THE HUSTLE



Part 1: The Game

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Chapter 1: The Game

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vince was on parole.

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

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

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

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

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

He had a plan.

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

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

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

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

He pulled out his phone and called Dale.

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

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

"And the wife pours drinks."

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

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

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

"But we know he's the husband."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tyler waited.

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

"I've played."

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

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

"What kind of stakes?"

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

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

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

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

"Why me?"

Vince's expression didn't change. "What do you mean?"

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

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

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

"I'll think about it," Tyler said.

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

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

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

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

Two days passed. Tyler sat at the kitchen table with his coffee and his laptop open.

$411.23 in checking.

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

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

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

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

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

The same hit. Never less.

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

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

"There's oat milk."

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

"It's not bad."

"It's despair in a carton."

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

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

"What's your day?" she asked.

"The Brenner house. Should be done by three if Bobby doesn't rewire the panel backwards again."

"Again?"

"He's consistent."

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

"What about you?" he asked.

"Freelance deck for the dental group. 'Smiles That Inspire Confidence.' I've been workshopping taglines in the shower."

"Give me one."

"'Your Teeth Are Our Passion.'"

"Christ."

"'We Put The Fun In Fundamental Oral Hygiene.'"

"Stop."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cursive.

It looked wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her route took her past Vince's house.

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

She didn't look.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the nickname landed on a bruise every time.

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

He didn't tell Megan what Gary called him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey. Where'd you go?"

He came back. Smiled. "Nowhere. Just thinking."

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

One more day.

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

"What?" She'd caught him staring.

"Nothing. You're just—" He shook his head. "You make this look easy."

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

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

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

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

He wasn't passing by.

"Hey. You think about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the split?"

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

"And nobody touches her," Tyler said.

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

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

"I need to talk to Megan."

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

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

These guys were idiots.

He picked up the tool bag and went inside.

He told Megan on Thursday night.

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

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

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

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

"He stares at me when I run."

"Everyone stares at you when you run."

"He does it from a lawn chair."

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

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

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

“And?”

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

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

“I know what?”

“Don’t make me say it.”

“Say it.”

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

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

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

“So I’m the distraction.”

“You’re the weapon.”

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

“Who are these guys?”

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

“What kind of friends?”

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

“Tyler.”

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

“And I’m just there to pour drinks.”

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

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

“How much?” she said.

He told her the number.

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

The number was its own pitch.

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

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

“Obviously.”

“I’m serious, Tyler.”

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

She held his gaze. He held hers.

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

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

He grinned.

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

“We’re going to crush them.”

“We’re going to destroy them.”

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

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

Friday came and Megan stood in front of the closet.

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

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

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

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

She nodded at the mirror. Fine.

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

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

"I'm going to a card game at our neighbor's house. Brunch would be an upgrade."

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

"No."

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

"Tyler. No."

"Why not?"

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

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

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

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

"Trust me. We walk out with double."

She took the shorts from his hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She reached for the jeans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ready?" he asked from the doorway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She could feel the new calluses through the cotton.

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

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

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

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

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

She almost smiled.

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

Vince opened the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Megan thought for a second. "'Last call.'"

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

Tyler nodded. Megan nodded.

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

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

"Go with what, exactly?" Megan asked.

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

Megan said nothing. Tyler said nothing.

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

Tyler frowned. "What?"

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

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

"And they don't know that." Vince shrugged. "Easy."

"That's ridiculous," she said. But she was smiling—the edge of a laugh breaking through.

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

"Meg." He nodded at it.

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

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

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

The doorbell rang.

Wicks came through the door talking.

"Vince! Where's this girl, man? Where's the—oh."

He stopped in the living room doorway.

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

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

"Holy shit." He said it to the room, not to her. His voice was nasal and too loud. "Vince, you didn't tell me she was *this* hot."

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

Dale entered behind him.

Dale came in behind him, and the doorway shrank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you." Flat. The two words were a door closing.

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

"Sit down, Wicks," Dale said. Low. Not a suggestion.

Wicks sat.

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

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

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

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

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

Megan stepped behind the bar table and picked up the bourbon. "What's everyone drinking?"

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

The game began and Tyler started winning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tyler won the first three hands.

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

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

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

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

"For you, gorgeous." His voice was too loud, too close. "Best bartender I've ever had."

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

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

Then the hand withdrew. Slow.

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

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

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

The comments started during the fourth hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not gay, Wicks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silence. One second. Two.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The touches began with logistics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sat.

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

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

"There," Dale said. Low. Satisfied.

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

Then she felt it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Play the hand, Wicks," Dale said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Comfortable?" he asked. Mild. Almost polite.

"Fine," she said.

