didn't. His cock was already pushing hard against his zipper, fast enough to ache, and the shame came up his neck right behind it. He didn't move to hide it.

She turned from the window, and her gaze dropped straight to it.

"You're hard," she said.

"Yes."

She looked at it for a long moment. Under the shorts her thighs pressed together, one quick squeeze, and she saw him notice. Her nipples had come up stiff under the thin shirt and she didn't cross her arms over them.

"I keep feeling it too," she said. "Dale's chair. When he let go of my hips and I had to do the rest myself."

Neither of them moved toward the other. Dale's cigar was still in her hair. She was sore, and she stood like it, and the court paper was still lying on the table between them. The box fan ticked in the other room.

"He said something on our step," she said. "That Thursday. 'They paid for you.' Like that was why they were so angry." Her voice went flat. "I thought he meant the pictures. The basement." She looked down at the table. "They lost to you every week, Tyler. Men who've played cards their whole lives. And they kept coming back."

He'd counted that money at this table like he'd earned it.

"So they weren't losing," he said. "They were paying. My cut came out of what they paid for you."

She went very still. Then, in the voice she used to check a bill: "Eleven hundred the first night. Fifteen-forty the second."

Megan looked down at her own clean nails on the table and turned her hands over once, as if checking what they were worth.

"So that's the going rate," she said. Her voice didn't crack. Her hands lay on the wood and didn't move.

"I don't know," he said.

He was seeing last night again, Dale's hips locked tight between her thighs. *That's mine. All of it. You'll be walking it home tonight.* And her voice under it, aimed at Tyler: *I want them to come in me. Both of them. I want you to sit there and watch them fill me up.* Wicks with his face slick and his mouth running: *what if she's pregnant, a girl takes it like that, no rubber, that's a wife.* And the Saturday before, through the crack in the basement window, the same mouth: *what if I got her pregnant, I'd marry her.*

His stomach rolled over.

"Did you take anything?" he said.

"What?"

"After the basement. After last night. Did you take anything?"

"No." It came too fast. Her eyes went to the dental group's freebie calendar on the side of the refrigerator and came back to him.

"Okay." He was already reaching for her car keys on the counter. "For last night there's still time. There's a pill. The CVS on Route 9 is open till—"

"It's the wrong time of the month." Crisp, the voice she used to send back a wrong order. "I'd know."

"You can't be sure. And if it's too late for the pill, there are places that—"

"Stop."

He stopped with the keys in his hand.

Her spine had come up off the chair back. Her knees were pressed together, her chin level, her mouth gone small and prim the way it went at a dirty joke.

"Don't finish that sentence," she said. "I won't do that."

He put the keys down.

After a while she went down the hall to the front room, and he followed her. They left the lamp off. She stood at the edge of the curtain and he stood behind her, and in the dark the glass only worked one way. They could see out. Nobody across the street could see in.

Three doors down and across, Vince's garage door was up a foot, with a line of yellow light under it.

"He's been sitting in there for months," Megan said. "Watching me carry the groceries in. Get the mail. Run."

"You didn't know."

"He did." Her voice had gone level again, with an edge on it he'd never heard. "Every single morning, he knew. And then he sold me to his friends, and he walked you into it at a gas pump so you'd hold the door."

Last night the man in there had laughed with his gut against Megan's back while Tyler sat wet in his jeans. Thursday, in the cab of the Ram, he'd offered to look in on her. *I'm a good neighbor.*

His knuckles had started to throb. He was squeezing his fist hard enough to split them again.

Megan didn't pull the curtain. She stood with her arms crossed and stared at that line of light as if she could burn through the door.

Behind them, on the cable box under the muted television, the clock went from 11:59 to 12:00.

The next day, Tyler called in sick to Kelly Electrical and sat with his phone face-up, waiting for Vince to say *something*.

Megan sat across from him, stuck on one page of a client brochure since nine. She had on one of his old gray work tees with nothing under it, knotted over her hip bone. Her nipples stood out against the worn cotton every time she reached for her water. His cock stirred, and right behind it came the plain fact: three men had had what was under that shirt, and one of them had it on his phone across the street. She didn't tug the shirt straight or look up. He couldn't tell if she was daring him or past caring.

At noon she stood at the front window with her arms folded. Across Ridley and three doors down, Vince's Ram sat in the driveway with its rotted muffler hanging an inch off the pavement. The garage door was shut at noon, which it never was.

"Come away from there," he said.

"He's seen me in a great deal less." She didn't turn around.

At two-fourteen the phone buzzed against the wood.

talked to my guy. hes still sore about his panel. needs more convincing. charge stays open for now

A second one came while he held it.

guys want saturday again

Megan read it over his shoulder, her hair against his cheek. Two washes since Saturday and it still held a stale thread of Dale's cigar. He felt her breath stop.

"Again," she said. "There's no owner who needs convincing." She straightened up. "There's Vince, and every Monday he'll need a little more."

"Till the arraignment."

"Then we go to the police."

"And tell them what?"

"All of it." She flung a hand at the window.

"I'm on bond, Meg. The desk sergeant types my name and gets a guy caught with a trailer full of copper who says his neighbor made him do it." He held up the phone. "Show me where he says copper."

She looked at it. *needs more convincing.* A man could text that about a used car.

"Then I'll tell them," she said. "About Saturday. What they did."

"You walked over there."

Her mouth closed.

"Twice. He's got you on his table asking them to finish in you." He hated himself for it. "Nobody at that desk sees a woman who didn't want to be there."

The red came up from the neck of the tee to her hairline. She sat down hard in the chair beside his and put both hands over her face.

"So this is it," she said through her fingers. "Every Saturday. Until you go to prison anyway."

He'd been seeing Saturday since the phone buzzed. Dale behind her with one big hand spread between her shoulder blades, pinning her flat so her breasts mashed out to the sides on the felt. Dale's hips working slow and heavy, all the way in, and the table legs walking a half inch across Vince's carpet with every stroke. Her whimper going high and breaking into the felt. Vince with his phone up, close.

And Wicks hunched at the table's end, nasal and fast. *She's going cross-eyed on it, Vince, get that, get her mouth.* Her eyes finding Tyler over the table edge, the way they'd found him every time. Tyler in the chair with his hands on the armrests. His cock swelled against his zipper at his own kitchen table, with her beside him. He shoved it away. In it he never got up. He sat in that chair every Saturday until the leaves came down, and she stopped looking for him.

By six the kitchen light had gone orange. She'd made eggs, the only thing either of them could face.

"How's your stomach," she said.

"Touch and go."

"Eat your eggs. You'll get your strength back." The corner of her mouth moved. His did too, almost, and then it didn't.

Through the front window Vince was out on his step in an undershirt, cupping a Zippo to a Red. What Tyler heard was the man in the cell, his tag line said up to the bunk like a moral.

"'You don't keep a gun in the house when you're on paper,'" he said.

Tyler set his fork down. "The guy in the cell. 'That's the one thing. That's the only thing.' He thought it was hilarious."

"He's still on paper," she said slowly. "He'd never keep one now."

"No."

Her eyes stopped moving. Her hand went flat beside her plate.

"Somebody would have to put it there," she said. "We buy one. People buy guns."

"I'm on felony bond. And anything with your name on it leads straight back to this house."

"Then we get one from somebody. Not a store."

"From who?" It came out sharp. She was the one with the ideas, and every one of them was making it worse. "Who do we know, Meg? Bobby, who wires panels backwards? The woman from your old agency who sends us Christmas cards? Every criminal we know lives on this street."

She flinched like he'd raised his hand.

Her eyes went past him to the curb across from Vince's, where Wicks's gray Civic had sat the Sunday after she quit, engine off, sixty feet from their door. Till last night he hadn't known about it. The curb looked closer now.

"Wicks," she said.

Tyler went still with his hand on the fork. "No."

"He's done time." Her voice went thin on it. "He'd know where to get one."

"And he'd do it for me." Her fingers came up to her mouth as she said it, as if she could taste menthol. She took them away. "He's been wanting me since winter. You told me so. You heard him."

He had. And the Saturday before last he'd heard him through the basement window, his forehead on the dirty glass. Megan on her hands and knees on Vince's couch, Dale's fist in her hair, her mouth full of him. Wicks behind her with his skinny hips slapping her ass. Then her back bowing all the way down, and a long high whimper muffled around Dale that broke in the middle. Tyler had never once gotten that sound out of her in eight years. And Wicks crowing over it like he'd won a truck on a scratch ticket. *You came on me. You came on me, sweetheart.*

"Because you came on him," Tyler said.

Her chin came up.

"Yes," she said. "And because he talked about taking me on dates while he was still—" She stopped. Her mouth went small. She was tearing strips off the edge of her napkin. "He wants me to be his *girlfriend*, Tyler." Her lip curled on the word like it smelled. "Dale moves him like furniture. Vince says his name like he's a dog on the couch." The napkin went to confetti in her lap.

"And you're going to let him have you."

She didn't look away. "I'm going to let him think so."

"You'd have to go to him."

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Vince and Dale can't know. Who else were you thinking of bringing?"

"Me."

"You?" Her voice went up and cracked. "You want to come along and sit in on it? Should I ask him if he has a chair?"

He looked down at his own hands on the oak, the hands that had held the armrests. Her face changed. She reached across the table and put her hand on his wrist, over the scabbed knuckles, and left it there.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was—I'm sorry."

"It was fair."

"It wasn't."

She kept her hand on his wrist. When she spoke again her voice had gone quiet and practical, the voice she used for a grocery list.

"He won't hand me a gun for a conversation. I know what he'll want." She made herself look at him. "I'll suck his cock. You've seen him. He won't last a minute. I go to his place, I get on my knees, and I come home with a promise."

Tyler saw it before she stopped talking. Some kitchen he'd never been in, dishes in the sink. Megan on her knees on cracked linoleum, holding her own hair back. Wicks slumped against the counter with his jeans around his thighs and his nicotine-yellow fingers on her jaw, steering her. That swollen head he'd seen in Vince's basement stretching her lips wide, sliding heavy across her tongue. Wicks talking to the ceiling the whole time, *oh Jesus, sweetheart, oh Jesus, oh Jesus.* Over in a minute. She'd spit in his sink and rinse her mouth from his tap and walk out with the promise. Tyler held on to how fast it was over. That part let him breathe.

"Say he does it," he said. "Say he gets you one. Then what? Where does it go?"

"A closet. In Vince's house."

"And then somebody has to find it."

"Somebody calls about the noise." She said it evenly. "One in the morning. A neighbor who can't sleep." She held his eyes. "It worked once."

It sat there between their plates. Tyler looked at her and, for the first time in eight years, couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"And what do you tell Wicks it's for?" he said.

"I'll think of something."

"He's not stupid."

"He's not stupid about everything." She let go of his wrist. "He's stupid about me."

The bedroom was hot. She lay on her side facing the wall, the sheet down around her hips, the gray tee rucked up her back. Somewhere across the street, on Vince's phone, was Saturday. He kept building the last frame of it: her face turned up off the table toward his chair, wet, her eyes open. He didn't know if that frame existed. He couldn't stop making it.

He thought she was asleep. Then she spoke to the wall.

"He's going to want something, Tyler. More than a conversation."

"I know."

"I'm going to give it to him." A breath. "I wanted you to hear me say that tonight. Not later."

His cock was thick against the sheet. It had been since *give*. His face burned where she couldn't see it. *Don't,* he told her

back, in his head. *Don't go.* He opened his mouth, and what he was listening to was his cock.

"Okay," he said.

After a while she shifted back until her hips met him. She must have felt it. Her hips stayed there, warm through two layers of cotton, and her breathing went slow and even.

Out on Ridley a car came by slow. He listened to it all the way down to the corner, every second of it, before he could tell the muffler was good and it wasn't him.

Tuesday it rained, a warm gray drizzle that kept Ridley Street empty, and the Civic didn't come.

Wednesday came up hot and clear. At eight o'clock Vince's Dodge Ram backed down his driveway, coughed smoke at the curb, and rumbled off toward Route 9.

At eight-fifteen Megan went out on the porch with a mug of coffee.

She had dressed for a Wicks. Her oldest gray running shorts, washed so thin the hems had curled up off the pale tops of her thighs. A white ribbed tank over a gray sports bra one size too small. Hair up in a ponytail. No makeup. The heat was already rising off the porch boards when she stepped out, and the bra bit under her arms and crushed her breasts together high under her collarbones. The ribbing stretched white across them. A drop of sweat started down between them before she reached the rail. She knew where a man's eyes went first from a car at ten miles an hour. She had watched them go there her whole life.

Behind the sheer curtain in the front window, Tyler was standing in the living room. She didn't look back at him. She felt him anyway. When she turned to set her hip on the rail,

his shape moved in the dark glass of the storm door, tall and still. He looked like he was looking at the same shorts the whole street was about to look at. Dread went down through her stomach. Under it, low between her legs, came a small hot pulse, because he was watching her bait another man, and she was letting him.

She leaned on the porch rail and blew across the coffee. Vince had thrown that at her Saturday night with his fist in her hair: six months he'd watched her do this on her step. She did it now on purpose. It was what the street knew her by.

At eight-twenty-two a loose muffler rattled around the corner of Vine.

The Civic came onto Ridley at ten miles an hour, gray primer and rust, the windshield streaked with dead bugs. Wicks was hunched over the wheel with a menthol burning in the fingers hanging out his window. His face was already turned toward her porch. The Wednesday before, she'd been carrying the trash to the curb when he crept by and lifted two fingers off the wheel at her. She had run inside and thrown the deadbolt.

This time she set the mug down on the rail.

She went down the three steps in her white sneakers, across the strip of damp grass, and off the curb into the street, right into the Civic's path.

He stood on the brakes. The bald tires chirped and the front end dipped. His head jerked toward Vince's garage, then up the empty street, and then he was lunging across the seat to crank the passenger window down. Hot vinyl and stale menthol rolled out of the car.

"Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, sweetheart, what're you doing in the road?" His voice was high and fast. "Vince sees my car stopped in front of your house, he's gonna take my head off, you don't know how he gets—"

"Vince left twenty minutes ago."

She stepped up to the door and leaned both forearms on the open window. Her shoulders pinched together. Her breasts pushed up hard against the ribbing, two feet from his face, with the gray edge of the sports bra showing at the neckline and the freckles on her chest bright in the sun. The drop of sweat had reached the crease between them. She let it sit there.

"Okay, but Dale, if Dale comes by—" His mouth stopped. His eyes had dropped and stayed. "Oh, Jesus. Oh, would you look. They're all squished up in there. Is that a sports bra? That thing's two sizes too little, that's a crime, you're about to bust right out the top. And you got sweat. Right in the middle there." He dragged his eyes up to her face. They slid back down on their own. "Vince'll kill me. He sees me looking at you like this, I'm a dead man. They'll find me in a ditch on Route 9 with my eyes still open."

She held still and let him look. A tight, satisfied heat sat in her chest, because it was working, because she had known exactly what he would do. Right beside it her skin crawled under his stare, from her throat down to the band of the bra. She kept her forearms where they were.

His Adam's apple went up and down. The cigarette burned in his yellow fingers, forgotten, a long gray ash shaking on the end of it.

"I saw you last Wednesday," she said.

"Yeah, I was just — there's a guy on Vine owes me a carburetor, I was swinging by to see if he—"

"I came out here yesterday at eight," she said. "In the rain. I thought you'd drive by again."

The ash dropped off onto the seat between his knees. He didn't brush it away. His eyes came up off her chest to her face, wet and shining. "You did?"

"Every time you get near me, Dale moves you." She kept her voice low. She let her lips stay parted after the words were out. "Or Vince says your name like you're a dog that got on the couch. I keep thinking about the basement, Wicks. About what you did to me on that couch."

His grin broke open, all yellow teeth and the dark one on the right. "I knew it. I *told* Dale. I said a girl comes like that on a guy, she don't forget the guy. Nobody else got that out of you that whole night. Just me. I said it to him, I said she's gonna remember." His free hand came off the wheel and settled on the inside of her bare wrist. Clammy. His thumb stroked once over the thin skin above the bone.

Everything in her wanted to take her arm back. She held still and let him do it again.

"I can't talk out here," she said. "I want to see you. Just you. At your place. And nobody can know. Not Vince. Not Dale."

"Today?" His leg was bouncing; the whole car shivered with it. "Like *today* today?"

"Two o'clock."

He was already digging through the console, knocking a soda can onto the floor mat, coming up with a crumpled autoparts receipt and a chewed blue pen. He wrote against the

steering wheel in big jagged capitals and pushed the paper into her hand and held her fingers closed around it.

"Four-fourteen Bennett. Two-B. Top of the stairs, it's the one with the number hanging off, I been meaning to fix that. Two o'clock." He swallowed. "I won't tell nobody. Who'm I gonna tell? Two o'clock."

"Go," she said. "Before somebody sees your car."

He nodded three times and threw it into drive. The muffler popped all the way down Ridley and around the far corner.

Megan stood at the curb until the exhaust cleared. Then she rubbed the inside of her wrist against her shorts, hard, and walked back up the steps and picked up her coffee and went inside.

Tyler was in the front hall with his back against the wall beside the curtain. His eyes went to her wrist.

"He had his hand on you," he said.

"He had his hand on my wrist." She set the mug down on the hall table. "I'll be boiling it later."

She rubbed it on her shorts again, slow and hard, while he watched her do it.

At five minutes to two, Tyler pulled her Camry to the curb on Bennett Street, across from 414 and fifty yards down, in the shade of a scraggly tree. He left the engine running for the air.

Through the windshield, up across two lanes of patched asphalt, she could see the second floor of the building. Narrow, beige, sitting on top of a radiator shop with its bay door padlocked. A rusted fire escape. A wide double window at the front with crooked blinds hanging halfway down.

She flipped the visor down and twisted toward the little mirror. The white cotton tee twisted with her. It had been

washed so many times it had gone soft and nearly sheer, and the scoop neck slid low on one side. Through it the scalloped edge of her plain cream bra showed, a line of lace drawn straight across the tops of her breasts. The underwire pushed them high and together, and when she leaned toward the mirror the sun through the windshield fell into the deep line between them and lay there, warm, a freckle on either side. It was the bra she wore to job interviews and dentist appointments. She knew what a man like Wicks would make of it: a good girl's bra under a good girl's shirt, and the shirt too thin to keep it a secret.

The navy-and-white linen wrap skirt was tied at her left hip in a single bow, falling just above the knee. One pull on that bow and the whole thing would open. Flat tan sandals. Her hair was down and brushed until it shone. One coat of mascara, enough to make her eyes look bluer. Clear gloss, enough to make her mouth look wet.

She looked like a woman on her way to lunch with her mother-in-law. That was the point, and her stomach tightened on it. Her left hand was on her knee where the skirt had parted. The ring was home, in the ceramic dish by the front door.

"One fifty-seven," Tyler said.

His right hand was on top of the wheel. His thumb kept moving over the split scab on his knuckle, where it had met Vince's teeth. He hadn't looked away from the window since he parked.

"I know what time it is."

"Twenty minutes, Meg."

"It's *Wicks*." She snapped the visor shut. "Saturday he didn't last a minute in my mouth. I'll let him touch me a little. Hands

or mouth, whatever he wants. I ask him about the gun, and I walk out."

He turned and looked at her. His eyes went to her glossed mouth, then down into the scoop of the tee, and stayed there a second too long. Sweat from the walk to the car had gathered in the scoop of the tee, and the vent was blowing cold straight onto it. Her nipples had drawn up tight under the cream lace, and she could feel the cotton resting on them. His hand shifted on the wheel. Below it, his jeans had gone tight across the fly.

"You wore that for him," he said.

"I wore it for us." She tucked the lace edge back under the scoop with one finger.

He looked. Then he looked back at the building.

"Two-twenty," he said. "Two-twenty, I'm turning the car off and coming up."

"Stay in the car. If he sees you, it's over."

"Go, then," he said to the windshield.

She couldn't tell which part he was answering. She got out into the heat and crossed Bennett Street at a brisk walk, her sandals ticking on the tar.

The storm door beside the garage bay had no latch. The stairwell behind it smelled like fried onions and cat litter. Seventeen steep steps of brown carpet went up to a landing lit by one caged bulb. Two doors. On the right, 2B, the brass B hanging by a single screw.

She stopped on the top step. She smoothed the front of the skirt with both hands and lifted her chin and knocked.

The door opened before her knuckles were off the wood.

He'd gotten ready for her, and it made him worse. His thin hair was combed straight back, still wet from the tap, dark

strands stuck to his temples. Jeans riding low on his hip bones with no belt. A black ribbed wifebeater hanging loose off his narrow chest. Scuffed work boots, unlaced, on bare feet. Over the menthol that lived in his skin he'd sprayed something from a drugstore that smelled like rubbing alcohol and lime. It hit the back of her throat.