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

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

Tyler won the next hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then she felt it.

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

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

Why?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're already losing," Megan said. "What stakes do you have left?"

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

She stared at him.

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

"Absolutely not."

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

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

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

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

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

"The bra," Wicks said. "Under the tank. That's it. That's all."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wicks turned his hand over. Full house.

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

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

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

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

She reached behind her back.

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

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

“Happy?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wicks saw it. Of course Wicks saw it.

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

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

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

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

He won another hand. His hands were steady.

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

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

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

"Jesus, Wicks," Vince said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The voice sat in her chest. Deep. Immovable.

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

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

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

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

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

Tyler said nothing. He dealt the next hand.

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

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

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

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

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

She looked away first. Then he did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tyler could smell it too.

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

Walking home. Megan was buzzing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They didn't discuss it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Every guy in that room wanted you."

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

Her mouth stopped.

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

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

She liked it.

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

He kept going. Couldn't stop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She pulled off.

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

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

His mouth found her and he froze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They wanted me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Afterward, in the dark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We're in.

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

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

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

The machine worked.

THE HUSTLE



Part 2: Solo

Sire Rickenbach

Chapter 2: Solo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He noticed everything.

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

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

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

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

But he didn't want to rush it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vince texted Tyler on Tuesday.

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

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

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

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

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

"Saturday."

"That's our day."

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

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

"You sure?"

"I said fine."

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

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

"His words. I'm just relaying."

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

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

"How much did we make last week?"

"Eleven hundred."

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

"I'll figure something out," she said.

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

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

She put it on the bed.

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

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

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

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"You were going to say I look hot."

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

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

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

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

"And they take what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s a favor?” Megan said from behind the bar. Her voice cool. The bartender voice.

“Whatever the winner asks for,” Dale said. “Within reason.”

“Whose reason?”

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

“I didn’t agree to that last week,” Megan said. “That was your rule. This is different.”

“It’s the same thing with a name on it.” Vince shrugged.

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

“Fine,” she said. “But I decide what ‘within reason’ means. Not him.” She tilted her chin at Dale.

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

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

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

She held his eyes. “Good.”

“They don’t need to hear it. Between us.”

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

“Let’s play some fucking cards,” Wicks said.

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

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

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

“Standing. Close.” He held up a fifty. “For the service.”

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

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

"That good?" she said. Flat.

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

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

"Give me a turn," Dale said. "Slow."

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

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

"Again," he said. "Take your time."

"I'm not a music box, Dale."

"Slower." Flat. The voice didn't rise. It didn't need to.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm here to pour drinks, Wicks."

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

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

"He's here to play cards." Wicks looked at Dale. "You believe this guy?"

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

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

"Favor."

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

"On my lap," he said. "Back to me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shampoo."

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

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Last call. Say it. End this.

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

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

The favor passed to Dale.

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

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

"Dale —" she started. The word went nowhere.

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

"Now turn. Let me see the back."

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

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

"That's the hand," Vince said. Breaking the moment. The dealer calling time.

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

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

"Lean against me," he said. "Just lean."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come here a sec. Both of you."

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

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

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

"She made three grand in two hours," Vince said.

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

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

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

"That's not —" Megan shook her head. "No. I'm here to pour drinks. That's it."

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

What Tyler said was: "It's up to you."

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

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

"I said no."

"You said no." His hands up. "That's it."

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

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

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

Tonight neither spoke.

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

"You okay?" he said.

"Fine." She poured water from the tap. Drank standing. "Dale's hands are —"

"I know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He didn't.

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

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

The job came through Vince. Of course it did.

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

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

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

"What kind of money?"

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

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

"That's serious money," she said.

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

"The game is Saturday," she said.

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

"Me alone at the game."

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

"Dale is not harmless."

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

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

What she said was: "Fine."

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

"I said fine."

That week, the basement kept showing up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Easy money," he said again.

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

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

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

Eleven o'clock. Nothing.

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

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

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

The blue bar stalled. No response.

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

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

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

Tomorrow. She'd deal with it tomorrow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She dried off. Put the towel on the hook.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't."

"Just observing." He stepped aside.

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

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

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

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

"It's a dress, Wicks."

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

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

"Let's play," Vince said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Wicks said it.

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

"— like when we were inside, the commissary list was —"

"Wicks." Vince's voice. Flat. Blade-sharp. A single word that cut the sentence dead.

Wicks stopped. Looked at Vince. The grin faltered. "I'm just saying —"

"Don't."

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

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

These men were in prison together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I want to go," she said. Flat. No quip.

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

"Someone else?"

"Another girl. For the game. Dale's been asking about this woman he knows —"

"You're replacing me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Remember what I showed you and Tyler downstairs?"

"Vince."

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

"I told you no."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded.

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

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

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

"Downstairs."

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

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

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

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

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

"Where do you want me?"

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

"Just stand there for a sec. By the stool."

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

Click.

She looked up. The shutter was already going.

"Don't stop. Just be you."

Click. Click.

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

"See?" Vince said. "Easy."

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

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

"Give me something," Vince said. "You're holding back."

"I'm standing here in a dress. What else do you want?"

"Give me what you give the mirror when nobody's watching."

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

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

The shutter burst — three rapid frames.

"That," Vince said. "Right there."

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

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

"Lean toward me," Vince said. "Just the shoulders."

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

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

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

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

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

"It's part of the shoot."

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

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

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

Vince didn't move to block her. He held the bikini out the way he held everything — like the next step had already been decided and he was waiting for her to catch up. "Dress shots are warm-up. This is the set."

"I'm going upstairs."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stood in her black lace and heels. Unhooked the bra. Her breasts settled — heavy, full, swaying with the motion, the nipples tightening in the cool air, the pink nubs crinkling. She folded the bra. Slid the underwear down and stepped out. Folded. Set both on the shelf.

Naked in heels under a bare bulb, she caught herself in the propped mirror: blue eyes too wide, dark hair falling forward over the tops of her breasts, nipples already tight, the full heavy shape of her looking like something that belonged on the other side

of the curtain whether she put the bikini on or not. She looked like the reason they'd paid. She hated how clearly she could see it.

In the back corner of Vince's basement, she reached for the bikini top. Tied it behind her neck, behind her back. The triangles were almost comically small — the fabric covered her nipples and an inch of areola at most. The inner curves spilled from the sides. The tops of each heavy breast rose above the triangle's edge. The strings bit.

The bottoms. She stepped in. Pulled them up. The front was a narrow strip of white — barely wider than two fingers — covering her slit and nothing else. Strings on her hip bones. The back a thong that disappeared between her cheeks.

Then she saw the photo.

It was on the shelf. Tucked between a box of clamp bulbs and a roll of gaffer tape. The corner visible — skin-colored — and her hand was pulling it out while her mind was still saying *don't*.

She pulled it out.

The same woman from the glamour shots. Same body, same tan. But this wasn't glamour. The woman was on her knees. Her mouth was full — stretched wide, jaw open, lips straining around a cock pushed halfway down her throat. She recognized the man. The dark skin. The size — the girth that made the woman's mouth look impossibly small. Dale. His thick hand on the back of her head, fingers buried in her hair. The shaft was slick with spit, glistening, veined, disappearing between the woman's lips. Strings of saliva connected her chin to where her mouth couldn't contain the volume. Her eyes watered. Sweat beaded on her forehead. The tendons in her neck were taut.

Megan stared. She should have put it down immediately. She didn't. Her eyes traced the image — the woman's jaw stretched to its limit, the skin taut at the corners of her mouth, the way her throat bulged where the shaft pressed. Dale's hand was tangled in the woman's hair, not pulling but holding, his thick fingers gripping at the root as if keeping her head where he wanted it. His other hand was on his own thigh, relaxed, the posture of a man receiving something he expected to receive. The woman's mascara had run in two thin tracks down her cheeks. Her nails were digging into his hip. The detail that held Megan longest: the woman's eyes. Open. Wet. Looking up at him while his cock filled her throat. The expression in them was complicated — tears and effort and something else underneath that looked like yielding, like the moment after resistance fails and what replaces it isn't acceptance but surrender, which is different, which is worse.

Between her legs — sudden, shameful — she clenched. A pulse of wet heat that had nothing to do with thought. The size of him. The visual of that dark, heavy cock stretching a woman's mouth to its limit. She was slick against the bikini fabric. Just from looking. The dampness sudden and damning and she felt the clench land with a flicker of horror that did nothing to stop it.

Was this left here for me?

She looked at the shelf — the photo's corner had been visible from the mirror's angle. Could have been careless. Could have been Vince. The thought sat in her stomach and the worse thought settled beneath it: *This was taken HERE. On this side of this curtain. Under these lights. That woman knelt right where I'm standing. She changed behind this same canvas and then she went out there and she put her mouth on him and the camera was going and that is what it looked like.* She looked at the photo again. The stretched lips. The spit. The cock. *That is what it looks like.*

Her hands shook putting it back. She pressed it flat against the shelf, precisely where she'd found it, as if being caught looking would change something — would mean she'd seen what Dale's cock could do and stayed anyway. She wiped her palm on her thigh. Between her legs, the dampness spread.