"You came." His eyes went down her and up and down again. "You came, and look what you came in. A little white T-shirt. I can see the lace, I can see the bra right through it, the little lacy edge going across. At Vince's it's them yellow bulbs and everybody's smoke and you look good, okay, you look great, but in the daylight?" He put a hand on his own chest. "You look like a lady in a commercial. Like for lipstick. Standing on my landing."

She lifted her chin. "May I come in, or would you like to review the rest of me out here?"

"In. Come in, come in." He stepped back and waved her in with his whole arm. "I been standing at that window since one-thirty, I didn't see you come up the street. How'd you get here?"

"I took the bus to Main and walked."

"Smart. That's smart." He shut the door and threw the deadbolt and then stood there looking at her like he wasn't sure what came next.

One square room. A kitchenette along the back wall, the sink stacked with dishes. A window unit rattling over a Folgers can it was dripping into. A full-size mattress on a low metal frame against the right wall, one flat pillow, a faded blue floral fitted sheet. A vinyl recliner in the middle of the carpet facing a TV on two milk crates. An ashtray on an upturned drywall bucket, full. A cable box on the TV with green numbers.

Across the front of the room, the double window over the street with its crooked blinds.

He came up behind her. She felt his heat first, his quick shallow breath at her shoulder, and then his bony fingers settled on her hips over the linen.

"Megan, in my place," he said. "On my rug. I vacuumed. Swear to God. I don't even own a vacuum, I borrowed the lady's across the hall, she thinks I got a date. I *do* got a date." His mouth came down toward her neck. "You smell like that rich-girl stuff. You always smell like that."

She turned inside his hands so his chapped lips caught her jaw instead. She set her hands against his ribs and held an inch of air between them.

"Wait," she said. "Before anything. I need to ask you something."

He froze. His Adam's apple jumped. "You're not backing out. You said on the street—"

"I'm not backing out." She slid her right hand up to the side of his neck. His pulse was going like a bird's under her thumb. "I came here because I wanted to see you without them. But I need something, and you're the only one I can ask."

His chest pushed up under her other hand. "Name it."

"I don't sleep," she said. "I lie there at night and listen to the alley. Every car door. After everything at Vince's, I can't—" She looked down at his collarbone. "I want something in my nightstand drawer. Something small. Something that lets me stop listening. I'm too scared to walk into a store and ask for one. I wouldn't even know what to ask for."

He blinked. "A piece?"

"And I can't ask Dale or Vince. You've seen them with me. They'd want to know why. They'd hold it over me."

A slow pink crept up his neck. He was nodding before she finished.

"Yeah. No, you're right, they'd make a whole thing." He dropped his voice, like they were in a movie. "I got one in my closet right now. Charter Arms .38, the little snub. Numbers ground off clean, five years ago, nobody's tracing that to nobody. Loaded. Fits a hand your size like it was made for it."

She kept her face still. *In his closet right now.*

"Don't give it to me today," she said. "I can't carry a gun down your stairs in the daylight. Bring it next Saturday. When you get to Vince's, put it in his closet. I'll take it with me when I leave."

He laughed, high and nervous. His hands stayed on her waist and squeezed. He was hard. She could feel him through his jeans against her stomach, and he didn't seem to know he was pushing it into her. "In *Vince's* house? No. No way. Vince finds a piece in his house he didn't put there, he don't ask nicely. He takes the whole thing apart till he finds out whose, and then he finds me. You seen how he is. I ain't carrying nothing into nobody's house. Not his. Not nobody's."

She took hold of the ribbed wifebeater at his chest, a fistful of it. "Then bring it to me."

"I'll come by your place. Two, three in the morning, nobody's up, I leave it in the—"

"Vince sits in that garage all day watching Ridley." She let her voice crack a little on it. "He knows every car that stops on the street. He'd see the Civic at my door and he'd know. Sat-

urday you're supposed to be there. Nobody looks twice at you walking into his house."

He chewed the inside of his lip. His tongue went to the dark tooth. His breath was right at her mouth, lime spray on top and menthol underneath. He was thinking about it, and she could see him not liking it.

She moved her hand from his chest to his face. Her thumb found the scratchy patch of goatee at the corner of his mouth.

"You're the only one I'd trust with this," she said. "I can't ask them. I don't *want* to ask them. You're the one I want, Wicks."

It went into him like a drink. She watched it. His shoulders came down and his grin came back, crooked, disbelieving.

"Me," he said slowly. "Not Dale. Not Vince. You come up my stairs and you pick me." He was nodding faster now. "Dale's gonna sit there Saturday like a big king and he ain't gonna know nothing. Okay. Okay."

"You'll do it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll do it."

"And you won't tell them. Not one word."

"On my mother." He grabbed her hand off his face and kissed her knuckles, wet. "Just you and me, sweetheart."

Done, she thought. Over his shoulder the cable box read 2:04.

He leaned in for her mouth, his chapped lips already parting, menthol and lime. She turned her face at the last second so they landed on her cheek, and she laid two fingers against them.

Not that. Anything but that.

"You'd really do that for me," she said softly, close to his ear. "Then let me do something for you."

His eyes went wide. "Yeah? Like what?"

She didn't answer. She held his eyes and let her hands slide down his narrow chest, over the damp ribbing of the tank, and stop on the snap of his jeans. Her face was burning. She made herself keep looking at him.

"Oh. Oh, Jesus. Okay." He laughed, a gasping sound. "Okay okay okay."

She sank down onto the rug in front of him, right there by the door, her skirt pooling around her knees. The carpet was thin and gritty under her. She opened the snap and dragged his zipper down and pulled the jeans and his gray briefs together down his skinny thighs.

His cock sprang up at her face, already hard. An ordinary shaft, pale, a little crooked to the left. And then the head. It was much too big for the rest of him. It sat on top like it belonged to some other man, round and fat and dark red, the slit already wet. It was the same head that hadn't lasted a minute on Saturday. This close it smelled of drugstore soap, and under the soap the menthol, and under that warm skin.

The plan was to do that again. Hard and fast. Ninety seconds, then the bus excuse.

"You want it?" he said above her, breathless. "Tell me you want it."

She looked up at him. "I want it, baby."

She took him in her fist and opened her mouth over the head.

Her lips met the crown and had to keep opening. The head was blunt and heavy, and her mouth stretched around it in-

to a tight ring, her jaw dropping wider than it wanted to, the corners of her lips pulling thin. Then the thick ridge slid past and her lips closed behind it, and she had the whole head on her tongue. Hot. Smooth. Soap first, because he'd showered for her, and then salt.

Spit pooled under her tongue and sealed around him. When she sucked, her cheeks hollowed, and the seal made a small, tight, wet noise every time she drew back and her lips gripped the ridge. His stained fingers came down and gathered her hair off her face in both fists so he could see.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Wicks said. "Your mouth can't hardly get around it. Them pretty lips, they're stretched all the way out. You can't hardly fit it, can you? Can you?"

She hummed around him and lifted her pretty baby blue eyes to his. Grit dug into her knees through the linen. She pumped him with her fist and bobbed fast and shallow, working the head, her tongue flicking under the ridge where she'd found on Saturday that he couldn't stand it. Ninety seconds.

"Megan's on my rug with my dick in her mouth," he said. "Nobody's gonna knock. Nobody's gonna tell me move over. That's all mine, that whole woman, in my house. Dale's got the size, okay, fine, but nobody's got *this*. You feel that?"

She pulled off far enough to answer, the head resting on her lower lip. "I feel it. I can't fit it, Wicks, it's too—"

He fed it back between her lips.

"There. Back where it goes." He was grinning down at her with his whole face. "You know what Dale'd say if he walked in right now? He wouldn't say nothing. He'd just stand there in my door with his mouth open and that cigar falling out on my rug. And Vince'd—" He giggled. "I ain't never vacuuming this

spot again. Lady across the hall can have her vacuum back. This rug's history now. Go on. Go on, look at them cheeks go."

She went faster. The window unit rattled. Her jaw ached at the hinge. She pushed down harder to finish it and took the head past her tongue toward her throat, and she gagged on it and came back up with her eyes streaming. Spit ran down over her fist. She did it again, because fast was the plan. His thighs shook under her free hand. He swelled thicker against the roof of her mouth and kept swelling. On Saturday, right before he went, the head had jumped twice on her tongue. She waited for the jump. It never came.

"You hear yourself?" he said. "You're humming. Every time you go down you make this little hum. You don't even know you're doing it."

She hadn't known. She heard it now, a small hum on every downstroke, and she couldn't stop it. Under the soap and the menthol another smell rose from her own lap, warm and sharp. Hers. She kept going. Ninety seconds. Fast. Finish him.

She pulled off. Her lips gave around the ridge and let go, and a string of spit stretched from the tip of him to her lower lip, sagged, and broke on her chin. She was panting. Her chin was slick.

"Come for me," she said. Her voice came out hoarse and level. "Come on. You can come in my mouth if you want."

He laughed. It came out of him in a giddy burst. "You're thinking it. I can see you thinking it. Saturday I went off in a minute, right? You come up here counting on it." He shook his head, grinning down at her. "Not today. I beat off twice this morning after I seen you on the street leaning into my car. Twice. Couldn't help it."

Her stomach dropped. *Twice.*

"Please," she said.

Her knees shifted on the grit. Spit dripped off her chin onto her wrist. She kept her eyes on his.

"You want it that bad?" He cupped her jaw in his stained hand and rubbed his thumb through the spit on her chin. "Then you gotta stay for it."

That stung. She tightened her fist on him hard enough to make him hiss and took him back in, deeper, like she could prove him wrong with her throat. The head pushed past her tongue. She gagged and he moaned, and she did it again. Her lips went numb. Her eyes ran. When she shifted her knees, her panties pulled against her, wet, stuck to her under the linen. She was wet.

"There it is, you're staying," he said. "Oh, you're getting into it now."

He pulled out of her mouth. She chased it an inch before she caught herself.

"Up," he said. His hands hooked under her arms. "C'mon. Get up here."

"Wicks—"

"I ain't wasting it in your mouth." He hauled her onto her feet. His face was red and his eyes were wild and happy. "Every time at Vince's I get five minutes and somebody shoves me off. Not here. I want all of you. I want to see the whole thing."

"I can't stay." Her voice came out hoarse. "I told you, the bus—"

"Bus comes every half hour. There's another one. There's always another one." He had the hem of her tee in his fists. "Arms up, sweetheart."

"Wicks."

"Just let me see 'em. In the daylight. One time. Nobody's ever gonna tell me to look away in my own house." His voice dropped and shook. "Arms up."

She stood with her arms at her sides for two seconds. Then she lifted them.

He dragged the tee up and over her head. Her hair caught in the collar, came free, and fell heavy across her shoulders. He flung the shirt at the recliner and missed. Then he stood in the middle of his rug with his jeans around his thighs and stared at her in the cream bra.

"That's a church bra," he said. "That's what a lady wears to church. And you're spilling out the top of it." He licked his lips. "Turn a little. No, back the other way. Let the sun get on 'em."

She turned back the other way. She stood in the middle of his room in her skirt and a plain bra with the light from the window on her, and let him look. The lace edge cut into the soft tops of her massive full breasts. The underwire pushed them up and together. Every breath she took lifted them against the cups, and his eyes went up and down with it, and his cock bobbed in front of him like it was nodding along.

He came around behind her. His fingers fumbled at the hooks. One gave. The second stuck, and he swore at it and yanked and whispered, "C'mon, c'mon," like he was talking to a car that wouldn't start. She reached back and unhooked it herself. He made a noise like she'd handed him money. He peeled the straps down her arms and let the bra fall onto the recliner.

Then he came around in front of her and stepped back half a pace and looked.

Sun came through the crooked slats in bars. It lay across her bare tits in stripes, light and shade and light. Big and heavy and high, pointed straight at him, milk-pale under the freckles scattered across the tops. Her nipples were up. The soft pink peaks had gone tight in the cold off the window unit, puckered hard.

Her arms came up to cover them. Crossing them only shoved her tits together and up, so they swelled over her forearms.

Wicks whistled through his bad teeth, long and shaky. "Oh no. No, no, don't do that to me. Put 'em down. I seen 'em in the basement and I seen 'em on the poker table but I never seen 'em in the *sun*. They're bigger in the sun. How are they bigger in the sun?" He didn't touch her. He just stared, rubbing his hands down his bare thighs. "Please. Arms down. Please."

She lowered her arms slowly. The cold air from the unit touched her bare nipples and they drew up harder. His eyes on them did the same thing. She stood there and felt them tighten while he watched, and couldn't make them stop.

"Can I," he said. "Can I hold 'em. One second."

"Wait."

He waited, his hands hanging in the air in front of her. She started to lift her arms again. Then she let them fall.

"Go on," she said.

His bony hands came up under her breasts and took the weight. His fingers were damp from his thighs and cool from the air, and the yellow tips sank into her. He bounced them in his palms like he was checking fruit at the store. "Heavy," he whispered. "Oh, they're heavy. Nobody here to shove me off. Nobody saying Wicks, move. I got all day." His thumbs

dragged up over her nipples and back down. She hissed through her teeth.

He ducked his head. His mouth landed on the upper slope of her left breast, a sloppy open kiss, his goatee scratching. He worked his way down. His yellow teeth closed lightly on her nipple and his lips sealed around it and he sucked, and he kept talking with his mouth full, a wet mumble against her skin—"mm, so soft, Jesus, so soft"—and a whimper got out of her throat that she never meant him to hear. She hated it. She got her fingers into his wet combed hair to push him off. She held on instead.

He came off her breast with his lips shining. "Now the window," he said. "I want 'em in my window."

"No."

"Every time with you it's a basement. Lights off, door shut, everybody whispering at the stairs. Not here." He took her hips. "I want the whole street to see what I got. In the daylight. Just stand there with me and look out at my street. That's all."

"Wicks, no."

"Thirty seconds. Please. Just look out."

She looked at his face. "Thirty seconds."

He backed her across the rug, three steps, his hands on her hips and his jeans hobbling his knees. The backs of her thighs bumped the radiator cover under the front window. Then he took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the street, and knocked the blinds up with his forearm.

The slats clattered and jammed crooked near the top of the frame. The whole window filled with afternoon. Bennett Street opened up below her: the patched lanes, the bodega with its

faded beer posters, the chain-link fences, a man in a lawn chair two buildings down. The glass was warm in front of her face.

"Wicks, no." She caught the window frame with both hands. "The street. People can see right up here."

"Second floor, sun's on the glass. They can't see shit." His fingers were at her hip, at the knot of the wrap skirt. "And if they can, let 'em. Let 'em see what I got."

"There's a man in a lawn chair. He's right there."

"He's half asleep with a tallboy. And if he looks, so what? He sees a girl in a window. He don't know you. Nobody's ever gonna know it was you." His mouth was at her shoulder. "One time. One time I get to have you where people can see. Please."

Her eyes dropped past her own bare tits, inches off the glass, to the street. The patched lanes. The scraggly tree fifty yards down. Under it, in the shade, the silver Camry – Tyler.

The sun lay across half the windshield. She could see the dark curve of the steering wheel and two pale shapes at the top of it that were Tyler's hands. Above them was a paler shape she couldn't make out. She couldn't tell if he was looking. She stared until her eyes stung. Then the pale shape tipped up toward the building and held there.

He was looking.

"Please," Wicks said into her shoulder.

She kept her eyes on the car. "Okay," she said. "Okay. Go on."

The tie came loose. The linen fell open and slid down her legs to her sandals. His thumbs hooked her panties and pulled them down to her knees. The wet cotton peeled off her with a soft unsticking sound, and when the smell of her reached him he groaned through his nose.

Then he dropped onto his heels behind her.

"Oh, you're *soaked*. It's stuck to you. The cotton's all strung off you, there's a string going right to your—oh, Jesus." His breath landed on her, hot, right there. "Bare. You're bare as a peach down here. And pink. It's all pink and puffy and shining, you're open a little, I can see in." His fingers slid through the wet on the outside of her, slow, and came away. He held them up beside her hip so she could see the shine on them in the sun. "That's you. That's all for me."

She could smell herself in the hot dusty air at the pane, next to the dead plant on the sill. Her face burned. He could see the proof of it. He could see exactly how wet she was for him, and he was crouched there admiring it.

His thumb moved up and found the mole high on her ass. "And a mole. Right there. Little mole on your ass. Would you look at that." He rubbed it like he was polishing a coin.

He stood up behind her. "Put 'em on the glass for me," he said. "Let 'em see."

"Wicks—"

"Please."

"Yes," she said. It came out of her small.

His hand went flat between her shoulder blades and pushed, and her breasts met the glass.

It was hot. The sun had been on it all afternoon and it burned for a second, smooth and hard, and her breasts flattened against it and spread. Her nipples mashed wide into the dusty pane. She gasped, and the gasp fogged a little circle in front of her mouth.

Down in the Camry the pale shape hadn't moved. She could guess what it could see from there. Her tits squashed

white and wide on the glass. Her face over them. Her bare shoulders. A skinny man's yellow hands on her back. The sill hid the rest.

Her lips moved against the pane around a word that was only breath. It fogged the glass, and nobody in the room could have made it out.

Her face burned so hot her ears rang. Her hands came up to cover herself and there was nowhere to put them; her breasts were pinned to the glass and her fingers only slid on the hot pane beside them. Between her legs she throbbed. Fresh wet ran down the inside of her thigh.

Behind her, Wicks's knee pushed between her calves and spread her feet wider on the rug. The panties slid down around her ankles. She felt his skinny hips press into her ass, and felt the heavy head of him slide down between her cheeks, still slick with her spit, nudging lower, until it settled hot into the wet seam of her pussy and parted her lips and stopped.

He didn't push. He held it there. His breath was in her hair.

"Say it," he said. "Say you want it. In my house, at my window. I want to hear you say it."

The cable box had said 2:04 when she knelt on his rug. Two-twenty, Tyler had said. Any minute now that car door could open. He could be crossing Bennett Street. He could be on the stairs.

"Yes," she said to the glass.

"Yes what?"

"Yes. Fuck me, Wicks."

He shoved in.

The fat head forced her open. It was a blunt, wide stretch at her entrance that she had to breathe through, her lips spread-

ing around it until the ridge pushed past and she closed around the narrower shaft behind it. He slid the rest of the way in one long push, and she heard it, a thick clinging sound of soaked skin giving way to him. His hips came flush against her ass. Her forehead hit the glass.

"Oh, *fuck*," she said into the glass.

"You hear that? Listen how wet. You was wet on the bus." He was gasping into her hair. "You was dripping walking up seventeen of my stairs. I bet you left a trail on the carpet. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

He fucked her fast. Where Dale took his time and Vince held her and ground, Wicks went at her in quick jittery strokes, like he couldn't make himself slow down, his bony hips slapping her ass. Every stroke pushed her breasts up the glass and let them slide back down. Her sweat made the skin squeak on the pane. Her breath fogged it and cleared and fogged again. His hands came around her ribs and got under her breasts and squeezed them against the window, his yellow fingers digging into the soft undersides while his thumbs pinned her nipples flat to the glass.

"Look at 'em," he panted. "Squashed on my window. Whole street can see your tits on my window. That guy in the lawn chair, he looking? I bet he's looking."

She looked for him. The man in the lawn chair two buildings down had his head turned toward the building. Or he'd turned it to spit, or to watch a car go by. She couldn't tell.

"He's looking!" Wicks crowed. "He's looking right up here. He can't believe it. He's gonna go inside and tell his wife and she ain't gonna believe him either."

She looked at the Camry.

"They can see me," she said. "Wicks. They can see me."

"Yeah they can."

"They can see you fucking me." The words came out of her in her own voice, the clean careful voice that ordered wine, and she heard them. Goosebumps ran down both her arms. Her nipples ached under his thumbs.

Down in the Camry the pale hands came off the top of the wheel. She couldn't see where they went.

She was pushing back at him before she had decided to. Then she knew she was doing it. She spread her fingers wide on the glass on either side of her breasts and shoved her ass back onto him and felt him go deeper, and then she did it again, harder, with her eyes on the windshield where his hands had been. Wicks yelped with joy and grabbed her hips and pulled her back onto him.

"Oh, she's fucking me back! She's fucking me *back*!"

"Shut up," she gasped. "Shut up, just—*harder*—"

He went harder. The window rattled in its frame.

His thumbs slid in from her hips and spread her cheeks wide, and the cold air off the window unit touched her where nobody should have been looking. "Oh, look at that," he panted, and his hips cracked against her. "Your little asshole—" Another stroke. "—all pink and puckered up—it squeezes every time I go in—" Another. "—staring right up at me—I'm gonna think about this—every time I look out this window—every single time—till I'm dead—"

She kept her eyes on the car. She couldn't stop keeping them there. Her breasts were hot from the glass and slick with sweat, and his hip bones kept slapping her. Her hands slid in

the fog on the pane. She bit her lip to keep quiet, because of the street, because of the man in the lawn chair. She pressed her open mouth to the glass to keep it in.