What am I doing. What if he tries to — what if they don't stop when I —

Three breaths. She steadied herself the only way she had: *Vince honors the signal. He honored it upstairs. Tonight is the last time. Play a little ball and be done.*

But the photo was still behind her eyes. The woman's face. The size of him. And the treacherous question — the one she could feel forming in the warm dark space between her thighs: *What does it feel like?*

She killed the question. Smoothed the bikini strings. Pushed her hair back. Checked the mirror. The woman in the glass was pale skin and white strings and blue eyes wider than they should have been.

She walked out. And the photo walked out with her.

The room went silent.

She stepped into the warm pool of the clamp lights and three men stopped breathing.

The bikini on her body. White strings on porcelain. Her breasts barely contained by triangles too small for them — the inner curves spilling from the sides, the stiff nipples pressing through thin white cotton, hard from the cold and the photo and the men's silence pressing against her like hands. They looked absurd and perfect and filthy: too much woman for too little fabric, the heavy pale weight of her trying to escape every seam. Above all that, her face — still trying for composure, pale blue eyes brighter than they should have been, mouth soft and uncertain — the pretty contradicting the pornographic and making both worse. Her flat stomach. The narrow waist that made the flare of her hips obscene. The bikini bottom a thin white strip riding low — the smooth bare mound visible on either side of the fabric, the seam of her pussy defined through the thin cotton. Her ass: both full cheeks exposed, the thong string disappearing between them, the single dark mole on the left cheek. The heels lengthening her legs.

Dale shifted forward on the couch. His cigar forgotten in the ashtray. His hands went to his knees and he leaned in — slow, heavy, the look on his face saying he'd been waiting for this exact moment and knew it when it arrived. His tongue crossed his lower lip. His dark eyes went from her chest to the strip of white between her legs and his

nostrils flared — smelling her, she realized, smelling the arousal that had been building behind the curtain, the heat and the musk that the thin cotton couldn't contain.

Wicks — his voice cracking: "Holy shit." He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing hard. "Vince — look at her. Look at those tits. The fabric — you can see her nipples through it, you can see the whole —" He ran out of sentence. His phone was up and shaking in his stained fingers.

Vince behind the camera, hand on the tripod, frozen for a moment. Then the shutter fired — three frames in quick succession, the sound mechanical and greedy.

"Perfect," he said. "Right there. Don't move."

She stood in the light and let them look. Three men and the full weight of their want pressing against her from eight feet away, and between her legs the wetness from the photo was already soaking into thin white cotton and she could feel it — the fabric warming, clinging, the dampness spreading in a slow bloom she couldn't stop.

"It's a swimsuit," she said. To the room. To herself. *These idiots are paying me for a swimsuit photo.* She gripped that. "Relax."

Nobody relaxed.

Vince shot fast. Burst mode. Seated on the stool — hands on hips, arch the back. Standing — feet shoulder-width, the bikini bottom pulled tight between her thighs, the strip of white the only barrier. Dale directing from the couch — sparse, logistical: "Feet apart." "Show me the back." She complied with diminishing resistance.

Her fourth glass. She'd walked to the card table between poses and reached for it — for permission this time. The gin softened the edges of what she was doing while the alcohol loosened something between her control and her body that she'd been holding together with conscious effort.

The touches started here. Vince left the camera on the tripod and stepped to her side — "adjusting the light" — his arm brushing the outside of her breast as he reached past her for one of the clamp stands. His hand on her shoulder, turning her ten degrees. His rough, stained fingers on her bare waist, lingering one beat longer than the direction required. She didn't call them out. Each one left heat behind.

"On the chaise," Vince said. "Hands and knees. Facing away."

The command landed in her stomach. She looked at the chaise — the clean sheet, the warm light falling on it. The position he was asking for. She knew what it would show them. She knew what it would look like from behind — the bikini bottom a joke of coverage, the thong string the only thing between her ass and three men with cameras. The sequence of small yeses — the dress, the stool, the bikini, the standing turns — carried her forward because each one had been trivially more than the last and stopping now meant admitting that all the previous yeses had been mistakes.

She set her glass on the card table and walked to the chaise. Knelt on it, palms forward on the clean sheet. The fabric was rough under her knees. The warm light was on her back. The men were behind her.

"Arch your back."

She arched. Her spine curved deep, her ass rising, her heavy breasts hanging in the tiny triangles — the weight pulling the cups away from her body, the full round underswell exposed, the soft pale flesh swinging free of anything like modesty. They hung. That was the word for it and the sight for it: hanging, heavy, the nipples pointing toward the sheet through thin white cotton, the triangles riding uselessly on top of something they couldn't hold. The breasts swayed when she shifted — a slow pendulous roll — and she heard Wicks's breath break. She could feel the men seeing them move. She could feel her own face burning toward the sheet while her chest put on the show.