His hip bones kept cracking into her ass, and she kept meeting them. The sound didn't stay in. "Wicks," she said against the pane, and then, broken, "they can—see you—fucking—" and it went up into a high cry that fogged the whole window in front of her face. She came with her mouth on the glass and her eyes on her husband's car. Her pussy locked down on him and pulsed. Her knees went. Wicks caught her around the waist and held her up on his cock while she shook, her breasts sliding on the wet pane, and she came and came and couldn't stop looking.

"You're coming on me," Wicks said into her neck. He sounded stunned. "You're coming. I can feel it squeezing. You pushed your ass back on me and you're coming at my window with your tits on the glass. Standing up. At my window. Oh, sweetheart."

She hung there in his arms, panting. Her forehead was on the pane. Down in the car, the pale shape hadn't moved.

Wicks pulled out of her. When the head slipped free she whimpered at losing it, a thin needy noise, and hated that she could feel how empty she was.

He turned her around by the waist. His cock stood out of the open jeans around his thighs, shining wet with her, the head dark and thick. His face was red and his eyes were wet and happy and he couldn't stop grinning.

"Not like this," he said. "At Vince's I always got somebody's elbow in my face, somebody yelling hurry up. I want your face.

I want you on my bed, like you're my girl. I wanna watch you do that again."

"Wicks. I have to go." Her legs were still shaking. "I said twenty minutes—"

"Hold on. Hold on." He toed the unlaced boots off and shoved his jeans the rest of the way down and hopped out of them and nearly went over into the recliner. "Look at me, I'm a fish. I'm a fish flopping on a dock." He kicked the jeans away and came back to her in nothing but the black wifebeater, his legs thin and pale, his knees knobby. He pulled her against him. His cock pressed wet against her stomach. His hands went down onto her bare ass and held on, and he started walking her backward, and he talked into her neck while he did it.

"Ten more. Ten minutes on my bed. Gimme ten minutes and I'll put that thing in Vince's closet with a bow on it. I'll do anything. Ten minutes."

Over his shoulder the cable box said 2:17.

Three minutes. In three minutes Tyler would get out of the car and cross Bennett Street and come up seventeen stairs and knock on this door. Ten more minutes put her on that bed with her legs open when he did. Her stomach dropped. Between her legs she throbbed, hard, in the same second.

"Ten minutes," she said.

He made a happy noise and kept walking her. Her panties were still around one ankle and she stepped out of them and lost a sandal on the way. Four steps. The backs of her knees hit the bed frame and she sat down hard on the sagging mattress and then went over onto her back on the floral sheet. It smelled like his pillow, menthol and hair oil.

He climbed onto the bed between her knees. His cock bobbed in front of him, still slick.

He took her behind both knees.

"What are you—"

"Trust me," he said. "Just trust me."

He folded her. He pushed her knees up and back until her thighs were pressed hard to her own breasts, her hips rolling up off the mattress, and then he lifted her ankles one at a time and hooked them up over his bony shoulders. She was folded in half under him. She couldn't put her hips down. She couldn't close her legs. Everything she had was tipped up toward him, open, her pussy flushed and slick and pointed at the ceiling.

He didn't go in. He knelt there holding her folded and looked. The blinds were still jammed up, and daylight lay across the bed and across her.

"Oh," he said, soft for once. "Oh, would you get a load of this. It's all right there. Everything. You're still dripping from the window. It's running down to your ass. It's all pink and puffed up and open, I can see right in. I can see where I was."

She had never been looked at like this. Tyler liked her under him with her legs around his waist and the lights off. Every man before Tyler had been in the dark too. Now it was Wicks, of all of them, in broad daylight, with her ankles up by his ears and every wet inch of her held up to his face.

"Don't stare at me like that," she said. "Wicks. I mean it."

"Lemme look. Please. Ten seconds." His thumbs stroked the backs of her thighs. "I been looking at you through clothes for months. Through the window of my car. Through Vince's smoke. Ten seconds."

He took his ten seconds. Then he leaned over her, and his chest came down on her shins, and his weight pressed her knees harder into her breasts. He held the head of his cock against her with one hand. It was right there, blunt against her opening.

"Okay?" he said. His voice was shaking. "Sweetheart. Okay?"

She had braced for Dale every time. She had braced for Vince. She looked up at Wicks's thin red face, his wet hair falling forward out of the comb, his watery eyes, and she didn't brace at all. It was only Wicks.

"Okay," she said.

He dropped into her.

Folded like that, she had nowhere to go. He went all the way down on the first drop, as deep as the fold let him, deeper than she had any guard for, and her head snapped back into the flat pillow, and a high, startled "oh" broke out of her. He was smaller than both of them. He was hitting deeper than either. The bedsprings creaked, metal grinding on metal, under the drop. His sweaty chest and the damp ribbing of his tank pressed her shins. Past his shoulder, across the room, the window unit let another drip fall into the coffee can.

"Oh," she said. "Oh. Oh, *God*."

"Yeah? Yeah?" He drew back and dropped into her again, his whole skinny weight behind it, and the springs creaked again. "Nobody ever got you like this. Tell me. Tell me nobody hits you this deep."

"Nobody's—" she said. "Nobody's ever—it's—"

He dropped into her again and the rest of it went. She couldn't finish it. Her toes curled over his shoulders.

"Nobody!" His voice cracked like a kid's. "You was gonna say nobody!"

He put his hands on either side of her face. His thumbs rested on her cheekbones and his damp fingers were in her hair. He brought his face down until his nose touched hers and his menthol breath was on her lips.

"Kiss me," he said.

She turned her face into the pillow. "No. Not that."

He let her turn. He put his forehead against her temple and kept fucking her, slow now, deep, every stroke grinding his pubic bone onto her clit at the bottom, and he talked into her ear in a thin, fast, shaking voice.

"Please. Once. Just once, like I'm your boyfriend. You don't gotta mean it."

"No."

He kept going slow. His weight sat on her shins and pinned the fold. His damp fingers moved in her hair. Her ankles bounced on his shoulders with every stroke, and every stroke went to the bottom of her and ground there before he drew back. The pillowcase scratched her cheek. It smelled like his hair oil and like nights of him lying here alone.

"Please. I ain't gonna tell nobody. Nobody's gonna know but this pillow. One kiss."

"I said no, Wicks." Her voice came out hoarse.

He ground down into her and stayed there, his hips making small circles, his breath hitching against her temple. He didn't ask again. He just kept going, slow and deep, with his nose against her cheek, and the grinding went on and on. She couldn't get any air with her face in the pillow. She turned her face back toward him, only to breathe.

He was right there. She lifted her chin the last inch and kissed him.

He moaned into her mouth like she'd hit him. His tongue came in, wet and eager and cigarette-bitter, sloppy, all over the place. He sucked on her bottom lip and licked her teeth and pushed his tongue against hers, and his hips started going fast again, hammering down into her, and his goatee scraped her chin raw.

She meant to lend him her mouth and wait him out. He'd have his kiss and he'd finish. But he kept kissing her like she'd handed him the best thing he'd ever had, making grateful little noises into her mouth, and he wouldn't slow down. She was kissing him back. She was kissing Wicks with her tongue, tasting his cigarettes, letting him scrape her chin, and he would not slow down. Her calves clamped against his ears.

She came into his open mouth. Her back bowed as far as the fold would let it and her pussy clamped on him in hard, fast spasms, and words came out of her. "Your mouth—oh, your—your c—your cock, Wicks, your—" It broke off into a cry, and he swallowed it. Her hands clawed into his shoulders.

He kept his mouth on hers and talked against her lips. "*Two!*" he gasped. "That's two! You came kissing me. You came with your tongue in my mouth. Megan. You kissed me and you came."

"Kiss me—" she said. She had never said anything like it in her life. She dragged his face down by his thin damp hair. "Again, kiss me, your mouth—"

She was kissing him on purpose now. Open-mouthed, her tongue in his mouth, her hands knotted in his hair. It horrified her, and she kept doing it. Across the room the blinds were still

jammed open. Daylight lay across the floral sheet and across her own thighs, squashed against her breasts and bouncing on them with every stroke. Her clean pale nails dug into his bony shoulders through the cheap ribbed tank. It was past two-twenty now. The seventeen stairs he'd said he would climb stayed quiet, and she felt the quiet between her legs like a hand. From the mattress she couldn't see the car at all, only the open window and a square of sky, and that made it worse.

"You're kissing me," he gasped into her lips. "You're kissing me like you mean it."

"Keep doing that," she said. "Keep—please, keep—"

"I ain't stopping, I ain't, God, you're squeezing me—"

"Wicks. *Wicks.*"

It came again on the tail of the last one, before the last had let go of her. It rolled up out of her belly and took all of her with it. Her hips jerked up to meet him. Her ankles slid off his shoulders and crossed hard behind his neck. Her nails raked down his back through the tank top. She tried to talk through it. "I can't—Wicks, I can't close my—my legs, I can't close my l—" The pulses hit and she squealed into his neck instead, high and cracked. She heard herself say his name again and again, high and thin. The sheet under her ass was soaked through.

He didn't slow down. He wrapped his skinny arms around her folded legs and hugged them to his chest and kept pounding her straight through it.

"*Three!*" His voice broke on it. "Three times! Your feet are locked on my neck, your nails are in my back, you're tearing me up! Megan! I thought that only happened in porn! I swear to God I thought them girls were faking it! Three!"

Her face was wet. She had her arms around his neck and she was kissing his cheek, his jaw, his mouth, anywhere she could reach. Her hips were still lifting to meet him.

"More," she said into his cheek. "Give me more of it. Please. I want more."

His rhythm broke. He started to shake all over.

"I can't," he said. "Sweetheart, I can't hold it. I'm gonna come. I'm gonna fill you up. Right here in my bed. I'm gonna come so deep in you, make you mine, put a baby in you—"

Baby. Her eyes came open. Over his shoulder there was a brown water stain on the ceiling, shaped like a hand.

He had said it in Vince's basement too. Cold went through her. She let go of his neck and wedged both hands against his chest and pushed. Her ankles came uncrossed and dropped back onto his shoulders as she tried to twist away.

"Wait. Wicks, wait." She twisted her hips on the wet sheet. She couldn't move them. "Pull out. Pull out. Don't come in me. *Pull out.*"

He froze. All of him, buried to the root, shaking with it. His face was twisted up like he was in pain.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Okay, I'm—okay."

He started to pull back.

"I gotta go slow," he said through his teeth. "I go fast, I'm gonna go off. I'm right there. I gotta go slow." He drew out of her an inch at a time. His arms trembled on either side of her. His eyes were squeezed shut. "Okay. I'm doing it. I'm doing it. For you."

He was doing it. She had told him to stop, and he was stopping. In Vince's basement nobody had stopped for anything she said, not once. He had her folded under him, every inch

of him begging to finish, and he was easing out of her because she had asked. She hadn't braced for that. It went through her warm and low, worse than anything he'd done to her yet.

Then the head reached the front of her.

Going slow, he couldn't help where it went. The fat ridge dragged forward along the wall inside her, right across the place it had found on Vince's couch, the place that had made her come on him with Dale in her mouth. Going in, he'd hit it in quick stabs. Going out, he rubbed it, an inch at a time, his whole crown pressing there, catching, pulling. Her toes curled on his shoulders. Her breath went ragged.

"Wicks—" she said, and didn't know what came next.

"I'm going," he said through his teeth. "I'm going, I'm going."

Another inch. The ridge caught and held and dragged, and she felt how close she was. She'd been close since the window. In a second he'd be out, and the fat head would pop free, and she'd be lying here open and empty and still right on the edge, with his come going on the sheet instead of in her.

It's the wrong time of the month. She'd said it to Tyler on Sunday in her sharpest voice. *I'd know.*

It took her before he was halfway out.

Her back bowed. Her mouth fell open. Her pussy clamped down on the head of him so hard she felt him groan through his chest. She crossed her ankles behind his neck again. She knew she was doing it. She locked her heels and pulled, and hauled him down, and he slid back into her all the way to the bottom. Her hands gave up his chest and went around him and held on. Her hips ground up onto him.

"No," she gasped. "No—don't—stay. Stay in."

He was shaking so hard the bed shook. "Sweetheart—you said—"

"I know." Her ankles pulled at his neck. Her hips ground up. She was still coming. "I know what I said. Don't stop."

"You *sure*? Megan, I can't—I'm right there, I can't—"

He'd gone still to ask. Buried to the root, his hips locked, waiting for her answer, and the stillness was unbearable. A second ago that fat head had been grinding the spot inside her that nobody else could reach, and she was still coming on it, and now it just sat there, swollen, pressing, doing nothing. Her hips jerked up to make it move. He held them down. He was trying to be good. He was going to make her say it.

If she said no, he'd pull out. She knew he would. He'd ease that ridge back out of her an inch at a time, the way he had a minute ago, and leave her open on his sheet with the edge still in her and nothing in her to finish it on. She'd ride home aching. She'd lie next to Tyler tonight with that empty feeling between her legs.

In the moment, that was worse. Lying there with her ankles on his neck, she knew it was worse than anything he could leave inside her.

She grabbed his face in both hands and made him look at her.

"Yes," she said. "Don't stop. Don't you dare stop." Then her voice went clean and careful, the voice she used with landlords and bank tellers. "Inside me. Please."

He moved again. He drove down into her, deep, the ridge dragging over that spot on the way out and slamming it on the way in, and she cried out against his mouth because that was

what she'd wanted, that, and she'd have said anything to get it back.

His hips stuttered. Twice, three times, little jerks he couldn't control. She felt the head swell thicker inside her, and his face broke open above her, his mouth slack, his eyes wet.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, Megan—"

She locked her legs tighter and held him down in her. "Keep going," she said against his mouth. "Keep going. Give it to me."

He made a high strangled sound into her mouth and drove into her one last time and came.

She felt it. Hot, hard jerks of him, deep, right at the bottom of her where he'd been hitting, each one a fresh spurt of heat. The first one set her off.

She'd thought she was finished. She wasn't close to finished. Feeling him go off inside her, Wicks, of all of them, pumping into her with his eyes squeezed shut and his whole skinny frame shaking, dragged her straight over again. Her pussy clamped down on him and pulsed, hard and fast, milking him in time with every spurt, and she couldn't tell where his throbbing stopped and hers began.

She kissed him through it. She didn't kiss him the way she had been, letting him in. She took his mouth. She pushed her tongue into it and found his and sucked on it, menthol and bourbon and spit, and moaned around it, long and broken, straight down his throat. His tongue came back at hers sloppy and grateful. Spit ran out of the corner of her mouth and down her cheek into her hair and she let it. She bit his lower lip. She licked into his mouth like she was trying to get the taste of him

off his teeth. Her hands were knotted in his hair, holding his face down on hers so he couldn't take his mouth away.

"I feel it," she said into him, between kisses, her lips dragging on his. "I can feel you coming. Oh God, I can feel it. Stay in me. Stay in." She kissed him again, open, wet, filthy. "Keep coming. Give me all of it."

He groaned into her mouth and jerked again, and she came harder on it.

The heat spread inside her. Folded the way she was, some of it ran back out of her around him, a warm wet trickle down toward her asshole and onto the sheet, and he was still twitching, and she was still pulsing on him. The smell of the two of them hung close and salty between their mouths. A string of spit stretched from her lip to his when he finally pulled back an inch to breathe, and she lifted her head off the pillow and licked it off his chin.

Wicks. She'd asked him for it. She'd said please.

"You told me to," he was saying, into her mouth, into her wet cheeks, her chin, her eyelids. He kissed her everywhere. "You told me. You said inside me, you said please. And you came again. Five times. *Five.* You came on me while I was coming in you, you were sucking my tongue, I felt you squeezing it out of me. Nobody's gonna believe me. I can't tell nobody, and nobody's gonna believe me anyway."

Her ankles were still locked behind his neck. She couldn't make them let go.

He did it for her. He reached up behind his own neck and found her left ankle and pried it loose, then the right.

He was panting and giggling at once. "You locked me in. Your feet was crossed back there like a seat belt, sweetheart, I

couldn't have got out if the building was on fire. You wouldn't let me go."

"Don't," she said.

He set her feet down on the mattress on either side of his knees. Her thighs wouldn't hold still. They kept jumping on their own, little hard twitches she couldn't stop. He laid a yellow hand on the inside of one and felt it jump.

"Easy," he said. "Easy, sweetheart. That's still me going in there." He rubbed his thumb along the twitch like he was gentling a horse. "Kicking like a frog leg. I did that."

Then he pulled out of her. He went slow. The shaft slid back easy. The head didn't. Her swollen opening clung to that fat ridge and held it, stretched wide around it, and for a second she thought he was stuck. Then the head cleared her with one wet pop.

It was loud in the little room. She heard it over the window unit.

"*Wicks*," she said into the pillow, shaky. Her face went hot the second it slipped out.

"Listen to that." His voice went nasal and reverent. "You hear that? You didn't want to let go of it. You had to let go of the head, sweetheart. You was holding on."

She was empty. The rim of her throbbed where he'd stretched it, tender and hot, and the inside of her felt open to the air.

Then his come followed, thick. She felt it gather at her opening and spill over, a warm heavy rope of him sliding down between her cheeks to the sheet, and then more of it, pushed out every time she breathed. She hadn't known there could be

that much. She lay with her knees open and felt it leave her and couldn't stop it.

Wicks was up on his knees between her legs, staring. His cock hung heavy and wet against his thigh, the dark head still shining.

"Oh, man. Oh, it's coming out of you." His voice cracked with delight. "That's me. That's all me in there. I beat off twice this morning, sweetheart, twice, and I still had all that left for you. Where'd I keep all that? I never seen it come out of a girl like that, I swear to God."

He put his hand on her knee and pushed it wider. He leaned down close. She could feel his breath on her. She was sore and fat down there, hot as a burn, still gaping a little where the head had held her open. White come welled up out of her and ran down, and a long glossy string of it stretched from her to the wet floral sheet before it broke. The window unit blew across her stomach and carried the salt smell of it up to her own face.

"Stop looking," she said. It came out hoarse.

"I wanna watch it come out." He stayed where he was, on his knees, his face a foot from her. "Another one. There goes another one. Where's my phone, I gotta get this—" He twisted toward the recliner where his jeans lay crumpled, one hand still on her knee.

She caught his wrist. Her fingers closed all the way around it.

"No." It was the voice for landlords. Flat and final.

He whined. It came out of him through his nose, long and wounded, like a kid told no at the candy rack. He looked at her

hand on his wrist, then turned back to her and settled on his heels.

"Okay. Jeez. I got a good memory." He kept watching.

She drew her knees together slowly. It took a long time. Her thighs ached in the long muscles where they'd been crushed to her breasts, and they shook all the way closed.

He laughed and dropped down onto his side next to her. The sagging mattress tipped her toward him, and her hip rolled into his, and the wet sheet stuck to her ass and pulled when she moved.

She looked at the ceiling. The brown water stain was still up there over the bed, shaped like a hand with the fingers spread. The window unit rattled. The Folgers can under it went *tick*, *tick*. She stared at the stain so she wouldn't have to look at his face.

The sheet under her was soaked and going cold. She could still feel where he'd been. Inside her, the exact shape of him, like a dent in a cushion. It had been *Wicks*.

Her stomach jumped. Then again. Her hips jerked once on the wet sheet without her.

"There. Did you feel that?" He was up on one elbow, delighted. "Your belly's jumping. Every time you breathe, it jumps. You're still going. You're still coming a little bit, ain't you? Off of me."

She didn't answer him. She kept her eyes on the hand on the ceiling.

Wicks propped his head on his hand. His dark canine showed. His free hand came over and found her left breast, and he drew one yellow fingertip around the puffy rise of her nipple, around and around. The window unit blew cold across her

wet skin, and the soft pink drew up tight under his fingertip where he could watch it. She watched it happen. Her mouth pressed thin.

"Them two," he said. "Dale and Vince. They think they're something. Vince gets on you, he grinds around like he's stirring paint. And Dale, okay. Dale's got the size. Nobody's arguing. But you don't shake for Dale. I seen you with Dale, you hold your breath for Dale." He pinched the tip of her nipple, gently, and rolled it. "You shook for *me*. You was hollering my name, sweetheart. Right here. I'm gonna hear it every night."

The pinch ran a jolt straight down through her to where she was raw. She let our a breathy *Ah*. He heard it and his knee started bouncing against the mattress.