"Spread your knees." Dale's voice from behind her. Low, flat, carrying the full weight of the room. A voice that didn't ask.

She hesitated. One second. The spread would open her to them — the bikini bottom was a strip of cotton between two strings and the spread would pull it tight against her and everything she was hiding would be visible through the wet fabric. She knew this. The knowing sat in her stomach. The small yes carried her past the knowing.

She spread them.

The pose. Her back arched, ass up, knees apart on the chaise. The thong string pulled tight between her cheeks — a single white line bisecting them, framing what it couldn't cover: her tight pink asshole visible above the string's line, the puckered skin smooth and clean, the color the same perfect pink as her mouth and nipples. Below, the bikini strip pressed against her pussy — soaked. The white cotton transparent where it clung to her, darkened with her wetness, the swollen lips visible through the fabric, the slit defined, the heat and slickness unmistakable. Between her parted thighs, the wetness had spread — a darker bloom on the white cotton, spreading slowly, the evidence irrefutable even at eight feet. At three feet — where the camera was — the evidence was anatomical.

The scent of her hit the room. Musky, sweet, the sharp concentrated note of female arousal cutting through the cigarette smoke and the cigar and Vince's greasy cologne and the concrete-dust smell of the basement. The smell was unmistakable and it was hers and every man in the room was breathing it.

Dale inhaled slowly behind her. She heard him — the deep, deliberate pull of air through his nose, the sound a man makes when he tastes something. Wicks swallowed. His Adam's apple clicked audibly. She could hear his breathing — fast, through his mouth, menthol-tainted panting, fast and shallow, his self-control running on fumes.

From this angle, behind her, the men saw: the full shape of her ass — pale, round, the mole on the left cheek — the thong string framing her most private places. The bikini strip clinging to a pussy that was wet enough to be visible, the cotton molding to the swollen lips, the slit defined through damp fabric. The pink of her visible through white cotton. Three cameras aimed at the evidence of a woman on her hands and knees with

her ass raised and her knees spread and her pussy soaked through her last piece of clothing.

The shutter fired. *Click. Click. Click.* Wicks's phone from one angle. Vince's DSLR from behind.

She was on display. Three men documenting the most private parts of her from three feet away in warm light. She was horrified — the woman who'd walked in saying *nothing weird, no touching* on her hands and knees with her ass in the air and her pussy on camera. And she was throbbing — her clit pulsing against the damp fabric with every heartbeat, her nipples aching against the cups, a deep rhythmic pulse between her legs that matched her shame and ran alongside it and would not stop.

She heard Dale move. The heavy footsteps on concrete — one, two, three steps from the couch toward the chaise. She was facing away from him. She felt him first: the displacement of air, the heat of his large body, the dense cigar-and-cologne smell thickening. His shadow fell across her back, across her ass — the light changing as he stepped between her and the clamp behind him. The temperature at her skin rose. He was close. Standing right behind her, standing over her, looking down at the full display from above.

Vince stepped from behind the camera. "Adjusting the angle." His hands on her hips, turning her slightly, his rough palms on her bare waist lingering one beat, two. He traced the line of her spine — "straighten here" — his fingertips on her vertebrae, pressing, his stained thumbnail scraping softly along the arch. The touch was proprietary. The pretense was gone from his hands even if the word *positioning* was still in his mouth.

Dale was directly behind her now. She could feel his breath — warm, cigar-thick — on the backs of her thighs. His body heat was a wall at her back. She could smell him specifically: the cologne, heavier this close, the musk of his skin beneath it, and the deeper male smell of his arousal — the warm, concentrated scent of a hard cock in denim three feet from her face-level if she turned around.

"You look good on your knees," he said. Quiet. For her alone. His voice coming from directly above and behind. She couldn't see his face. She could feel the weight of his attention like a hand on the small of her back. "Real good."

"Don't close your eyes," Vince said. "Look at the camera."

She opened them. Looked at the lens — pale blue eyes wet at the edges, mouth open on a breath she couldn't close, the expensive face of a woman who did not belong on her hands and knees with her ass up and her tits hanging and her pussy soaked through cotton. Her face was hot — the heat across her cheekbones, down her neck, across the tops of her breasts. Her nipples ached against the fabric. Between her legs the pulse was constant — the throbbing a metronome that matched the clicking of the shutter and the sound of Dale breathing behind her.

She sat up on the chaise. Dale stepped back from the foot end and settled onto the couch — the springs protesting under him, his thighs spreading. Wicks was in the

folding chair to the side. Vince moved behind the camera. The men were close now — the distance that had felt safe when she stood at the stool had collapsed, even with the few feet of concrete between them.