"They never got it this hard, I bet," he said. "All puckered up for me. Dale had his mouth on it all night Saturday and it never looked like that."

"Don't talk about—"

It died in her throat. Her throat was raw from crying out into his neck. Her chin burned where his goatee had scraped it for twenty minutes. Her open mouth tasted like his menthols. He pinched and rolled her nipple anyway, gently, watching her face.

She wanted to roll off the bed and find her clothes and get down those stairs. She wanted to stand in her own shower until the hot water ran out. She lay where she was and made her hand move instead.

She put it on his chest. Her fingers spread on the damp ribbed wifebeater, and his heart knocked against her palm, still fast. Her left hand. Nothing on it. The ring was at home in

the ceramic dish by the front door, with the keys and the loose change.

"Wicks." It came out a croak. She swallowed and tried again. "Can I tell you something? Without you laughing."

"I ain't gonna laugh." His hand left her nipple and came down over hers on his chest and held it there. "Swear."

The side of her breast was pressed against his tank top. She could feel the wet cotton on it. She left it there.

"I'm scared of them."

His thumb stopped on her knuckles.

"Vince and Dale." She looked at his collarbone. Her lower lip shook and she let it. Under his hand her fingers trembled on his chest. "The way they've been with me. Like I'm theirs. Dale puts his hand on the back of my neck like—" She stopped. "And Vince watches everything I do. Everything. They're getting worse every week, Wicks. And you're the one I wanted. I came here because you're the one I wanted."

Against her hip, his spent cock gave a slow thick twitch.

"Yeah." He said it softly, like it might break if he said it loud. "Yeah. I know."

"If they find out I was here." She made herself look at him. His watery eyes were right there. "If they get even a hint. About today, or about what you're doing for me. They'll come down on you. Dale will. You know he will. And they'll make sure I never get near you again."

She watched it go through him. The grin dropped off. His Adam's apple went down and came up. His eyes slid off her face to the window, toward the street, and he looked like a man seeing Dale on those stairs. She thought it was all of Dale.

He swallowed again. Under her palm his heart had picked up.

"Nobody's coming down on nobody," he said. "Because nobody's gonna hear nothing."

"You can't tell them. Even as a joke. One word, Wicks, and it's over."

"Sweetheart." He tapped his temple with one finger. "I'm a vault. You know how many guys I sat in a room with for years and never said one word about what they told me? Years. Vault." His hand came back down over hers on his chest and squeezed. "Dale's gonna die not knowing. I'm gonna be sitting there Saturday knowing and he ain't."

"Saturday you have to act like this didn't happen. You can't look at me the way you're looking at me right now."

"Like how?"

His eyes were on her swollen mouth. Then on the red rash his goatee had left across her chin and down her throat. Then lower, on her bare tits, and his tongue came out and touched his dark canine.

"Like that."

He laughed, high and pleased with himself, and wiped his face with his hand. "Okay. Okay, I can do that. I'll be ignoring you so hard. I'll be all, *who's she*. Who's that lady, Vince, she lost?" He sobered. His thumb rubbed over her knuckles. "And the thing. Saturday. I got it. You don't gotta ask twice."

His cock had thickened against her hip while he talked. She could feel it lying hot and heavy on her skin. His hand stayed over hers, and her breast stayed against his damp tank, and she held her voice steady.

"Promise me."

He drew a cross with his finger over the front of his tank top, over his heart, slow and serious, like a kid. "I come through, sweetheart." Then he heard himself, and the dark canine came out, then all the yellow teeth. "I *come through*. Heh. You know that about me now, huh?"

She made herself smile at him. She didn't know if it looked like a smile.

"One more," he said. "Kiss me one more. Like my girl."

She looked past his shoulder at the cable box. The green numbers sat there.

"One," she said.

He leaned down and kissed her. His tongue came in slow this time, lazy, tasting of the same smoke. His hand left hers and slid down over her belly and cupped her bare pussy.

She was swollen and hotter there than anywhere else on her. Her lips had gone thick and slick with him, sore to the touch, and his palm closed over all of it and pressed. It made one soft wet sound under his hand. The heel of his hand grazed her clit and her stomach jumped against his wrist. Her hips came up off the sheet once into his palm, on their own, and she whimpered into his mouth. She kept her knees where they were, and she let the hand stay.

"I'm holding it in you," he said quietly against her lips. "Feel that? I'm keeping it in there. You're still all swollen up from me. You're my girl now. You keep that in there for me."

She kept her eyes open over his shoulder, on the cable box across the room.

2:51.

She turned her mouth off his. "The bus."

"There's another—"

"I have to make the three o'clock." She pushed up on her elbow. His hand came off her and caught her hip instead and held on.

"Ten minutes," he said. "Ten more minutes. There's one at three-thirty. There's always another one." He pressed himself against her thigh so she could feel what he meant. He was getting hard again. "Feel that? That's what you do. I'm ready again already. That never happens. Ten minutes, sweetheart."

"Wicks. The bus." It came out sharp. She pulled against his hand.

His fingers tightened on her hip. "Say Saturday."

"Saturday."

"Say my name."

"Wicks."

He let go. He fell back onto his pillow with his arm under his head and watched her sit up, beaming at the ceiling, his knee still bouncing.

When she stood, the ache went all the way up into her belly. Her thighs shook under her. She pressed her fingers to her swollen pussy to hold herself together, to hold him in, she didn't know which. The lips were puffed and tender under her fingertips. Her fingers came away shiny. She looked at them, and her eyes squeezed shut.

"It's on your fingers," Wicks said from the bed. He was still in nothing but the tank top, his cock lying thick on his thigh. "Oh, man. That's me on your fingers. Bathroom's right there. There's a towel on the hook. It's mostly clean."

She took one step toward the bathroom door. Mildew, and a bar of soap gone soft in a puddle. She thought about his towel on her and knew she'd be sick on his floor.

"There's no time," she said.

Her panties were on the rug by the bed where she'd stepped out of them. She stepped into them and pulled them up without wiping, and the wet cotton settled against her and went warm.

"I seen that." He came up on his elbow. "You didn't wipe. You're taking me home in them. Don't wash them. Promise me you won't wash them."

She didn't answer. Her tee was on the rug by the recliner, where he'd thrown it and missed. Her bra was draped over the recliner arm. One sandal had come off in the tangle of sheet at the foot of the bed. The other lay on the rug halfway to the window.

The skirt was at the window. She had to cross the room in her panties to get it. The blinds were still jammed up crooked at the top of the frame and the whole street was lit. The linen lay crumpled on the carpet below the sill where it had fallen around her ankles.

Her eyes went to the glass first. Two wide round smears in the dust at chest height, where her tits had been mashed flat, each with a smaller blot dead in its center from her nipples. Her fingerprints, spread wide on either side. At mouth height, a smudge of lip gloss and dried spit. On the sill beside them the dead plant leaned in its cracked pot. She could see exactly what had been pressed there.

Below it, across Bennett Street, the silver Camry sat in the shade. The sun had moved. It lay across the whole windshield now, white, and she could see nothing behind it. Anyone in that car could see her. She stood in the open window in the sun

with her tits bare and her panties soaked dark and clinging, and the glare gave her nothing back.

She bent for the skirt. She had to bend all the way to the floor. Her tits swung down heavy and full in the sunlight, freckles bright across the tops and the red rash of his goatee splotched over the pale skin, her nipples still swollen. Halfway down she thought of her arm. She brought it up across her chest too late, after she already had the skirt in her fist. Shame went through her face and a throb went through her pussy in the same second.

"Bend over like that again," Wicks said behind her. "Oh, man. That little mole. Right there on your ass, sticking out of them wet panties. Do it again." His voice climbed. "You're gonna ride the bus with me in you. Sitting on it. The whole ride. It's gonna soak right through that skirt, the whole bus gonna smell like me. Some guy's gonna sit down next to you and he gonna know."

She straightened at once. She stepped into the skirt and wrapped it and tied it at her hip with fingers that kept missing the knot. The bow came out lopsided and she left it.

She went back across the rug to the recliner. The cups of the bra were cold from the window unit. They closed over tits marked pink with his goatee and yellow-gray where his fingertips had been, and her nipples stood up hard against the lace. She reached back for the hook and missed it. She found it the second time, one eye off, and it sat crooked.

"Church bra going back on," Wicks narrated from the bed. "There it goes. Aw. Bye, girls."

She pulled the tee over her head. It clung to the sweat on her back and stuck there. Her own shampoo came up out of her

hair in the collar, sweet and expensive, the only clean thing in the room. She dragged her hair out of the neck and found her sandals.

At the door he caught her. He had pulled his jeans on, unsnapped and riding his hip bones, and his tank top was stuck dark to his narrow chest with sweat. His hair had dried in clumps where she'd pulled it, sticking straight up off his forehead.

"Saturday I'm gonna ignore you so hard," he said. "I ain't even gonna look. I'm gonna be watching the TV. I'm gonna be looking at Dale's shoes." He was looking at her now, all over. "Say hi to the bus driver for me."

He got both hands up under the back of her skirt and squeezed her ass hard. His fingers slid down and found the soaked cotton between her legs and pressed it up into her, and he groaned into her face.

"Oh, I can feel it," he said. "Right through. You're so wet. You're still so wet from me."

"Wicks. The bus."

He kissed her one more time, wet and long, his goatee on her raw chin, his fingers pressed up into the cotton. She held still for it.

"Saturday," he said against her mouth.

"Saturday," she said. It came out hoarse.

He threw the deadbolt for her. The door shut behind her and she heard it lock again.

She stood on the landing under the caged bulb. Fried onions and cat litter. Her knees felt like they belonged to somebody else. She went down the seventeen stairs with her hand on the wall the whole way.

The heat outside hit her like an open oven. Her eyes watered in the glare.

She kept her eyes on the sidewalk, away from his window, away from the Camry. She walked down the far side of Bennett Street toward where the bus would be. The sun lay on her through the thin tee. Her nipples were still drawn up hard against the lace and she could see them through the cotton when she looked down. Her stride came out short because her thighs wouldn't steady. Her sandals slapped the hot concrete.

The man in the lawn chair outside the bodega watched her come. His eyes went to her mouth and then down to her chest and stayed there. She straightened her back as she passed him. She felt the straightening push her chest out under the tee. Her face burned. She kept walking.

She turned the corner onto the side street and stopped by a chain-link fence and waited.

Ten seconds later the Camry came around the corner and pulled to the curb beside her. She opened the door and got in and shut it.

The clock on the dash said 3:04.

The air conditioning was on high. In the closed car the smell came off her all at once, out of her hair and her shirt and her skin. Menthol. The drugstore lime. Sweat. And the other smell under it, the sex, coming from under her skirt.

Tyler left the car in park. His hands were on the wheel. The scab on his knuckle had split again and there was a dot of fresh blood on it. He turned his head and looked at her, and she watched his eyes go over her. The tee stuck to her in damp patches. The bra sitting crooked under it, one cup higher. The red goatee rash spreading from her chin down her throat and

onto her chest. The skirt tied in a lopsided knot. Her hair matted flat at the back from his pillow. His thumb pressed down on the scab. His nostrils flared once.

She sat up straight and put her hands together in her lap. The vent blew cold onto the damp linen over her thighs.

He shifted in his seat. The denim pulled tight across his lap. She saw it, and made her voice cooler.

"He has it," she said. Clear and level. "A thirty-eight. The numbers are ground off. It's loaded. He's bringing it Saturday, and he swore he won't tell either of them."

"Sixty-seven minutes," Tyler said.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I didn't ask about the gun."

"That's what I went up there for."

He looked at her mouth. "I saw what you went up there for," he said.

The fan blew. She looked straight ahead through the windshield at a fire hydrant somebody had painted gold.

"I saw you at the window, Meg."

"I know." She kept her eyes on the hydrant. "I saw you see me."

He went still. His whole body just stopped, his hands on the wheel, the way he went still when the firm called. She heard him breathe in through his nose.

"Then he pulled you off it," Tyler said. "And the window was empty. Two-sixteen. And you didn't come down until three."

"It wasn't—"

"Two-sixteen."

"He wouldn't *finish*, Tyler." It came out higher than she wanted. She brought it down. "He'd jerked it twice this morning. By himself. After he saw me on the street. He told me that like he was proud of it. I tried to do what I said I'd do. I got down on the rug and I used my mouth. I could barely take the head, Tyler, I was gagging on it, and he still wouldn't—"

"After the window." His hand slid an inch on the wheel and gripped again. "The bed."

"Don't use that voice on me."

"Tell me."

"You said two-twenty." She turned in the seat and looked at him. Her face was hot and she couldn't stop it. "You said two-twenty you were turning off the car and coming up. I looked at the clock on his cable box, Tyler. I *watched* two-twenty go by."

His thumb went to the scab and worked at it. It opened. He kept working it.

"You were going to come up," she said.

"What did he do to you."

She stared at him. He stared back. He was giving her nothing. Under her skirt she could feel the cotton soaking, cool now from the vent. Her face burned. The words were in her raw throat and she started.

"He put me on his bed." Her voice cracked and she kept going. "He folded me in half. He pushed my knees up to my chest and he put my ankles on his shoulders and he leaned on me. That's how he fucked me. Like that."

Tyler breathed out hard through his nose.

"His cock was so deep. Every time. My pussy was right up in the air and he just kept going down into it." She swallowed. "And he called me his girl. The whole time. *My girl, my girl.*"

His eyes dropped to her lap and came back up. He said nothing. His chest went up and down.

"And he wanted to kiss me. I said no. I turned my face away and I said no, and he didn't make me. He asked. *Please, once, like I'm your boyfriend.*"

"And you kissed him."

"Yes, I kissed him." She was almost shouting. "I kissed Wicks. With his tongue in my mouth. And I came. I came with his mouth on mine." She could still taste the menthol on her tongue while she said it. Her voice caught and broke and she pushed through it. "And then I couldn't stop kissing him. I had my hands in his hair. I pulled his face down to me by his hair, Tyler, and I came again." Her eyes were stinging. "With my tongue in his mouth."

The denim across his lap pulled tighter. He didn't look down. The wheel creaked under his hands.

"Did he pull out."

"I told him to." Her voice dropped. She looked down at her hands. "He said he was going to come in me, and I pushed him. I told him to pull out. And he did. He stopped. He was pulling out because I asked him."

"And."

"And I came again." She couldn't look at him now. "And I put my legs around his neck and pulled him back in. And I told him to do it."

The vents blew. The gold hydrant sat there in the sun. She could hear him breathing.

"I told him to come in me. And he did." She pressed her knees together. "It's in me right now."

She shifted her hips on the seat. Her thighs unstuck from each other with a small wet sound. The skirt slid open over her knee. There was a dark wet patch on the navy linen, and where she'd been sitting a small shine on the gray upholstery. The smell came up between them, stronger.

"You want to see it?" Her own voice, clipped. "It's on your seat."

He looked. He looked at her lap a long time. Then he looked at her face.

"You told him to," he said, low, like it cost him something.

"I told him to," she said, smaller.

The split scab was bleeding onto the leather of the wheel. She made herself keep her eyes on his face. His lips had gone pale. Red was climbing his neck from under his collar. His eyes were wet and furious and they would not leave her.

Her eyes went down, to his jeans. The fly was pulled crooked, stretched tight along his left thigh. She could see the shape of the head of his cock outlined in the denim, and a small darker spot at the tip where he'd soaked through. He kept his hands on the wheel. He made no move to hide it.

She looked at it for a long time. One second. Two. Three.

"You're hard," she said. Precise. "You're sitting there hard. Are you serious."

"Meg." Rough. A warning.

"You sat down here. You sat in my car and watched him put me on that glass, and I come down and tell you that, and you're—" She pointed at his lap with her left hand.

"I'm out on Vince's bail." It came out of him fast and flat, like he'd had it ready. "I go up those stairs and put that guy through a wall, I'm back in a cell by tonight. And Saturday's gone. Everything's gone."

"Don't."

"That's the—"

"Don't, Tyler. You know that's not why you stayed in the car."

His hand came off the wheel and rubbed at the back of his neck. He looked out the windshield. He looked at the hydrant the way she had.

"I had the key off," he said. "Two-twenty. I had my hand on the door handle."

She waited, and he went on, to the windshield.

"I looked up at the window one more time. You were pushing back on him. I could see you doing it. Your fingers were spread on the glass and your tits were flat on it and your hips were going back onto him." His voice went low and rough, each word dragged out of him. "I was hard before he ever got you off the glass. Before you came. And then the window was empty, and I sat here and looked at it for forty minutes, and I couldn't get out of the car. I couldn't make myself. I didn't want it to stop." He swallowed.

"Where did your hands go," she said. He closed his eyes. "When they came off the wheel. I saw them come off the wheel, Tyler. Where did they go."

"On me." It came out of him like a tooth. "Through my jeans. I stopped. I couldn't stand it, so I stopped, and I put them back on the wheel." His eyes opened on the windshield. "And then I started again."

"Did you—"

"No."

She sat with that. A hot pulse went through her low, between her legs, and she felt her pussy clench hard on the wet cotton, and she was so angry she could feel it in her teeth. She wanted to hit him. She wanted to open the door and get out on the sidewalk and walk to the real bus.

"Tyler," she said, furious.

His hand came down onto his thigh and pressed there, beside the line in his jeans, his fingers digging into the denim. He turned his face to his window.

"Drive," she said.

He didn't move.

"Tyler. Drive the car."

He put it in gear. He pulled away from the curb with one hand and kept the other on his thigh, beside the hard line in his jeans, and it stayed there. She kept her eyes on her window and watched the chain-link go by.

On Friday afternoon Tyler sat on the edge of their bed and called Vince on speaker while Megan stood beside him with her arms folded under her breasts.

He rubbed the back of his neck once. "It's Tyler. Got a problem with tomorrow."

Classic rock and the compressor rumble from Vince's garage. Silence. Then the hard edge. "You got a court date in three weeks, pal."

"Not her. Me. The shop in Millbridge wants four grand up front for the rebuilt transmission, so I took an overnight commercial swap in Meriden. Six tomorrow evening to six Sunday morning. I turn it down, I lose my spot on the dispatch list."

He stared at the carpet between his boots and let the pause stretch. Then he pushed the rest of it out, low and bitter.

"And after last Saturday — sitting in that chair while you guys laughed at me — I don't want to be in the room. Megan's been asking all week when Saturday is. She wants to come on her own."

Next to him, Megan's arms tightened under her breasts. Heat climbed her throat and she turned her face toward the window. Tyler saw it and looked away.

A short, rough laugh through Vince's nose. "Climbing the walls. Yeah. I bet she is." The click-snap of his Zippo. "You know what I watched her do Tuesday morning? She come out on your step in them little gray shorts with no bra on, bent down to pick up the Amazon box. The whole block stopped, pal. You can see everything that girl's got right through that shirt." A drag. "She don't even know she's doing it. Or she knows."

Tyler's hand was on the back of his neck again. "She doesn't know."

"I know what she wants Saturday. Eight-thirty. Front door's open. You go pull your wire."

The line went dead.

Megan's face was still toward the window. The flush was high on her cheeks and her mouth was pressed thin, and the color went down past her collar.

She looked at the phone on the bedspread. "He bought it."

"He was always going to."

"You almost blew it at the end. Your voice changed."

"My voice was fine."

"Your voice got tight when he talked about the shorts." She unfolded her arms and looked at him. "You sounded jealous. You're supposed to sound beaten."

"I am beaten."

She held his eyes. Then she put her hand on his shoulder, briefly, and took it away.

"I'll go tomorrow," she said. "It'll be done by one."

Tyler's hand found her hip. His thumb hooked the waistband of her shorts. She looked down at his hand and didn't step out of it and didn't lean into it.

"I don't want you walking in there alone," he said.

"That's the whole point."

"I know what the point is."

She lifted his hand off her hip and set it on his knee. "Then let me do it."

At twenty past eight on Saturday night Tyler stood in the bedroom doorway and watched his wife turn from the mirror.

She'd found the dress at the back of the closet — a crimson halter from a bachelorette weekend in Miami she'd never worn past a hotel bathroom. She was wearing it now.

The thin red jersey was a single layer with nothing under it. Two straps tied behind her neck, the front plunging in a V between her breasts to her navel, the side openings showing the pale swell of her from collarbone to rib. When she turned and caught his eyes on her she tugged the knot at her neck so the V opened a finger wider and smoothed the jersey down over her hip. It rode back up. Under his stare her nipples drew tight, the raised puffy circles of her areolae and the stiff points pushing through the red stretch like they were trying to get out.

Her entire back was bare to the base of her spine. The skirt ended so high on her thighs that the mole on her left cheek showed at the hem. She wore nothing underneath.

On her feet, the pointed black heels she'd worn the night she went to Vince's alone for the pictures. Her dark hair loose. Her mouth painted the same deep red as the dress.