"Take it off." Dale's voice.

The room stopped.

"Five hundred," he said. He reached into his pocket. More bills on the card table. "The top."

"I'd pay too," Wicks said. Two hundreds. "For those — for that. Please."

Seven hundred more. Twenty-four hundred total.

Vince stepped close. His voice low, private: "You're robbing these idiots, Megan. Seven hundred dollars for one picture."

"No." She meant it. Felt the word solid. "That's not what I agreed to."

"Five hundred," Dale repeated. "Thirty seconds. Then it goes back on."

"I said no."

Ten seconds of silence. The clamp lights buzzing. Her nipples aching against the tiny triangles.

She thought about the money — twenty-four hundred and counting. She thought about the woman in the photo — who'd had Dale's cock in her mouth and been paid and walked away and been fine. She thought about Tyler, who'd asked her for nudes three times and been told no each time. Three times she'd said no. No to the phone in bed. No to the camera on the nightstand. No to the laptop and the promise he'd delete it. Eight years of no. And these men — men whose names she hadn't known six weeks ago, men who smelled like motor oil and menthol and cheap cologne — would have what Tyler never got. Were documenting what Tyler had been denied. The thought, when it arrived, did not feel like shame. It felt like a door being kicked open from the inside.

She reached behind her neck. Found the knot. Pulled. Then the one at her back — fingers fumbling, the second knot tighter than the first.

The strings fell. The triangles dropped — peeling away from her breasts, the fabric releasing them. For one second the cups clung by static and sweat and then they released and she was bare.

Her tits in the clamp light. The reason. Full, heavy, the pale skin luminous under warm white, suddenly and completely without excuse. They sat high on her chest, projecting forward — the aggressive shape that jutted rather than sagged, the size and firmness making a lie of gravity. The nipples tightened in the air — the puffy pink mounds crinkling, the nubs hardening into rigid points, flushed darker pink, the raised swollen profile readable from the couch. Freckles scattered faint across the upper slopes. Three feet from Dale's face. Under warm light. With cameras going. She was the most naked woman alive and she'd only lost two triangles of cotton.

The room's silence lasted three seconds. Then Wicks — his voice cracking, different from anything he'd said tonight: "Jesus. Vince. You seeing this?" He

swallowed hard enough that she heard it. “I want to put my mouth on those. Look at the size of them. Look at her fucking nipples. I want to — I need to —”

“Shut up, Wicks.”

Dale said nothing. He leaned back into the couch. His tongue moved behind his lower lip. He knew what came next. His body said so.

Megan’s hands twitched at her sides. The instinct to cover — to cross her arms, to shield. She didn’t do it. Chin up. Composure by millimeters.

The shutter fired in rapid succession.

She stayed topless. The thirty seconds Dale had promised passed and the bikini top stayed on the floor and nobody mentioned it. The camera was clicking. And she was settling into the exposure — the crisis dulling into a state, the air against her bare skin normalizing in increments she could feel but couldn’t stop.

Vince shot her through poses. Arms up — her breasts lifting, the nipples pointing toward the ceiling. Turned sideways — the full profile, the aggressive jut. Leaning forward on the chaise — tits hanging, swaying, the weight pulling them into shapes she could feel the men watching. She walked to the card table and picked up her glass. Her fifth. The gin was insulation now — she drank because she could feel everything and the feeling was too loud and the gin turned the volume down one notch, and the notch was the difference between standing up and walking out and staying on this chaise with her tits bare and men’s eyes on them.

Between poses she caught her own face in the black of the lens — still trying for chin-up composure while her bare tits did the opposite of composure, bouncing when she reached for the glass, settling when she sat, the nipples refusing to soften. The dissonance was the show. She knew it. They knew it.

“Those nipples don’t lie,” Wicks said from his chair. His commentary had shifted — he was narrating what he saw changing in her. “They’ve been hard since the bikini. The color’s darker. She’s getting off on this. Look at her. She can’t hide it.”

Dale: “She likes being seen.”

She had no answer for that. Her nipples were hard and would not soften and the cameras were documenting the evidence and Dale was right.

Then Vince put the camera down.

She noticed the absence of the shutter before she noticed what he was doing — stepping around the tripod, his hands wiping on his jeans. The gold chain catching the light.

“The shadow’s wrong,” he said. “Let me fix the light.”

He stepped close. Reached past her for a clamp light and his arm brushed the outside of her breast — the rough fabric of his sleeve against the soft outer swell. He tilted the light. Stepped back to the tripod. Then crossed back to her in two steps — his hand on her shoulder, turning her ten degrees.

“There.” His hand didn’t leave. His thumb on her collarbone. His rough fingers curling over the top of her shoulder — the contrast vivid: his brown, oil-stained hand

on her pale skin. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat and something greasy underneath.

His thumb traced down. Off her collarbone. Over the upper swell of her left breast — one inch, then two, following the soft heavy curve he'd been photographing all night like the camera had been a warmup for his hands.

She grabbed his wrist.

"We said no touching."

Vince didn't pull back. The deep-set eyes, shadowed under heavy brows. The smirk almost gone — replaced by something hungrier and more careful. "I'm positioning."

His thumb pressed. The pad of it against the top of her breast — the full, taut flesh above the nipple — then dragged a slow half-inch toward the puffy pink, stopping short like a man who knew exactly where the line still was and how close he could stand to it. Feeling the density, the warmth, the give. She held his wrist and didn't push. Her nipple tightened harder under the almost of it. The rule had been restated and redefined in the same breath, and her letting the redefinition stand was the real concession.

He stepped back. Palms out. "See? Professional."

Her skin burned where his thumb had been.

Then Dale stood.

He didn't announce it. The couch protested as his weight came off it and then he was crossing the space — direct, certain. His body blocked the clamp light behind him. His shadow fell over her.

"Get over here." Three words that hit her low in the stomach.

She didn't move. "Dale —"

"Stand up." He reached out one massive dark hand.

She stood. His hand was there and his voice was there and the photo behind the curtain was in her head and she couldn't be sitting beneath him while he stood over her.

He pulled her forward. One step. Between his spread legs — standing, feet apart, his hands on her hips. Even in heels, the top of her head reached his chin. This close he was enormous — the width of his chest filling her vision, his arms like walls, the gold chain at his throat. His dark skin against her pale body, the contrast everywhere: his brown hands on her white hips, his dark forearms against her bare stomach.

"These are mine tonight," he said. Looking down at her breasts. One dark hand left her hip and rose — cupped her left breast from below. The full weight of it in his massive palm, his fingers pressing into the soft flesh. His thumb brushed the nipple — the swollen nub tightening further under his touch, a sharp sensation from her chest straight between her legs.

She gasped. Her hands flew to his wrist. Her fingers didn't meet around it.

He bent to her. His thick neck curving, his broad shoulders rolling forward, the mass of him folding down until his face was level with her chest. She could see the top of his skull — close-cropped grey hair against dark skin, age lines creasing. His full lips parted. His breath warm on her nipple for one second —

His mouth closed over it.

The sound she made was involuntary and open.

His lips sealed around the puffy pink flesh — encompassing the nipple and the swollen areola, taking more of her breast into his mouth than she thought a mouth could take. His tongue flat and hot. He sucked. The full pull of his mouth, cheeks hollowing, drawing her nipple into wet heat that made her legs buckle. The wet sound of it filled the space between their bodies — lewd, rhythmic, a man feeding on her. His tongue worked — flat strokes across the hard nub, pressing it against the roof of his mouth, pulling. Spit welled at the corners of his lips and ran warm down the underside of her breast. She gripped his head — the close-cropped grey hair rough against her pale fingers. Her hands went from his wrist to his skull and she didn't know if she was pulling him off or holding him there. His mouth was relentless — hot, wet, the suction drawing sensation from her chest to her core with every pull. Across the light pool she could feel the cameras taking it: her pretty face tipped back, mouth open, the magazine girl with a fifty-five-year-old man's mouth full of her tit.

He released her nipple with a wet pop — the flesh springing free from his mouth, shining with his spit in the clamp light, darker, abused-looking, the puffy areola glistening. Moved to the other breast. The same mouth. The same suction. The same devouring pull. Her right nipple between his lips, his tongue circling, his teeth barely grazing. She watched — she shouldn't have watched — the pale heavy globe of her vanishing between his dark lips, disappearing, reappearing wet. Her spine curved — arching into him, pressing her breast more fully into his mouth. Involuntary. Her hips shifted. Her pussy clenched with every suck and the clenching was a rhythm she couldn't interrupt.

"You taste like I knew you would," he said against her skin. His lips moving on her breast, voice vibrating into the flesh. Then his mouth sealed again and she moaned — a real moan, from her chest, filling the room. The sound of a woman who had stopped holding anything together.

The shutter burst. Vince back behind the camera.

Dale's hands slid down her body. From her breasts — reluctantly, the last press of his thumbs across the hard nipples drawing a whimper she couldn't swallow — to her ribs, where he could feel her breathing, the fast shallow pulls that made her ribcage flutter beneath his palms. To her waist, his dark fingers spanning the narrow taper, feeling how small she was between his hands. To her hips. He gripped the hip bones and pulled her toward him — one step, her bare stomach pressing against his chest through his shirt, the body heat pressing through the cotton into her skin. She was small against him. The top of her head at his chin. Her bare tits against the stiff fabric of his shirt, the cotton dragging against her nipples with every breath. His arms around her were walls she'd walked between.