His head said take the keys off the hook and tell her to change. His cock said nothing useful. An image came through that he couldn't shut off — Dale's scarred fingers hooking the straps off her shoulders before she'd cleared the front hall, the red jersey on the floor before the door closed behind her — and it was wrong, it wouldn't happen like that he thought, and it made him harder, and he killed it.

"Put something on under it," he said. "Or take my jacket for the walk."

"The walk is three doors." She picked up the leather tote from the bed and slung the strap over her bare shoulder. The motion dragged the jersey across her left nipple and it peaked harder and she looked away. "The dress is doing what it's supposed to do."

"Meg."

"I'll be back when it's done." She held his eyes. Something warm in them. "Leave the porch light on for me."

The ring was already in the ceramic dish by the front door when she walked past it — beside two quarters and a house key, the gold band she'd set there before he came into the room. Tyler looked at the gold in the dish and his stomach turned over.

She walked past with her left hand empty at her side and opened the front door and stepped into the July heat.

He stood in the hallway and listened to her heels on the step, then the sidewalk, fading. Through the curtain the driveway was dark.

He went to the kitchen and turned the lights off.

The July air was still warm from the day. It came up under the jersey the moment she was off the step, touching the skin of her stomach and her thighs and the smooth strip between her legs where she wore nothing. Each heel on the sidewalk sent a jolt up through her calves and her breasts shifted under the red fabric, heavy and loose, the nipples dragging on the thin stretch with every step.

A pickup rolled past on Ridley with its window down and the driver's head turned all the way around. She felt his eyes on the plunge of her back and the length of her legs and she kept walking, chin up, heels clicking steady.

"God *damn*," the driver called through the open window, and his brake lights flared for a second and let go.

Her nipples were hard against the jersey. Between her thighs she was already slick, the wet heat of it on her skin, and the shame was that she'd felt it start before she reached his driveway.

Vince's porch light was off. Dale's dark sedan behind the rusted Ram. No Civic at the curb.

She climbed the two concrete steps and knocked.

The door opened. Vince filled the doorway in his open plaid shirt, and he stayed where he was. The musk of his skin and the sweet chemical of whatever he'd combed into his hair came through the screen.

His dark eyes went down the crimson V and stopped on her nipples.

They tightened further under his stare. Her arms started to cross over her chest and she caught herself and lifted her chin.

"Six months I been watching you walk past this house," Vince said. "In them shorts, in the sports bra. Never once looking like *that*." His stare dropped to the hem. "I can see you ain't wearing a goddamn thing under it."

"Good evening to you too, Vince. Can I come in or are we doing this on your porch?"

He held his ground. She had to turn sideways to get past the barrel of his gut. The jersey hem dragged across her ass as she squeezed through, and his oil-stained palm settled on the small of her back and steered her into the hall. The shock of his rough skin on hers ran up her spine.

The poker table was shoved against the paneling, stacked tonight with Evan Williams and Tanqueray and a plastic tub of ice. The couch and the recliner faced each other across the stained carpet.

Dale sank deeper into the middle of the couch and spread his knees as she came out of the hall. The unlit cigar turned between his scarred fingers. His heavy-lidded eyes tracked her from the heels to the hem and settled there.

"Last time she walked out of here she could barely keep her dress on," Dale said. "Tonight she's not bothering."

"It's a dress," she said, clipped and bright, and felt the distaste pinch at her mouth before she could stop it.

"Set that bag down," Dale said. "Bring me four fingers of the brown. Neat."

"Neat it is." She set the tote against the wall by the kitchen archway and went to the bar.

She had the cork out of the bourbon when the rattling pop of Wicks's muffler came down Ridley and died at the curb.

Half a minute later the screen door slapped. Wicks stepped into the front hall sweating through a faded blue denim jacket zipped halfway up his skinny chest, his right arm held stiff against his ribs.

"Hot enough to melt the dash out there," Wicks said, fast and loud, already running. "Every light on Ridley was red, I swear to God, and my AC's busted, stuck on — Vince, you seeing her in that dress? You can see *everything* through it, I mean everything, the—"

"Wicks." Vince's voice from the recliner, flat. "Shut your mouth and hang your coat."

Wicks shut his mouth. He threw the brass deadbolt and turned to the louvered closet door three feet from the entrance.

"Just hanging this up," he said, quieter.

She set the bottle down on the felt.

Wicks pulled the closet door open. The crammed row of winter coats and flannels and the heavy brown leather bomber in the center. His back half-turned to the room. She saw his right hand come out of the denim pocket holding something compact and heavy in a gray shop rag. His arm shoved deep behind the brown coat's shoulder. A faint, solid clunk of steel settling on pine board.

She clinked two tumblers together at the bar. Hard.

Wicks hung the empty denim jacket on a hook, pulled the closet door shut, and rapped his knuckles twice on the wood.

Tap-tap.

He turned down the hall and winked at her — wide, toothy, conspiratorial. Behind him, across the room, Dale's

heavy lids moved from the wink to Megan's face and stayed a second.

She poured four fingers of bourbon into Wicks's glass with fingers that stayed steady because she made them stay steady.

She carried the drinks out. Dale's bourbon, Wicks's bourbon. On the way back past Vince she stopped at the stereo cabinet against the front wall and twisted the volume up three clicks and turned the bass dial to the right.

A low bassline boomed out of the floor speakers and rattled the windowsill. The vibration came through her heels into her shins.

"Little quiet in here," she said, and her red lips curved as she swayed her hips once to the music and Wicks grinned back at her from the couch. "Might as well make it a party."

Vince shifted in the recliner. "I got neighbors, sweetheart. Keep that going past eleven, somebody's gonna call the precinct on me again."

Again. Heat rose in her face. She kept the smile and felt it pulling.

"I'll turn it down later. Drink your gin."

She poured his Tanqueray to the brim and mixed herself a tonic with barely an inch of gin in it, the fizz sharp on her tongue.

Dale set his glass on the armrest. He pointed one finger at the space between his spread knees.

"Here."

She walked across the stained carpet and stood between his thighs, her back to Vince and Wicks. The warm smell of his cologne rose off his lap. His spread legs pressed hot against hers

through his jeans and the jersey hem rode high on the backs of her thighs.

His eyes went through the fabric to what was under it.

"That's coming off," he said.

"Dale—"

His scarred fingers reached past her shoulders and hooked into the jersey knot behind her neck.

Her hand flew up and grabbed his wrist. Her eyes went to the front blinds, the crooked slats, the thrown deadbolt.

"The blinds are open," she said. "Anybody could—"

"Nobody's out there." His voice stayed level. "Take your hand down."

She stood with her fingers around his wrist. She could feel the cords of his forearm under her grip and the knot of the jersey in his fingers and the stereo shaking through the floor into her heels. The deadbolt was thrown. Three men behind her in a room she'd walked into alone, and her hand was the only thing between the dress and the floor.

She lowered her hand.

Dale pulled.

The jersey caught on her nipples — the stiff points snagging in the stretch — and then dragged them down and the fabric peeled away from her breasts with a soft, clinging sound and they dropped free, heavy and full, bouncing once in the room's air. *Dale*— died in her mouth as the knot gave. She felt the cool hit her chest first, then the undersides where the jersey had clung all night, then the nipples that had just been pulled. The jersey slid over her ass, the fabric dragging across skin it had been holding for three blocks and an hour, and fell to her heels

with a soft slap. She stood on the red ring in her black heels and a shiver went through her shoulders that she hated.

"Nothing on under it!" Wicks choked behind her, coughing bourbon. "Vince — she walked down the block like that."

"I know she did," Vince said from the recliner, rough and pleased. "I watched her the whole way from the porch. You could see everything move under that dress from three houses down."

"Dale, you seeing this?" Wicks leaned sideways on the couch to look at her from behind. "How do you walk down a street with *nothing*?"

Dale's hands were at his sides. He looked at her face, then down. "She walked down the street for us."

She stood between Dale's knees naked except the heels, chin lifted, letting them look. The freckles scattered across her upper chest were out in the light. The mole on her left cheek, the one mark on her only a lover would see, was showing to the whole room. Between her thighs her pink lips were flushed and parted, the start of a gleam where they opened catching the light, and she knew every man in the room could see it.

"Look at them tits bare in my living room," Vince said from the recliner, his hand at the front of his shorts.

Wicks's Adam's apple jumped. His watery eyes went everywhere at once.

A whimper slipped out of her. Shame crawled up her neck. Under it, something clenched low and liquid.

Dale's palms cupped the undersides of both breasts and lifted their weight and let them drop. His thumbs dragged rough across her nipples, one and then the other.

"Now you're dressed right," Dale said.

She made a sound — high and caught in her throat.

"Your hands are cold," she said. It was supposed to come out clipped and it came out with a breath behind it that ruined the register.

The recliner creaked behind her. She smelled Vince before she felt him — the cigarettes and the musk and the gin — and then his body was close at her back and his rough palm slid across her ass and squeezed. The heat of his gut pressed against her spine. His gold chain brushed her shoulder blade.

From the couch, Wicks's bony fingers crept onto the groove of her hip bone and settled there, damp and trembling, his bourbon breath hot on her shoulder.

"God, she's smooth," Wicks said, loud. "Feel how smooth. You ever felt skin like this? I never—"

She flinched under his touch and stayed.

Dale's hands were still on her breasts. "My lap," he said.

Behind her, Vince settled back into the recliner with his gin.

Before she could move, Wicks shoved his glass onto the end table and slid across the cushion until his knee bumped Dale's thigh. His stained hand shot out and grabbed a full handful of her right ass cheek, fingers digging into the pale flesh.

"Hey, careful, Dale," Wicks said, loud over the stereo, grinning like he held four aces. "You can't just boss her around like that. She likes it a real specific way when she's on a bed — me and Meg got a whole different thing going on since—"

Her blood went cold from her scalp to her feet.

If he said *Wednesday*. If he said *my bed* or *his apartment on Bennett Street*. The room would come apart in ten seconds.

His mouth — the menthol, the yellow teeth, the dark one on the right — was about to say the word that ended everything.

She grabbed Wicks by both sides of his jaw and drove her mouth onto his.

His tongue came at hers before she was ready. Menthol and bourbon and the edge of the dark tooth against her lip. She shoved her tongue past his teeth to kill whatever word was next, and the taste of him flooded her mouth and her stomach turned and she held it there.

She swung her thigh over his lap. Her naked pussy met the rough denim seam over his cock — hard under her, straining at the fly — and the friction of it dragged a moan out of her into his mouth that she had not planned. Wet heat spread on the jeans beneath her. Her nipples dragged on the cotton of his t-shirt and the friction peaked them harder and she hated the throb that went with it.

His hands slid from her waist to her ass and spread her cheeks apart and she felt the room's air on everything and let him. He tried to keep talking into the kiss, a worshipping fragment — *"—knew you'd come here for—"* — and it died against her tongue.

She held the kiss until whatever he'd been building was gone and his tongue was just chasing hers, sloppy and grateful and giving her nothing to be afraid of.

When she pulled back half an inch — breathing hard through her nose, smeared red lipstick on his goatee, one glistening thread of spit between their mouths — Dale's heavy-lidded eyes were narrow and hard on the side of her face.

Across the rug, Vince was forward in the recliner, staring at Wicks's red-smeared mouth.

"What the fuck was that," Vince said.

She was still on Wicks's lap. She forced a laugh — too dizzy, too high — and wiped her mouth with her wrist. "He said something cute," she said, and heard her voice shake. "I felt like kissing somebody."

She glanced down. A dark wet smear on the denim of Wicks's fly, right where she'd been sitting.

Vince saw it from the recliner. "You see what she left on him," he said, nodding at the jeans. "You see that."

She slid off Wicks's lap because of that and because Dale's eyes were still narrow.

Dale's voice from the couch, flat. "Since when do you kiss Wicks like that."

"Wicks asked nicer than you did." It was supposed to be a deflection and it came out too thin.

"You owe me a lap," Dale said.

She went to Vince's recliner instead. Small defiance. She felt Dale's eyes on her back as she crossed the rug and picked up the bottles and poured three more fingers into Vince's glass and topped Dale's off.

Vince unfastened his cargo shorts and shoved the zipper open and pulled himself out — half-hard, dark from the tan, uncut, the girth across the shaft so wide that her fingers wouldn't meet around it.

"Sit on the arm," he said. "Put your hand on it."

She perched on the padded arm of his recliner and wrapped her fingers around him. The first Friday night he'd put

her right here. Clean hands, that courteous voice, *Comfortable?* He'd kept his fingers to himself all evening.

"Comfortable?" Vince said, and grinned up at her with his chipped left incisor.

"Yes," she said. It came out prim and breathy and it was a lie.

His free hand slid between her thighs on the arm, rough fingertips finding the wet crease of her and pressing. She stroked him from the foreskin to the root, the dark uncut skin sliding under her fingers, and she felt him harden and pulse in her grip and her stroke faltered. The smell of his cock rising off his crotch.

"First night you sat right here," Vince said, his eyes half-closed, his hips tilting into her fist. "Same arm. Knees together, wouldn't look at me. I asked was you comfortable." He grinned at the ceiling. "Now you walk over with nothing under that dress, I tell you put your hand on my cock, and you just do it. Don't even make a face no more. I can feel how wet you are from here."

"Drink your gin, Vince," she said, and heard the bartender voice crack on *gin*.

From the couch, Dale watched her hand on Vince. "She still owes me."

"I heard you," she said. She meant it to sound sharp. It came out small.

At the bar, Wicks was pouring himself another double and talking to nobody about how she'd tasted like lipstick and bourbon, about what her tongue did, about what he'd had Wed— she— and he took a long drink and started talking about the stereo instead.

Ice shot through her belly. Her fingers tightened on Vince's cock and she made herself loosen them.

"Your hand's shaking," Vince said.

She looked. Her clean fingers around the dark girth of him, the heel of her palm slick where he'd leaked. Her hand was shaking.

Then Wicks came back from the bar.

He was already at her shoulder, bourbon on his breath, before she registered his steps. His stained thumb and forefinger closed on her right nipple and pinched, and the nipple peaked harder in the pinch and she flinched.

His mouth came down to her ear. Low — under the stereo, barely a whisper. "Told you I'd take care of you, baby. Wait till you check the front hall—"

She could hear Vince breathing in the chair, his eyes half-closed. She couldn't tell whether he'd heard.

She let go of Vince's cock and came off the arm onto her feet.

"Hey—" Vince started.

She stepped around the back of the recliner and grabbed Wicks by the back of his stringy neck. His cock was straining against the front of his jeans, the shape of the oversized head pressing hard through the denim. She shoved her left breast into his open mouth.

His teeth closed on her nipple and the soft weight of flesh around it. Whatever word was next died in a muffled, wet groan. She held the back of his head and felt his tongue work the nipple behind his teeth — hot, sloppy, the pull sending a jolt straight down between her legs that she hated. His cheeks

hollowed as he sucked and the nipple swelled fatter in his mouth. Spit ran under her breast and down her ribs.

While he sucked she got his jeans open. Her free hand yanked the button, hauled the zipper down, and pulled him out against her stomach — the ordinary shaft, pale and crooked, and the head swollen and dark red and too big for the rest of him. It pressed hot and leaking against her navel.

He tried to finish the sentence. It came out smeared and garbled around her flesh — *"—right behind th—"* — and then a worshipping half-line about her tit that was all vowels and spit.

"Don't," she said. Broken. "Wicks — *don't*."

She kept his mouth full until the sentence was gone. Then she sank down his body, her breast dragging out of his mouth, his cock dragging up her stomach and between her breasts and under her chin as she dropped.

Her knees hit the carpet. She held his shaft and the crown was at her lips and past them, stretching her mouth wide around the ridge, the taste of his skin flooding her tongue — hot, smooth, a salt leak at the slit she wasn't ready for. She gagged when the head hit the back of her throat and drove down again. Deeper. Her nose pressed against his wiry hair and spit slid off her lip and ran down over the top of her left breast. He was narrating above her, nasal and too loud — *"The lipstick, look at the lipstick all over it, her lips can't even go around—"* — until his voice cracked:

"Oh, fuck—" Wicks wheezed. "Oh fuck, look at her—"

His hands grabbed two fistfuls of her hair. The shame was right there with the taste: kneeling for Wicks, in front of Dale and Vince who outranked him, the same flavor she'd swallowed

three days ago soaking her tongue while her thighs were slick and her pussy ached.

From the couch, Dale made a low sound in his chest.

"Jesus Christ," Vince said from the recliner.

Behind her the recliner scraped on the carpet.

Vince's boots hit the floor. His rough hand came down into her hair next to Wicks's knuckles and yanked her head off the cock. The wet pop carried over the music. His taste was still on her tongue.

She was kneeling on the rug with spit on her chin and her breasts slick and shining and both men's hands in her hair.

"Who runs this room?" Vince said. His voice was flat and ugly.

"You do," she breathed.

Dale was already off the couch. His forearm caught Wicks across the chest and shoved him into the bar table. Bottles rattled. A tumbler went off the edge and shattered.

"Sit at the bar," Dale said. "Stay."

Wicks scrambled onto the barstool with his cock still out of his open fly and his fists gripping the bar edge, knee jittering against the table leg.

Dale's hand closed around Megan's arm and hauled her up. Her heels skidded on the carpet. His fingers found the hinge of her jaw and locked her head where he put it.

"You put that dress on for me and walked over here in it," Dale said. His voice was the same flat register it always was. "And the first cock you put your mouth on was *his*."

His hand left her jaw and his open palm cracked across her left ass cheek, right over the mole. The slap rang over the music. A hot red mark spread on her white skin and she cried out and

Dale's name broke out of her mouth with the cry. The bourbon on his palm burned against the hot cheek.

"That's mine," he said.

"Both of ours," Vince said.

From the bar, Wicks's knee stopped jittering. "Damn," he whispered. "You see that handprint? Right on the—"

"Shut up, Wicks," Dale said. "You'll get your turn."

Dale's hand went to the back of her head. He turned her face toward his open fly. His cock was out — heavy, dark, veined, the broad head catching the lamplight. He held the shaft in his fist.

"Open your mouth," he said.

She opened. The broad head pushed past her teeth onto her tongue. Salt and the dense musk of his skin, the ghost of cigar smoke. Her jaw stretched at the hinge and her lips sealed around the shaft and she tasted how different he was from Wicks — wider, heavier, a weight on her tongue that filled her mouth before he moved.

Dale held the back of her head and gave her two slow strokes, in and back, watching her face.

"This mouth is mine," he said, low. "Not Wicks's. We say when Wicks gets his turn."

He pulled out of her mouth. Spit stretched and broke.

Then his arms were moving.

Dale stepped behind her. His forearms hooked under both her knees and lifted. Her heels left the carpet. Her legs were spread wide and her back was pressed against the hard wall of his chest and she was off the ground, held open in the air, her weight on nothing but him. He braced his shoulders against

the wood paneling, and his spread hands locked behind her bent knees.

She was face to face with Vince.

She looked down between her own spread thighs. She could see everything — the swollen pink of her, glistening in the lamplight, and below it, pressed against the cleft of her ass, the full dark length of Dale's cock, pinned along her from underneath, dark against her white skin. When she looked up, Vince was standing between her open legs with his shorts at his knees, his uncut girth in his fist, the blunt head shining with the wet where it had slid against her thigh.

"Wait," she said. "Vince. Wait."

His face was six inches from hers. "For what? You climb on Wicks twice and now you want me to wait?"

"He's watching." Her eyes went to Wicks at the bar. "I'm — you're — Vince, please."

Vince stepped closer between her spread thighs. The blunt head of his cock slid through the slick on her inner thigh — wetter than the smear she'd left on the jeans, shining — and pressed against her without entering.

"Feel that?" he said, his dark eyes on hers.

Dale's mouth came down to her ear from behind, low and calm. "You heard him. His room." He shifted his hips and the length of him slid along the cleft of her ass, slick and heavy. "And this is mine. I'm lending you."

She looked at Vince's face. She looked down at his cock in his fist — dark, veined, the uncut girth wider than her hand had been around it on the chair arm, and the blunt head shining, aimed at the open center of her.

She reached between her own spread thighs. She took his cock in her left hand and fit the broad head against herself. She felt the width press and her breath went short.

"Go on," she said. The shame burned in her face before the words were out. "Go on, Vince."

He drove into her.

The width opened her and kept going — wider than she'd braced for — and his girth seated deep and she heard the sound of soaked skin giving as he bottomed out. The room went quiet. Dale held still behind her. Vince held still inside her. A whimper cracked out of her that she couldn't swallow. Her head fell back against Dale's shoulder and Dale's arms took her weight as she jerked.

Vince watched her face from six inches away.

He drew back, his shaft shining with her. He drove in again and her whimper broke into a gasp that shaped his name — *Vince* — and her hands grabbed the forearms holding her knees because there was nothing else to hold.

"Tight," Vince said, his dark eyes on her face. "Soaking wet and she's still tight. You feel like you been thinking about this all week."

Her hips rolled to meet his next stroke. She couldn't stop them. She saw him see it and grin with his chipped tooth.

"You're — too wide," she said. Dale's body was a wall behind her. "Please — *God* — slow—"

His thumb found her clit and pressed and her back arched against Dale's chest and her breasts bounced against Vince's collar and a moan cracked out of her that was someone else's voice.

"She's going with it," Wicks called from the bar, his voice high and nasal, his fist moving on his own cock. "Vince, she's pushing back on you, look at her hips—"

"Eyes down, Wicks," Dale said behind her ear. The vibration of his voice ran through his chest into her spine.

Below her, Dale's cock slid along the cleft of her ass, slick with what was running out of her around Vince. Dale ground up against her from underneath and the sensation stacked — Vince deep in front, Dale pressed hard beneath.

"Don't look at me," she said to Wicks, and heard her own voice break on it.

"She's getting close," Wicks said from the bar, leaning forward, his fist working faster. "Listen to her. Wed— she made the same—" He caught himself and swallowed. "She's real close, Vince."

Ice went through her chest. Vince's next stroke cut the fear in half.

Dale shifted his grip. He bounced her down onto Vince and she cried out — high and broken — and Vince's cock dragged on something deep inside her and the edge was right there. The smell of sex had risen through the cigarette air and filled the room.

Dale's mouth came down by her ear, but he was talking past her, to Vince. "Every time you go in, her ass clamps down on me back here." Low and flat, a fact.

She felt it. Dale's length pinned in the crease of her ass, her cheeks clenching on it every time Vince drove into her, Vince filling her from the front, both of them on her at once.

"Vin—" she started, and his next stroke cut the name in half.

"Who runs this room?" Vince said. His mouth was close to hers now, his breath on her neck, grinding her down inside Dale's grip.

"You do," she gasped. "Vince — *you do* —"

Vince drove in three more times — grinding, watching her face from six inches — and his rhythm broke. He pulled out with a ragged grunt, and stuffed himself into his open shorts. He dropped into his recliner and reached for the gin.

Dale held her against the paneling for one more second. His cock was still pinned between her ass and his belt, slick, pulsing. Then he let her knees down. Her heels hit the carpet.

He walked her to the couch by the arm. Four steps. He sat in the center of the plaid cushions and pulled her down onto his lap with her back against his broad chest.

For five seconds nobody in the room was touching her between the legs. She felt the air find every soaked, tender inch of her.

"Drinks," she said. Her voice came out bright and cracked at the seam, the bartender voice with nothing behind it. She leaned forward off Dale's chest for the bourbon on the end table, his length sliding along the crease of her ass as she moved, and topped off the glass on his armrest. "Vince, you're empty. Wicks, you're right there. Pour him one." Her hand was steady on the bottle because she made it steady. The more they drank, the sooner Vince's eyes would close. "Nobody in this room is drinking enough."

"I got something better than a pour," Dale said behind her ear.

She felt his hips shift. The broad head of his cock left the crease of her ass and pressed between her thighs from below,

right against the tender, soaked center of her. She was soaked — from Vince, from the recliner, from the hour — and the size of what was pushing against her was a different scale from what had just pulled out.

"Dale." She said it fast. "Dale, that's — I can't sit on all of that."

"Sit on it," he said. A fact about the weather.

"Yes," she whispered.

His scarred hands gripped the tops of her hips. The head notched against her opening. One hand moved to her bare thigh, his dark fingers spread across her pale skin, holding her in place. She felt the head push in — the blunt, wide thickness stretching her — and her eyes closed and her mouth fell open and a helpless gasp shaped his name before she could stop it. She grabbed his forearms.

"Dale—"

"More of it," he said. "Take more."

She sank. The shaft followed the head in, longer than Vince, reaching deeper with every inch until she was past where anything else tonight had gone. Her thighs were shaking on either side of his. She dropped the last two inches and her breath punched out of her and she sat on him, full, full of him, too full. The length of him pressed a spot high inside her that made her whole belly clench.

"I can feel it in my stomach," she said. It came out raw and astonished. "Dale — you're — God."

"Took all of it," he said. Quiet. Satisfied. His palm settled on her bare hip and held there. "You feel like that from the inside. Tight rich girl with all of me in her."

She rose on her knees. She felt every ridge of him dragging out of her, his length shining between her spread thighs, and dropped her weight. The soaked slap carried over the bass. She grabbed his forearms and did it again. She rose until the broad head caught at the mouth of her and the cool air hit the wet shaft and she dropped and the full seat punched the air out of her lungs. Her head fell back against his shoulder.

She was riding him. And Wicks was watching.

He'd dragged the bar stool to the far end of the couch, his leg bouncing against the floor. His cock was still hanging from his open jeans. He leaned forward on the stool with both hands on his knees, mouth open, eyes locked where Dale's shaft disappeared into her.

"Jesus," Wicks said, loud. "Vince. You seeing this? Every time she comes back down you can see his balls on the cushion. She's taking the whole — look at how wet it is, it's dripping off her onto—"

"Everybody in this room can see, Wicks," Vince muttered from the recliner, his bloodshot eyes on her breasts, the gin at his lip. "She's soaking my couch."

Dale drove up. She dropped. The slap was louder this time — skin on skin on plaid — and the force sent a jolt through her that made her gasp, and the gasp broke a sentence she'd started about the ice. The bartender was gone.

"Listen to her," Wicks said, his voice high and reverent. "She's trying to talk and she can't, she's just— oh man, she's bouncing on him."

Vince leaned out of the recliner and held his empty glass across the gap. "Bartender." Wicks took it off him and held it out to her from the stool, grinning.

She got the Tanqueray off the end table with her left hand and poured while Dale bottomed out inside her. The pour wobbled. Gin ran down the outside of the glass and over Wicks's yellow fingers. She laughed, breathless and bright, and wiped her wet hand across her bare thigh.

"I'm a terrible bartender," she said, and her voice broke on the word and the laugh came back, high and loose and cracking, and Dale's hips drove up and the laugh turned into a raw moan she couldn't stop.

Wicks carried the glass back to the recliner, sucking gin off his knuckles.

At a quarter past ten she put her hands on Dale's knees and pushed herself up, and his length dragged out of her, and she stood on legs that barely held. The stereo was across the room. She needed a reason to walk past it.

"Ice is gone," she said. "Tub's empty. You want your drinks cold, somebody has to get ice."

Dale's palm cracked across her bare ass. "Then go get it."

She walked to the bar on heels that didn't feel steady. The air cooled between her thighs, the wet running in a slow trickle down her left leg toward her knee. The room smelled like sex and cigarettes.

"Something's running down your leg," Vince said from the recliner, watching her pass, his voice sluggish with gin. "All the way to the knee."

"Mop's in your kitchen, Vince," she said. The bartender, barely.

At the stereo cabinet she turned the bass dial two clicks to the right. The thump from the floor speakers kicked hard enough to rattle the bottles in their wet rings.

She got the ice from the kitchen. When she came back, she set the bucket on the end table and sat down beside Dale. His arm came across her bare shoulders.

"Open your knees," he said, flat. "Let me feel you."

She hesitated.

"Yes," she said, quiet, and opened them.

His fingers went between her thighs from the front. Two fingers, parting her, pushing into the soaked heat. His thumb found her clit and pressed. She leaned her head back against his collarbone and her eyes closed and a low, shaky moan left her. Wicks's knee stopped bouncing.

"Dale—" she tried to say, and heard it come out broken.

"Wet." He drew his fingers back and she could see them in the lamplight — his scarred knuckles shining with her, the dark skin glistening. He pushed them back in and she gasped. "Wetter than when I went in." His fingers worked deeper. Her hips rolled toward his hand.

Dale's free hand caught her jaw and turned her face toward his. His breath was cigar and bourbon. His heavy-lidded eyes looked into hers from three inches. Then he lifted her by the hips.

She swung her knee over his thigh. The straddle put them face to face — his scarred knuckles in her hair, the gold chain at her collarbone, cigar smoke on his breath, and his cock pressing up against her from below, still slick, still hard, still too much.

"Get back on it," he said. "I want to see your face."

She took him in her hand. She fit the head against herself and sat down on it and her eyes rolled and his name cracked out of her in a broken breath and his hands settled on her hips and held.

She rode him again, face to face, grinding rolls that rocked the couch. At her left shoulder, Wicks leaned in from the stool, too close. His mouth at her ear, bourbon and menthol — "Wednesday you made the same—"

She grabbed the back of his head and jammed his mouth against her left breast. The word died in a muffled grunt. His lips sealed around the puffy tip and his teeth closed on the soft flesh and his tongue worked, sloppy and devoted, his spit running warm down the underside where the freckles faded into pale skin. He pulled off long enough to gasp at Dale: "Look at this tit, Dale, the whole thing's in my mouth, I can feel her nipple getting hard on my tongue—" She shoved his face back onto her. His worship went into the soft weight of her breast, muffled and wet and grateful. Dale's eyes tracked the mouth on her tit, tracked her hand holding Wicks's face there, and he said nothing.

Tyler couldn't stay in the dark kitchen.

He had been at the table since nine with the overhead light off, staring at the green numbers on the microwave while the refrigerator hummed. The bass from Vince's house came across the street as a low, heavy pulse he felt in the floorboards under his boots. At eleven he'd gone to the sink for water. At eleven-thirty the numbers had turned and he'd put the glass down without drinking.

He knew the plan. He was supposed to sit here until twelve-thirty with the curtains drawn. If Dale or Wicks walked out for a cigarette and saw him on Ridley, every piece of what they'd built fell apart.

The thought of her bare breasts squashed against the glass on Bennett Street. The fogged ring where her mouth had been.

And later, in the Camry, her scraped chin and her voice cracking while she told him she'd come four times.

Tyler stood. He crossed the kitchen, went through the laundry room, and stepped into the dark yard.

The July night was thick and airless. Warm tar and mowed grass. He walked along the back fence to the property line, checked both directions, and crossed the dark asphalt of Ridley on a diagonal. No headlights. No porch lights. Vince's side of the street was darker — the old streetlight at the corner had been out since March.

He followed the shadow of the chain-link fence along the back of Vince's lot, past the strip of weeds where the basement window well sat — the hopper where he'd crouched in dead leaves two Saturdays ago — and slipped around the garage into the narrow side yard.

The living-room window was four feet above the foundation. The bottom sash was pushed up three inches for air. Behind the insect screen the drape was pulled back at the sill, and the bottom slats of the blinds hung crooked where an elbow had knocked them. A three-inch gap. Yellow light poured through it into the hydrangea leaves.

He stepped between the bushes. Planted his boots in the dry dirt. Brought his face level with the gap.

The couch sat side-on under the window, its near arm about two feet from the sill. Tyler looked down its length toward the bar and the recliner.

The smell hit him through the screen first: stale cigar smoke, bourbon, and underneath it, rising through everything, the sweet musk of her, her arousal and her sweat, thick enough to taste on the roof of his mouth.

She was straddling Dale's lap in the center of the couch, facing him, the profile of her body turned toward the window. She was naked except the pointed heels. Her dark hair clung to her shoulders in damp tangles. Tyler could see the line of her throat, the curve of her jaw tipped back, the near-side breast swinging with every stroke — the puffy nipple tight and glistening, freckles scattered across the upper chest. She was riding him in grinding rolls — rising on her knees so the springs creaked, sitting all the way down with a wet slap that carried through the screen. Every time she dropped he could see the red handprint on her near hip above the small dark mole, and the dark root of Dale's cock between her pale thighs.

Her far breast was in Wicks's mouth — the thin man leaning in from the bar stool at her left shoulder, his stained fingers dug into the pale underside, his lips and teeth sealed on her nipple. Her right hand held the back of Wicks's head, keeping his mouth full.

She was laughing.

A breathless, shameless, throaty laugh that broke into a high open moan when Dale's hips drove up into her.

"Come on, Vince," she gasped between strokes. "Drink it. You wanted me here tonight — keep up with me."

She ground down on Dale as she said it and the laugh came again. He knew that laugh. He'd heard it once in eight years when he was the one who'd made it — a Sunday morning in the first apartment, the futon, tickling her until she couldn't breathe and then inside her and she'd laughed like that with her head back and her hands in his hair and her whole body open to him. That was his. That sound was supposed to be his.

Tyler's fingers dug into the unpainted sill. His cock ached against his thigh. His free hand moved toward the screen and stopped. He could rap the mesh. He could walk around to the front door. His cock throbbed and the plan sat on him and his hand came back to the sill.

She thought he was home in their kitchen. The laugh sounded real.

Inside, Dale's hands clamped under her ribs. He lifted her off him.

"No—" She grabbed his shoulders. "Dale. I wasn't done."

The head of his cock pulled free with a thick, wet separation. He set her down on the couch cushions at the near arm, right under the window.

"Let a man get his drink," Dale said. He slapped her bare ass, open-palmed — the crack carried over the bass — and stood.

He crossed to the bar. Vince was already there, swaying, pouring. Both men had their backs to the couch.

Tyler froze. She was right there.

She'd fallen against the plaid cushions with her head at the near end of the couch, tipped back over the arm, her throat bare. She was close enough that if the screen hadn't been there he could have touched her hair. Her chest rose and fell. Her legs were parted, her heels hooked on the cushion frame. He could see the freckles scattered across the tops of her breasts, the pink blotches of heat down her throat, the puffy nipples still tight from Wicks's mouth. Between her pale thighs her pussy was flushed dark pink and glistening, puffy and used, and a thin string of wet hung from her to the plaid.

She breathed. Her eyes stayed closed. Her head tipped back over the arm, inches from the sill, and her mouth was open and her chest rose and fell and nothing in her face said she knew he was there.

At the far end of the couch, Wicks's eyes went from the two broad backs at the bar to her. He set his glass on the carpet. He kicked his jeans off his skinny ankles and scrambled between her spread knees, his cock hard, the ordinary shaft and the too-big head bobbing above her.

She opened her eyes. She looked up at Wicks and past him at Dale and Vince.

"Wait." She pressed her palm flat against his chest. "Wicks — wait."

Tyler heard the voice she used on him the night he forgot to call the landlord about the leak. Clipped. Final. Her hand locked on Wicks's chest.

Wicks froze over her, his arms braced on either side of her shoulders. The head of his cock was touching her, resting against the slick heat between her legs.

"Just me," he said. His voice shook. "Five minutes. They had you all night. Please, sweetheart."

Tyler watched her hand stop pushing. He watched her eyes go to Wicks's face and stay there, and something in her expression changed — the sharpness drained, and what replaced it was worse.

She looked once more at the two backs at the bar. Then her fingers curled into the front of Wicks's shirt and she pulled him down.

"Yes," she said against his mouth. "Come on."

Wicks kissed her — menthol and bourbon, his mouth clumsy and hungry — and the crown of his cock pressed against her pussy, the broad head hot and wet, leaving a slick mark on her. His mouth moved down her jaw, lips dragging along the bone, and he said into her neck: "Roll over. On your front."

She hesitated for half a second. Then she turned.

Tyler watched her cheek settle onto the plaid. Her breasts flattened against the cushion, pale against the dark fabric. Before she could push up, Wicks dropped flat on top of her from behind.

Through the screen Tyler could see his hip bones pressing into her ass. He could count the ridges of Wicks's spine through his shirt. The scrawny man was lighter than either of the others and he covered her completely — his narrow chest flush against her back, his legs covering hers. His mouth found the crease of her neck.

"Let me in," Wicks whispered, his chapped lips against her nape. "Let me have you, sweetheart."

Tyler saw her hips arch off the cushion. Just enough.

Wicks reached between them. Tyler could see his stained hand guide the broad crown between her thighs from behind. Wicks pushed in and Tyler heard the sound she made — a low, cracked syllable into the upholstery, half his name.

Through the screen he watched Wicks's weight pin her flat. His arms went under her chest, his stained fingers gripping her breasts from underneath, his thumbs pressing her nipples into the plaid.

"Yeah, sweetheart," Wicks breathed behind her ear. "You can't go anywhere under me."

"Shut up." Her voice broke on it. "Shut up and keep going." Tyler saw her hips shove back into Wicks's stroke, the inch his weight allowed, and heard Wicks gasp.

Wicks was the only one who begged. Tyler could hear it through the screen — the stream of worship he could not slow, babbled into the back of her neck where the damp hair clung to her skin.

"You been on them all night and I only want five minutes, just five minutes where it's me, sweetheart, you're so tight under me I can't—"

His hips went faster. The desperate frantic pace, every drive pinning her flat. His fingers gripped her breasts and she bit the upholstery. Her hips kept meeting him.

She tried to say something, and it died against the plaid, unfinished.

Her mouth opened against the plaid. The words started as something and came out as Wicks's name in a cracked half-whisper.

"Oh God," Wicks gasped above her. "Oh God, sweetheart, I can feel you getting there, you're squeezing—"

Her back arched against his chest. Her face came off the cushion and a high, broken cry tore through the room, cutting over the bass. Her heel knocked the couch arm and the knock was louder than the cry. She was saying his name and a plea — *don't stop, Wicks, right there*.

Inches from the screen. Her face was turned toward the sill. Her eyes flew open and the blue was gone, the pupils blown wide, swimming, tears spilling across the bridge of her nose. Tyler's whole body locked. At this range she could see him — one blink and she'd focus and his face would be right there

— and every nerve in him said to drop below the sill and he couldn't move. Her pupils swam and didn't find him.

At the bar, Dale looked at the couch. He looked at Wicks's scrawny body flattened on top of her, at her heels drumming, at the way her fingers were ripping at the plaid. He set the drink on the bar. He crossed to the near end of the couch, three steps, and knelt at the arm beside the window. He was close enough that Tyler could have counted the scars on his knuckles.

His hand went into her hair. His other hand closed around the bare column of her throat — not squeezing, just holding, his dark scarred fingers spanning the width of her neck. He lifted her face off the cushion and she looked up at him, eyes streaming, Wicks still driving into her from behind.

"That's mine down there," Dale said. Low. A statement about what the room already knew.

"Yes," she gasped. The word had no shape. "Dale — yes—"

He held her there, his hand on her throat and his fist in her hair, with Wicks hammering into her from behind. Then Dale let go of her throat, took himself in his fist, and laid the head of his cock on her lower lip.

"Open."

Tyler watched her open. Two feet from the screen, close enough to see her lips stretch around the head and her jaw drop to take the width of him. The dark shaft slid into the smeared red of her mouth an inch at a time. Dale fed it to her slowly, holding her head by the hair. Wicks drove into her from behind, and every stroke rocked her forward onto Dale. She gagged. Dale didn't give her an inch back. Spit ran out of the corner of her mouth, down his shaft, off her chin onto the plaid.

"Look at that," Wicks panted. "Every time I go in, she goes down on him. I'm fucking her onto your dick, Dale."

"Then keep doing it," Dale said.

They did it together. Wicks shoved her forward, Dale held her down and drew her back by the hair, and she rocked between them, full at both ends. Tyler could hear both: the flat clap of Wicks's hips on her ass, and the thick, choking slurp at Dale's end. Her fingers clawed the couch arm. Her heels drummed the cushions.

The second one came with both of them in her.

She shoved her hips back into Wicks, the inch she could move, and it took her. She came with Dale in her throat. The cry went into him, muffled and high and broken, and she shook on Wicks in fast, hard spasms, tears and mascara running sideways across her face and spit stringing from her chin. Dale held her down on him through all of it.

"She's coming on me again!" Wicks's voice broke high, too loud. "Dale, she's squeezing — she's coming with your dick in her mouth—"

"I feel it," Dale said. He pulled her off by the hair to let her breathe. A rope of spit stretched from her lips to the head of him and broke. She sucked air in sobs, and he looked down at her face and pushed back in.

From the bar Vince laughed, thick with gin, his cigarette burned down to the filter. "On Wicks again. Ain't that something."

Outside, Tyler's forehead was almost on the screen. His hand was pressed to his fly. This time he didn't rip it away, and he hated himself for not ripping it away. His wife was two feet from him with a cock down her throat and another in her from

behind, coming so hard she was crying, and his feet stayed in the dirt.

Through the crooked slats, past Dale's kneeling frame, the numbers on Vince's clock turned over.

12:08.

She saw the clock.

The numbers glowed across the room from where her cheek lay on the soaked plaid. 12:08. Past midnight.

Dale's cock had left her mouth. His hand was still in her hair, his thumb against her temple, and Wicks was still inside her, his weight slack and twitching on her back, his face in the sweat behind her ear. Her ears were ringing. Her thighs were still jumping in small aftershocks.

Past midnight, and nobody had finished. Vince had pulled out of her against the paneling and gone back to his gin. Dale had kept himself back all night. Wicks was still hard inside her, holding on. The call had to go in after one, with the music still going and Vince asleep in that chair and the other two gone home. Wicks sticking around could ruin everything. Men didn't go home until they were done. Vince wouldn't sleep until he was empty.

She knew exactly where each of them would finish if she let them.

All three of them. Bare. She felt it for one cold second, a drop in her belly like stepping off a ledge. The count she'd refused to finish in the shower in June started up again, and she shut it down before it got anywhere.

And under the cold, the ache between her legs, raw and tender and still clenching around Wicks, wanted it anyway. It wanted exactly what the plan needed. She lay with her cheek in

the wet plaid and couldn't find where one ended and the other began.

She rolled her hips underneath Wicks. A slow grind, pressing him deeper.

"Wicks." Low, into the cushion. Almost a confession. "Stay in me. I want you to come inside me."

It surprised her. She heard her own voice say it and the shame went up her throat and she said it again.

"Please. Come in me, Wicks. Don't pull out."

His hips stuttered. "Oh, fuck — sweetheart — I been holding it, I been holding it through both of those, I can't—"

"Then let go." She clenched around him — deliberately, milking — and ground her ass back into his hips. "I can feel you. I can feel how close you are. I want it."

"You're squeezing it out of me," he gasped. "Oh God, you're doing it on purpose, you're — I can feel you pulling—"

Dale's hand left her hair. He stayed kneeling at the arm, his cock in his fist, watching.

Wicks drove into her one last time. His arms locked around her chest, his face in the damp hair behind her ear. He went rigid. His hips jerked against her in fast hard spasms and she felt the first pulse — a kick of heat, deep, flooding her.

She squeezed him. She milked every pulse and told him she was doing it.

"I feel you," she said into the cushion. "I feel every pulse. Stay."

His lips found her ear, his breath ragged, and under the bass — so close his mouth was inside her ear, inaudible to Dale kneeling beside her, to Vince at the bar — Wicks groaned it against her skin:

"Just like Wednesday, baby. Behind the brown coat. Don't forget."

She held still. She squeezed and held. His cock kicked inside her, again, again, and his weight went slack on her back.

Outside the screen, Tyler watched Wicks freeze on top of her. He heard her voice — *stay in me, don't pull out* — and saw his hips jerk, and Tyler's hand found the sill and gripped until the grain bit his palm.

She pushed Wicks's hip. "Off."

He pulled out slowly. The crown dragged free with a wet sound and a warm spill slid out of her and onto the plaid. Wicks slid off her and stayed at her side, propped on his elbow, panting, his grin splitting his thin face.

She rolled over.

She lay on her back with her knees up and her heels on the frame. Between her pale thighs, Wicks's cum welled out of her, white sliding down the flushed pink of her.

Through the screen, Tyler saw it. White against pink at the near end of the couch. His wife's pussy overflowing with another man's cum, inches from the sill. His head said *go to the front door* and his feet stayed in the dirt and his cock ached and his stomach was sick.

Inside, Wicks stayed at her side. His stained hand cupped her right breast, his thumb tracing the puffy edge of her nipple, still worshipping.

"That's mine in there," Wicks said, too loud. "She's full of me, Dale."

She looked across the room at Dale, still kneeling at the arm.

"Dale." Her voice was raw and low and it came out like a need she couldn't swallow. "I want yours. Inside me. I want to feel yours on top of his."

Dale stood. He crossed the rug, his broad frame blocking the light for a second.

"Wicks leaves the last of anything in you," Dale said, flat and quiet, with the patience of weight. "That's not how it goes. Not in this room."

He took her by both ankles. One pull and she slid down the couch on her back, the soaked plaid dragging under her, until her ass was at the edge of the center cushion and her head lay back near the arm. He knelt on the cushion between her thighs, hooked her heels over his forearms, and spread her wide. Then he let her legs fall open around his hips and put both hands on her waist.

His hands went almost all the way around her. Dark fingers spread over her ribs, thumbs pressed into the soft skin above her hip bones. He held her like something he was about to lift.

He laid the head of his cock in the mess Wicks had left and pushed it up and down through her once, slow, coating himself. She felt it drag over her swollen lips, wet, heavy, too wide. Then he set it at her opening.

"Wicks warmed it up," he said. "Now you get the real thing."

He pulled her onto him.

He didn't push in. He hauled her down by the waist, her whole body sliding on the wet plaid, and impaled her on him in one long drag. The stretch was enormous. Wicks had left her slick and open, and it didn't matter; Dale was a different size, and she felt every inch of the difference, her pussy forced wide

around the thick root of him, the head pushing up through her until it hit the end of her and kept pressing. Her mouth fell open. Nothing came out. Then a thin, high sound, all breath.

Wicks's come squelched out around him. She heard it, a thick wet sound under the bass, and felt it run down between her cheeks.

"There," Dale said.

He pulled back almost all the way, and she felt the broad head drag through her, catching, and then his hands yanked her waist and slammed her back down onto him. Her breasts jumped. Her head knocked against the couch arm. He did it again. He wasn't thrusting so much as using her: his hips stayed planted, and he pulled her body up and down his length by the waist, as hard and fast as he wanted, like she weighed nothing. Every pull brought the slap of her ass against his thighs and the deep, blunt punch of him hitting the end of her, a jolt that went up through her belly into her chest.

"Oh—" she said. "Oh God, Dale, it's—oh—"

Her pussy was so full she could feel his pulse in it. The heat of him. The sharp ache at the very end of every stroke, too deep, right on the edge of too much, and right behind it a heavy, spreading pleasure that made her toes curl in the air. Her hands found his forearms and gripped them, and they were like gripping a banister.

"Listen to it," Dale said. He sounded almost bored. "Full of him and still sucking me in."

She could hear it. A loud, sloppy, rhythmic squelch every time he dragged her down, and the room smelled of it, of come and sweat and her own sex, thick, everywhere, on her skin and in her mouth.

Wicks had climbed onto the cushion by her head. He was kneeling at her shoulder with his jeans still open, his cock hanging half soft and wet against his thigh, and his mouth was going again.

"Look at it, Dale, look at the white coming out of her, that's mine, I got there first, you're fucking her through mine, she told me to, she said please, she said it just like on Wed—"

Cold went through her.

She turned her head on the arm of the couch, grabbed his half-hard cock by the base, and pulled it into her mouth.

He choked off mid-word. "*Oh.*"

He was soft enough that she could take all of him at once, the fat head and the whole shaft, and she did, her lips sealing at the root, her nose in his wiry hair. He tasted of himself and of her, salt and musk, wet from inside her. She sucked hard. She felt him start to thicken against her tongue, the head swelling, pushing at the back of her mouth, and she kept sucking, because as long as he was in her mouth he wasn't talking.

"Oh, Jesus," Wicks whimpered. "Oh, Jesus, she's — Dale, she's —"

"Good," Dale said. "Keep him quiet."

Dale yanked her down again, harder, and the stroke drove her forward onto Wicks, and Wicks went deep into her throat. She gagged around him. Dale pulled her back by the waist and she came off Wicks halfway, gasping through her nose, and Dale slammed her down again and she went back onto him. They had her between them. Dale's hands on her waist worked her whole body, and her mouth went down on Wicks every time her pussy went down on Dale.

Wicks was hard now, all the way, the head stretching her lips again. His fingers went into her hair, gentle, almost apologetic. Dale's weren't gentle at all. He changed his grip, one hand flat on her stomach, low, pressing down, and the next stroke she felt him through her own skin, the head of him moving under his palm. She moaned around Wicks's cock, long and broken, spit running down her cheek into her ear.

"Feel that?" Dale pressed harder. "That's how far up you I am."

She felt it. Pressed between his palm and his cock, the pleasure stopped spreading and started to gather, low and hot and tight, right under his hand. Her thighs started to shake around his hips. Her heels drummed on the cushion.

"She's gonna," Wicks said, high and shaky, his hips twitching against her face. "Dale, her whole face is—she's gonna—"

Dale didn't slow down. He went faster. Short, brutal pulls now, his hands locked on her waist and her body jerking on the plaid, the wet slap coming so fast it ran together, his palm grinding down on her stomach on every stroke.

She came with Wicks in her mouth and Dale all the way inside her. It tore up out of her belly from under Dale's hand, and her back arched off the couch, and she screamed around Wicks's cock, a high muffled wail that vibrated all the way down him and made him cry out. Her pussy clamped down on Dale in hard, helpless spasms, so tight she felt every inch of his shaft. He kept pulling her onto him straight through it, forcing his way through the clench, and every stroke dragged a fresh pulse out of her until she was sobbing around Wicks and shaking from her heels to her scalp.

"There it is," Dale said, low. His rhythm broke. "Now hold still."

He hauled her down to the root and held her there, both hands on her waist, crushing her onto him. She felt him swell. Then the first thick pulse, deep, a hard kick of heat right at the end of her, and another, and another, each one flooding her. He came in long, heavy surges, grunting through his teeth, his chain swinging over her stomach, and she clenched on every one of them. She couldn't stop. Still coming, her pussy milked him while he emptied into her, on top of what Wicks had left, so full she could feel it pressing.

Dale held her on him until the last pulse faded. Then he let go of her waist and pulled out, slow, and the broad head dragged free of her with a loud wet sound.

It all came out after him. A thick warm rush, Wicks and Dale together, spilling out of her open pussy and running down between her cheeks onto the plaid. She felt it pool under her and go on leaking.

She let Wicks slide out of her mouth. He was fully hard again, shining with her spit, and for once in his life he had nothing to say.

Dale sat back on his heels and looked down at what was running out of her. He didn't smile. He picked up his cigar from the end table and bit the end off.

"Now you're full," he said.

Through the screen, Tyler saw the mess slide out of her onto the soaked fabric. Two loads. He saw Dale's dark hand on her pale thigh and the cigar between his teeth and he saw his wife lying open on the couch with the insides of her legs

streaked white. His hand found the sill and his knuckles ached on the wood.

She turned her head toward the recliner.

"Vince."

He was on his feet. He'd shed his shorts somewhere. He stood in nothing but the gold chain in his dark chest hair — the prison-ink knuckles wrapped around his cock, the gin sweat shining on his forehead, the Zippo scar on his right thumb. His bloodshot eyes were slits. He swayed when he stepped between her heels.

"Two loads in that sloppy cunt and you still want more." His voice was sluggish with gin. "Came back for it all on your own tonight. Tell me why."

She wrapped both legs around his hairy lower back. Crossed her ankles behind him and pulled. The head of him pressed against her opening — the uncut girth, blunt and broad, wider than everything at the entrance, stretching her before he'd started.

"Because I—" She looked up into his bloodshot eyes and the sentence cracked. "Because I wanted—" She couldn't finish it as a clean claim. She pulled him closer with her ankles and the blunt head of him pressed harder against her and the want came out of her in a ragged whisper. "Put yours on top."

Through the screen, Tyler heard it. *Because I wanted.* She said it to Vince's face with her legs around him and Tyler couldn't tell if it was the plan or the truth. The laugh from the ride came back to him — her head back, her mouth open, nobody making her — and his fingers dug into the unpainted wood.

Vince shoved in.

The width opened her through two men's cum. She cried out — a raw, climbing sound, pleasure and fullness and the stretch of the broadest part of him pushing through the slickness — and she gave way around his girth and he sank through to the root. The uncut foreskin dragged through the mess of both loads as he bottomed out. Her fingers clawed the cushion. Her ankles locked behind his back. She could feel everything — his width parting her, the wet squishing out around his shaft onto the plaid, her own grip failing on his hips because her fingers slipped on the gin-sweat of his skin. The smell of Tanqueray and Marlboros filled her mouth when he leaned over her.

Dale's hand left her thigh as Vince settled his weight.

"Six months I'm watching you from the garage," Vince slurred, his rough hands gripping her hips, grinding into her. "Running in them shorts. Bending over for the mail. I knew it then. Knew you'd end up right here – our little slut."

She couldn't answer. His girth was churning through the mess of two other men and his thumb found her clit and pressed and her hips bucked off the cushion.

At her breast, Wicks had crawled back. Vince's bulk had shoved him to the edge of the cushion but his mouth found her left nipple and sealed on it, his tongue lapping, his stained hand cupping her breast from below.

"Look at her go," Wicks said from the arm, his mouth pulling off the nipple long enough to crow. "Vince, she's riding up on you — she's taking all three of us tonight—"

Two men on her. Vince filling her, Wicks at her breast. The girth stretching her on every stroke and his thumb circling her clit, and the orgasm that had been building since Dale came in-

side her gathered and gathered and she heard herself say Vince's name.

"Vin— *Vince*—"

"She's fucking me back," Vince slurred, his bloodshot eyes on her rolling hips. "Look at her go."

She came. A wave that started deep and took her, her back bowing off the cushion, her pussy clamping on Vince's girth in hard spasms while Wicks's mouth stayed sealed on her nipple and his tongue kept working, and the orgasm crested and crashed and she squealed — long, ragged, rising — and Vince drove through it, grunting, his hips jerking against her grip.

He came with her. His bloodshot eyes went wide and his fingers dug into her hips and he held deep and his cock pulsed inside her, flooding, his grunt low and ragged through clenched teeth. She locked her ankles and ground up onto him and milked every throb.

"Knew she would," Vince grunted into the side of her neck as he emptied. "Knew she'd come crawling back."

Her hips kept grinding. Wicks's mouth kept pulling at her nipple. The last pulse kicked inside her and Vince's knees buckled. He caught the arm of the couch, dragged himself out of her, and stumbled backward. He hit his recliner. The footrest kicked out and his head hit the headrest and his eyes rolled shut. She felt the third load leak out of her onto the plaid before his chin dropped and the snoring started.

The bass thumped through the floorboards.

Outside, Tyler heard her say Vince's name and saw the last man pull out and stumble. He saw the mess between her thighs, three loads running out of her onto the plaid. His palm

had pressed against his fly again. He tore it away and let go of the sill.

Through the crooked slats he saw Dale reach for his keys on the bar table. He saw Wicks bend to fish his jeans off the carpet.

Tyler backed out of the bushes. He crossed the dark pavement of Ridley in four strides, slipped along the chain-link fence, and the laundry-room door shut behind him. Her last cry was still in his ears. He was still hard and his stomach was still sick.

Megan sat up on the couch.

She stood on her heels. Cum slid down both thighs, warm, running toward her knees. She found the crimson dress on the carpet where it had been since eight-thirty. She looped the straps behind her neck and pulled the clingy fabric down over her bare hips. The thin jersey stuck to her pussy and to the wet on her inner thighs and she felt it soak through as she tugged the hem past the mole on her left cheek.

In the recliner, Vince snorted. One bloodshot eye opened and stared at nothing and closed. He groaned and levered himself up, bare from the waist, and shuffled down the back hall. The bathroom door shut. The faucet turned on.

Dale was in the front hall with his keys. He looked her over — the tangled dark hair, the smeared red mouth, the thin red fabric wet and clinging to the cum on her legs.

"Walking home with all of that in you," Dale said. His eyes went to the wet stain darkening the red between her thighs. "In that dress." He tapped the unlit cigar against his palm. "Get some sleep."

He walked down the hall and out the screen door. His footsteps went down the concrete steps, and the sedan door opened and closed in the driveway.

Wicks lingered.

With Vince behind the bathroom door and the bass booming through the living room, Wicks pulled the louvered closet door open three inches. Her stomach dropped. His stained fingers were inside the dark crack and the blood went cold through her chest — and then his hand came out with the denim jacket on the wire hanger and nothing else, and her stomach settled.

He shoved his skinny arms into the sleeves and caught her by the waist at the screen door.

His stained hand slid up under the back of her crimson skirt. His fingers went through the cum on the inside of her thigh and he cupped her bare ass and squeezed, his grip slippery and warm.

"Full of all of us," Wicks whispered, his mouth at the corner of hers, menthol and bourbon on her lips. "Three loads, sweetheart. You're gonna feel that on the walk home." His chapped lips pressed against her jaw. Then lower, his voice dropping under the bass. "Behind the brown coat, baby. Take it home. Lock your door. Call me tomorrow."

She gave him a smile. It sat on her smeared mouth like something she'd put on.

"Tomorrow," she said, and pushed him toward the screen door with two fingers on his chest.

His grin split wide and he slipped out. His boots on the concrete, then Dale's sedan pulling out, then the rattling pop of Wicks's Civic following it toward the corner of Vine.

The faucet squeaked off. The bathroom door opened. Vince shuffled past the kitchen archway with his face wet and his eyes barely open, dropped back into his recliner, pulled the footrest lever, and was asleep before the chair stopped rocking.

In the living room, the floor speakers boomed and the cable box glowed 12:34 in green. The bar table was sticky glass rings and a dead cigar butt in an empty tumbler and blue smoke hanging flat below the ceiling.

Megan stood in the hallway in her crimson dress with three men's cum sliding down her thighs and the bass shaking the glass in the window beside her.

The screen door was still settling on its spring.

Out on Ridley the Civic's muffler went small and then went away. In here the bass kept coming up through the floor into the soles of her heels. Her ears rang under it.

The closet was at her left shoulder. White louvers gone yellow, three feet inside the door, the catch not quite caught where Wicks had pulled it. Through the slats she could smell old leather and mothballs. *Behind the brown coat, baby. Take it home.*

She didn't touch it. She turned away from it carefully, the way she'd turn away from a stove, so her hip wouldn't brush the wood.

In the living room Vince was gone again. The recliner was tipped all the way back with the footrest up, and he lay in it naked, his head rolled toward the window and his mouth open on the chipped tooth. His gut rose and fell. The gold chain had slid sideways into the gray hair on his chest, and his cock lay soft and dark against his thigh, still wet. The snore rattled in the wet of his throat and whistled past the tooth, under the music.

Twenty minutes ago that had been inside her. She stood over the recliner and smelled it. Him, sour and wet, and under him herself, the thick salt smell of her own cunt coming up off the dress, all of it riding on the mothballs and old leather that had followed her in from the hall. She was still open from him. She could feel the exact shape he'd left, the stretch of it, a dull ache that went up into her belly, and what he'd emptied into her was still there, heavy and warm, holding. Her hands stayed at her sides.

She looked away and found her tote where she'd left it at eight-thirty, against the wall by the kitchen archway. Black leather, stiff-sided, big enough for a week away. All it held was her house key and a lipstick. She hooked the strap over her shoulder, and it hung light and empty against her hip.

That was when she saw his shorts.

They lay on the carpet beside the recliner where he'd stepped out of them, khaki in a heap. One thigh pocket sagged with something flat and heavy. A black corner showed under the flap.

His phone.

She stood with the tote on her shoulder and looked at it. Last Saturday he'd held that phone up over her for an hour. She'd let him, and she'd said it was for Tyler. And somewhere in it was the picture Tyler had made himself describe to her across their kitchen table last Sunday: the basement window, the dirty glass, Tyler's face in it with his hand down his jeans. Her stomach went hot with it, with what he'd been watching through that glass.

Her heart was going hard enough to feel in her throat. She set the tote down on the carpet without a sound.

She crouched by the footrest. The movement opened her, and she felt it let go. Warm, slow, more than she'd thought was left, sliding down the inside of her thigh toward the back of her knee. Vince's bare foot was a hand's width from her face. Yellow nails. A smell like the inside of a work boot.

The pocket flap was Velcro. She pinched the tab and waited. The song was building to something. When the drums came down she pulled, and the rip vanished under them. She slid two fingers into the pocket and drew the phone out by its edges.

Above her the foot jerked, and she went still on her heels with the phone against her chest. The recliner creaked. Vince smacked his lips twice and said something into the headrest that wasn't a word. His hand came off the armrest and found his own belly and scratched it. Then the snore again, ragged at first, then long.

She let her breath out through her teeth. The phone went into the tote's inside pocket. She zipped it shut.

She should have stood up and walked out then. She stayed in her crouch with his foot beside her ear and his shorts in her lap and the music thumping in the floor, and she thought about the basement.

Two Saturdays ago, at the end of everything, he'd pulled open a drawer down there and laid three memory cards on the card table in a row. *Every card from my camera goes into your hand.* She'd walked home holding them so hard they'd marked her palm, and she'd believed him. The camera had stayed in the drawer. Whatever he'd plugged it into had stayed wherever it was.

She folded the shorts and set them back on the carpet where they'd been, pocket side down.

The basement door was off the kitchen, beside the refrigerator. She opened it onto the dark and the smell came up the stairs: concrete, cold cigarettes, the sweet aftershave on the shelf by the water heater. Underneath it something sour that she knew was the old couch. She found the switch by feel. The fluorescent tubes ticked and stuttered and came on.

She went down in her heels with one hand on the rail, the tote bumping her hip, and every step she counted. Thirteen.

Nothing down here had moved. The rug. The folding table. The couch against the far wall under the hopper window, with the blanket thrown over it now. She saw the rug, and the scrape of it came back into her knees, last Saturday and the one before. Heat came up her neck and she let it and kept walking.

The laptop was on the card table. A cheap black one, closed, its charger snaking to the outlet on the post. A gray cable ran out of its side to the camera, which sat beside it on its back with the long lens pointed at the drop ceiling. It looked like he'd been pulling pictures off it. Tonight, or last night, or some night this week, while she was across the street putting dishes away.

She didn't look at the screen. She pulled the cable out of both ends and dropped it in the tote, and the camera after it, and the laptop on top of that, charger and all. The bag sagged and the strap bit into her shoulder.

The drawer stuck. She worked it out an inch at a time, and halfway out the song upstairs ended. The house went quiet. She froze in a crouch in front of the table with the drawer hanging open on its runners, her face tipped up at the joists. In the qui-

et the wood over her head creaked once. The recliner. Or the house settling. Or him getting up.

She stayed down. The concrete was cold through the soles of her shoes and her thighs trembled with the crouch, and the crouch opened her again. More of them slid out of her, slow, down the inside of her leg. The ache where Vince had been beat in time with her heart. Then the next song came down through the ceiling, bass first, and covered her.

Inside the drawer, under a lens cap and a tangle of batteries, was a hard plastic case with a hinged lid. Six slots. Four cards. Her thumb found the latch and rested on it. Four cards of something, of somebody. She took her thumb off the latch and put the whole case in the bag.

The tablet was on the shelf by the water heater, face down in its rubber sleeve beside the aftershave. *She made three grand in two hours.* She grabbed it and it went in with the rest.

She stood in the middle of the rug and listened, her arm going numb under the weight. The bass came down through the joists. Nothing else. No creak on the floor over her head.

She turned off the light and climbed the thirteen steps in the dark, the tote knocking her hip on every one.

In the living room Vince's eyes were open.

He hadn't moved. His head was still rolled toward the window, but his eyes were open and wet in the lamplight, and they were on her.

She stood in the kitchen archway with a corner of the laptop digging through the leather into her ribs and her heart slamming.

"Leave the bottle," he said. His tongue was thick.

"It's on the table, Vince."

"Mm." His eyes went over her the way they always did, slow, from her face down the crimson. They caught on the bag. Half a second, and she felt its weight swing against her hip. Then they moved on to the shine on her legs and stayed there awhile. Her nipples drew tight against the damp jersey. Then his eyes closed. His mouth fell open again.

She counted to thirty with the snore. Then she walked.

Past the recliner. Past the bar and its dead bottles. Into the hall. The closet came up on her right this time, the yellowed slats, the gap at the catch. She shifted the tote to her other shoulder so the leather wouldn't brush the door, and she went by it with her arms in close and didn't look in.

She caught the screen door with her fingertips and eased it shut behind her so it wouldn't slap.

The night was warm and heavy. Cut grass, and over it the smell coming off her own skin and the dress, smoke and sweat and men. Behind her the music came out the cracked living-room window and down the concrete steps after her. She went down them with her hand off the rail and crossed Ridley at a walk, the tote swinging heavy at her hip, the backs of her legs cooling. Behind her the bass thinned across the street to nothing. She kept the same pace the whole way, heel and heel, that sound under each one, and the windows of her own house were dark.

Tyler heard the key.

He'd been back twenty-five minutes. He was sitting in the dark kitchen where he was supposed to have been all night. There was dirt from the side yard on his boots and he hadn't wiped it off. His jeans were too tight over a hard-on that had

lasted through the yard and the fence and the laundry-room door and hadn't gone anywhere since.

The front door opened and shut. The deadbolt turned. Then the chain, and the chain took her two tries.

She came down the hall and into the kitchen and stopped when she saw him. He reached up and turned on the little light over the stove.

She looked the way she'd looked through the blinds an hour ago, only standing up. In the stove light the crimson was stuck to her everywhere it was wet. The thin jersey was pasted over her tits, her nipples standing puffy and dark through it, and dark patches spread at her hips and down along her thighs. Her hair was knotted at the back where hands had been in it. Her lipstick was gone except at the corners. She smelled like Dale's cigars from four feet away. Under the table his hard-on pushed up against the zipper.

She swung the tote off her shoulder onto the table with a heavy knock and unzipped it. The phone came out first, alone. She set it face down on the table. Then she tipped the rest out in one motion, a slithering heap of black plastic and cord, a long lens rolling to a stop against his mug.

Tyler looked at the phone. His own face was in there somewhere, in that dirty window, with his hand down his jeans. Heat came up his neck into his face. His fingers itched to turn it over, and he laid them flat on the table instead.

"That's his phone," he said.

"It was in his shorts."

"Meg." His voice came out thin. "That wasn't—we never said—"

"I know what we said." She was very straight. Her hands were steady on the zipper. "It was lying there. With you on it. And the camera was in the basement plugged into that." She nodded at the laptop. "He gave me three cards and kept the camera. I don't know what else he kept. Now I don't have to know."

"You went in the basement."

"Yes."

"With him upstairs."

"He was asleep." She pulled the zipper closed on nothing. "Mostly."

He looked at her. She was still in it. Her pupils were huge in the stove light, and from across the table he could smell her now under the cigar, her cunt and the cum in her, thick and salt. His cock jerked against the zipper. He hated it, and it jerked again.

"Is it there?" he said. "The other thing."

"Where he said. He told me four times." Her mouth thinned. "He told me in my ear while he was—" She stopped. "It's there. He took his jacket out of that closet on the way out. Off the front hanger. He didn't go near the back."

"You watched him."

"I watched him."

She stood there with the table between them. She'd gone over there four hours ago alone. He opened his mouth to ask how it had been and heard how it would sound, and he couldn't. He'd stood in the side yard with his boots in the hedge and one slat of the blinds cutting her in half at the waist. He'd heard her tell all three of them not to pull out, and his palm had been flat on his fly when she said it.

"Are you okay," he said instead.

"I'm fine."

She tucked her hair behind her ear, and it caught in the knot. "It went the way it always goes. They drank. Dale left first. Wicks talked." She lifted one shoulder. "Vince was out by half past twelve."

Tyler heard every place it was smaller. *The way it always goes.* He'd watched her come with her back bowed off the couch and Vince's name in her mouth. *Out by half past twelve.* Out after he'd emptied himself into her, with her ankles locked to keep him there. He didn't call it. His cock answered her anyway, hard against the zipper at the size of the lie, and he hated it for that.

Below the hem of the dress cum ran down the inside of her calf, pale in the stove light, and stopped at the strap of her shoe. He watched it go. His hand stayed on the table. She saw him watch it and stood still.

"When he wakes up," Tyler said, "the first thing he reaches for is that phone."

"Then he can't be the first one to wake up."

The microwave said 12:58.

Through the screen over the sink they could hear it. Faint at this distance, under the crickets, but there. The kick drum, the bass. Somebody's party, three doors down and across, at one in the morning.

She went to the sink and ran the water and washed her hands with dish soap up to the wrists, slowly, the way she washed after raw chicken. She dried them on the towel. Then she took her phone off the charger by the toaster and looked up the number.

At 1:04 she dialed. He watched her stand with her back to the counter and her other arm across her stomach.

"Hi. I'm calling about a noise complaint." Clear, a little bored, every consonant there. "It's a house on Ridley Street. They've had music going since before nine, and it's past one. You can hear the bass inside our house with the windows shut."

A man's voice on the other end, tinny. Tyler couldn't make out the words.

"The house with the Dodge pickup in the driveway. Across the street from the duplexes." She listened. "I'd rather not, if that's all right. I have to live across from him."

A pause. The tinny voice again, shorter.

"Thank you," Megan said. "I'm sorry to bother you."

She hung up and set the phone face down on the counter, and her hand stayed on it.

"He said they'll send a car when one frees up," she said.

"That could be all night."

"Then it's all night."

They went into the front room without turning anything on. The sheer curtain was drawn across the big window. They stood behind it, close enough to the glass to see through. From here Vince's house was three doors down on the other side: the dead lawn, the Ram nosed up against the garage, the porch light he never turned off. The living-room window glowed yellow behind his blinds. The music came out of it and across the street and in through their screens.

Tyler stood at her shoulder. After a while he put his hand on her waist. The jersey was damp under his palm and warm through. She didn't lean into him and she didn't move off.

He kept seeing the couch through the gap in the blinds. Her face turned toward the window, two feet from him, and not seeing him. Her heels hooking together behind Vince's back and pulling him in.

"Did Wicks say anything?" he said. "In front of them."

"He tried."

"What did you do?"

She didn't turn her head. "Kept his mouth full. Every time he got it open."

His cock throbbed against his zipper. He could see it, Wicks's mouth buried under her, his skinny hands spread on her thighs. He stood there with his hand on her and let it.

1:20. 1:31. Nobody came. The song changed and changed again. A car came down from Vine and Tyler's chest locked, and it was a Corolla with one headlight, and it went on by.

Then it would be some kid cop, he thought. A kid would walk up and knock and ask Vince to turn it down. Vince would turn it down, all apologies, *my bad, officer,* and the kid would go back to his car and drive away. And Vince would go back in and sit down in the quiet and pat his shorts for his phone.

At 1:43 a cruiser turned onto Ridley.

No lights. No siren. It came slowly, a spotlight on the driver's side running along the house numbers. It stopped at Vince's curb. One officer got out, settled his belt, and went up the driveway past the Ram with a flashlight. Under Tyler's palm Megan went rigid.

The officer knocked on the screen door. Waited. Knocked again, harder; Tyler heard it this time, a flat rattle across the street. He stepped back off the stoop and put his light on the living-room window.

The music stopped.

It stopped in the middle of a bar, and the quiet that came after it was so big Tyler could hear the streetlight buzzing at the corner. A dog started up two yards over and quit.

The porch light already showed the door. It opened, and Vince was in it. He'd pulled the shorts on and nothing else. He swayed and caught the frame with one hand, threw the other arm up against the flashlight, and then spread his hands, his mouth going. Tyler couldn't hear it. He could see the shape of it: big shrug, palms up, a grin he'd seen across a card table. Fell asleep. My bad.

The flashlight left Vince's face. It went past his shoulder into the house, onto the bar and its row of dead bottles, and it stayed there. Tyler's stomach turned over. He didn't know the rules for a man on parole. He could guess what a bar like that looked like to a cop.

The officer tipped his head toward the cruiser. Vince nodded and nodded. Then the officer held out his hand, palm up, and Vince stopped nodding. He went inside and came out with his wallet and held out a card.

The officer took it back to the cruiser. The dome light came on. Through the windshield Tyler watched the white glow of the dash laptop on his face, his hand typing, typing. Then he had a phone to his ear. He talked a long time.

"He's running him," Tyler said.

Megan said nothing. Her hand had found his wrist where it rested on her waist, and her nails were in it.

Up on the porch Vince patted the front of his shorts. Both sides, then the thigh pockets. He looked down at his own feet. He turned and went back inside, and the hall light came on

behind the screen. A minute later he came out again with his hands empty and stood on the top step looking down the driveway at the cruiser.

Tyler knew exactly where that phone was. Face down on the table in his kitchen, forty yards behind his back. Dread went through him that Vince would turn his head this way and put it together, and under the dread, small and mean, a gladness he didn't like. Megan's nails tightened in his wrist.

Vince lit a cigarette. The Zippo flared once in his cupped hands and Tyler saw his face. Then it was gone.

The officer stayed in the car. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Vince smoked one cigarette and lit another off it.

At two the second cruiser came around the corner from Vine. As it came up behind the first it gave one short whoop of the siren, the way they did to say *here*.

On the porch Vince's whole body stopped. Half a second. Shoulders up, cigarette stalled halfway to his mouth, his head gone still on his neck. Then it let go of him, and he took the drag, and he was a man standing on his own step again. Tyler had seen it before, from four feet away, at a gas pump on Route 9 when a siren went by. He hadn't known what he was looking at then.

Both officers went up the driveway together now. They didn't go in. They stood at the bottom of the steps, and one of them leaned in close to Vince's face while the other kept a hand resting on his belt. Vince sat down on the top step. He talked with his hands. He pointed back into the house and shook his head.

Up and down Ridley, porch lights came on. Down the block an old woman stood in her doorway in a housecoat with

her arms folded. Two kids in boxers sat on the hood of a car at the far end, watching like it was television.

"They're waiting for something," Megan said.

"Yeah."

"What?"

"I don't know," he said. "Just wait."

At 2:24 a dark sedan pulled in behind the second cruiser. No lightbar. No markings. A woman got out in a windbreaker with block letters across the back. She had a clipboard and a flashlight. She bent her head with the first officer by her car for a minute, and then all three of them went up the driveway. At the foot of the steps she turned under the porch light, and Tyler could read the yellow letters across her shoulders. PAROLE.

Vince stood up when he saw her. His arms went out wide, and his voice came across the street for the first time, loud enough to carry but not to make out. A string of it. The woman held up a hand, palm out. He stopped.

She lifted her chin toward the hall. She went up the steps past him and into the house. The first officer followed her in. The second stayed on the step beside Vince, and when Vince turned to watch them go, the officer put a hand on his arm.

The hall light was on. Through the open front door Tyler could see a slice of hallway, paneling, a corner of the white closet door.

Megan's fingertips came up and touched the sheer. "That's it," she whispered.

A flashlight beam moved in the slice. It went away into the living room. For a long time there was nothing, just the beam sweeping across the back of the yellow blinds, across the ceil-

ing, gone. Tyler's mouth was dry. *He took it with him. He came back for it. It was never there.*

The officer on the step put his other hand on Vince. Vince yanked his arm. Tyler saw it happen: one hard twist, the officer's grip holding, the second hand landing on the back of his neck. Then the first officer was out the door and down the steps, and they had him turned to face the siding with his arms up behind him. The cuffs were too small to see. Tyler saw Vince's elbows come together behind his back and stay there.

Vince's voice came across Ridley in pieces. "—ain't mine—" Then something about January. Then nothing Tyler could make into words.

The officer came out onto the porch carrying a brown paper bag folded over at the top. She held it away from her body.

Megan's hand left Tyler's wrist. It came around behind her and found his hand on her waist and pressed it there, harder, against the damp jersey.

They walked Vince down the steps and down the driveway along the Ram toward the first cruiser. He was barefoot. He kept turning his head back toward the house, talking. The second officer opened the rear door.

Tyler reached past the edge of the sheer to the lamp on the end table and turned it on.

The front room came up gold around them. With the light behind it the sheer was nothing, a haze over the glass. Tyler saw his own hand on Megan's hip in it, the wedding band catching gold against the red, and her bare shoulder, and the dress. Her ring was in the dish by the front door. His was on, and it was on his wife.

Across the street Vince's head came around.

He stopped walking. The officer behind him pushed and Vince's feet stayed planted. He was looking straight at their window. In the cruiser lights his face was gray and loose, his hair hanging in his eyes. For a second it was blank. Then his head turned, slow, back toward his own front door, the lit hall, the open closet. It came back to their window. His mouth shaped one short word Tyler couldn't hear.

The window again, Tyler thought. From the other side. The dirty basement glass and his own face in it, his own face in that phone on the kitchen table. Now Vince was the one out in the dark looking in. Tyler's cock was still hard against his zipper. Something in his legs wanted to step back out of the light. He stayed in it.

Megan's weight eased back into him. Her hand came over his on her hip and held it there. Her chin came up. Between them and Vince was the street, and the hedges, and the red and blue going around on the cruiser roof, and that was all.

The officer's hand went onto the top of Vince's head and pushed it down. For a moment his face stayed up and turned toward them, and then it went under the roofline and was gone, and the door shut on him.

The first cruiser pulled out with its lights going and no siren and went down toward Vine. The sedan stayed. The parole officer put the paper bag in her trunk and went back inside the house with the other officer, and the hall light burned.

One by one the porch lights on Ridley went off. The kids on the hood of the car slid down and went in.

"He saw us," Tyler said.

"Good." Her hand was hard on his. Her voice was level. "I wanted him to know it was me."

Behind them in the kitchen his phone lay face down on the oak with the rest of it.

Megan let go of his hand.

"I need a shower," she said. She said it steadily, to the glass.

"Go."

She went down the hall. He heard the water come on, and the pipes knock in the wall. He went back into the kitchen and looked at what was on the table. Then he went down to the basement for the sledge.

By the third week of August the light came into the kitchen lower than it had all summer, across the table and up the side of the refrigerator. Megan saw it every morning now on her way down the hall.

The F-150 was in the driveway. It had been since the first week of the month, when the public defender called Tyler on a Tuesday and said the complaining witness had withdrawn. It was being written up as a contracting misunderstanding. Tyler said she'd sounded bored, like she was reading him a parking ticket. They'd guessed at it over dinner that night. Tyler figured the man who owned the cabin hadn't wanted a lawyer anywhere near his insurance records. Megan thought it was more that nobody wanted Vince's basement in a courtroom. The yard released the truck the next morning. She'd watched from the front window while Tyler stood in the driveway with his hand on its hood for a full minute before he came in.

Most mornings she found him at the counter with the state's case lookup open on his phone before he checked the weather. *Barella, Vincent.* Held at Middlesex. No bond. CRIMINAL POSSESSION OF A FIREARM, and a court date in September. His thumb would stop on the screen. He'd

read it twice. Then he'd turn the phone face down and pick up his coffee.

Across the street the grass had gone to seed. The Ram hadn't moved. Somebody had stuffed a flyer for gutter cleaning in its door handle in July, and it was still there, gone soft and gray.

The Civic hadn't come down Ridley since. Megan ran at six every morning, out past Vine and back. Every morning at the corner she looked for gray primer and a rusted bumper, and every morning it wasn't there. Dale's sedan wasn't there either. She looked for that too. At the corner her stride went short every time, and heat sat low in her stomach where she used to see his car idling, and it stayed there the last block home.

She came down the hall barefoot in his gray work tee and a pair of cotton shorts. Her hair was still damp from the shower. Her ring was on her finger. It had been back on since the morning after, when she'd taken it out of the ceramic dish without stopping to think about it and only noticed an hour later, washing a glass, that she had.

Tyler sat at the table in his work clothes with his coffee and the toast he never finished. He looked up at her over the mug. One corner of his mouth went up, and his eyes dropped to her bare legs under his tee. That look had been coming back a little more every week.

"You're up early," he said.

She didn't answer. She came to the table and took her right hand out of the pocket of her shorts and set the stick down next to his mug. Her left hand came to rest on the table beside it.

She'd bought it nine days ago at the CVS on Route 9, with a bottle of shampoo and a box of tissues she didn't need. It had sat in the bottom of her makeup bag since then in its box. She'd known before she bought it. She'd known in the shower in June with the water running over her, counting on her fingers, and she'd made herself stop counting. This morning she'd opened the box.

Two lines in the little window. Pink, both of them dark.

Tyler looked at it. He didn't pick it up.

She watched it reach his face. The smile went first. Then the color, from his forehead down, until he was gray around the mouth. His eyes went past her to the refrigerator, to the free calendar from the dental group stuck to the side of it, and stayed there.

His lips didn't move. His thumb ticked on the handle of the mug, once, again, and at one place on the calendar his mouth went tight. She watched it get there and said nothing.

The refrigerator hummed. Out on Ridley a mower started and caught.

"Meg," he said.

He reached across the table and covered her left hand. His fingers were cold, and they were shaking against her knuckles.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. It's early. It's really early. That's good. That's the one good thing." He was talking faster. "We can drive into Hartford this week. I'll find a place. I'll take a day off, I'll tell Gary it's a dentist. We go in, we take care of it, and we come home." His hand tightened. "Nobody ever has to know. Nobody. It's done and it's over."

She looked at his hand on hers.

She could guess from his face what he was seeing. She'd seen it too, more than once, lying awake. The last time it had been him was weeks before any of those Saturdays. Dale, the smell of his skin, his dark hands spread on her pale stomach. Wicks with his face wet, saying *what if I got her pregnant* to the room like it was a joke and not one. Vince's weight. Under the table, with Tyler's cold hand still on hers, her cunt had gone warm and slick, swollen against the cotton of her shorts. She pressed her knees together on it and felt it pulse between them. Her face stayed level across the table. She didn't know which of them.

She drew her hand out from under his. She did it gently. She laid it on her stomach, over the gray cotton, low, and the ring caught the light.

Her back was straight. Her lips pressed together, small, and her eyes stayed on his across his cold coffee.

"I told you, Tyler," she said. "I don't believe in abortion."

About the Author

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