His hands went lower. Both palms sliding down the swell of her ass — cupping the bare cheeks, the bikini thong string between his thick fingers, the fabric meaningless against his grip. He squeezed. Kneaded. Pulled her cheeks apart slightly and her pussy

clenched at the exposure and he inhaled sharply — a single rough pull of air that she felt against the top of her skull. He held her there: her bare tits against his chest, his dark hands on her white ass, his cock a thick ridge between them pressing against her stomach through his jeans. She could feel the heat of it through the denim. The size of it.

"We said —" she started. The words died. His hands on her ass tightened and the thought dissolved.

He pulled one hand away from her ass and found the back of her neck — thick fingers dark against dark strands, curling and gripping at the base of her skull. He turned her face toward him.

She knew what was coming. Knew it in the way her lips parted and her body went still. His face was close — the broad nose, the dark skin, the full lips slightly parted around the smell of cigar smoke. His eyes open and on hers. No question in them.

His mouth found her neck first. Below her ear — lips, warm and full, pressing against pale skin. The weight of his mouth, his breath hot, the scratch of his jaw. He kissed along her throat — slow, deliberate, his lips parting against her skin. She tilted her head. Gave him more. The tilt was involuntary and it wasn't and the ambiguity was hers.

Then her mouth. He turned her face with the hand in her hair and his lips found hers.

She held still. One second. Two. Her lips pressed together — the last line, the last thing she could hold. His mouth was warm and full and tasted of cigar smoke and whiskey and something darker, something animal and male and wholly unfamiliar. The mouth she'd been kissing for eight years tasted like toothpaste and coffee and the mints he kept in his truck. This mouth tasted like a basement and bad decisions and heat.

She opened.

Her lips parted and his tongue found hers and she kissed him back and the kissing back devastated her — because she opened willingly, her mouth moving against his, her tongue touching his tongue, the taste of him flooding her, and the willingness was hers. His hand tightened in her hair. She gripped his shirt — fistfuls of cotton, pulling him closer, and the pulling was a choice she was making in real time and couldn't pretend away.

A moan passed from her into him. Small and helpless. Then a second one — deeper, from lower, from the place where his mouth connected to the pulse between her legs. His tongue was slow and thorough and certain and she kissed him the way she hadn't kissed anyone — open-mouthed, gasping between tastes, her teeth grazing his lower lip. She could taste the whiskey. The cigar underneath it. The salt of his skin. Seven seconds. Ten. His free hand found her breast and squeezed — the full weight of it in his palm, the nipple against his rough thumb — and she moaned into his mouth again. Her hips shifted. Her hands went from his shirt to his neck to the back of his skull, her fingers on the close-cropped grey hair, holding his face against hers. She was the one holding him now. The yielding had become something larger and she couldn't find the seam where it ended and the wanting began.

He pulled back. One inch. His breath on her wet lips. His dark eyes close enough to see the lighter striations in the brown, the dilated pupils, the calm certainty of a man who had just confirmed what he suspected.

"Knew you'd taste sweet," he said. Quiet. Just for her. Then louder, to the room: "She kisses back. You get that?"

The shutter fired.

Her mouth was wet. Her lips swollen from his — the pretty mouth used, shining, not hers in the way it had been an hour ago. She'd kissed another man — willingly, with tongue, with a moan. Her nipples were aching points, still spit-shiny from his mouth, the pale slopes of her breasts marked with the faint wet trails of where he'd fed. She was wetter than she'd been all night — the kiss had opened something and she could feel herself soaking into the thin strip of bikini fabric.

Wicks's hands arrived. She heard his chair scrape on the concrete — a thin, metallic screech. Then something set down on the table — his phone, she realized later, the filming suddenly less important than touching. His footsteps — quick, uneven, jittery, done waiting. His breathing reached her first — fast, through his mouth, menthol and stale cigarettes mixing with the cigar smoke and Dale's cologne and her own arousal in the close air. Then his palms landed on her shoulders from behind.

His touch was a different language from Dale's. Where Dale's hands were certain and heavy and hot, Wicks's were nervous and thin and clammy — his bony fingers trembling against her skin, the nicotine stains vivid yellow-brown against her pale shoulders. He slid down her arms. Found her ribs. His fingertips counted her bones through her skin, pressing, mapping, the frantic disbelief of hands that kept checking she was real.

He moved lower. His hands on her bare waist, his thumbs tracing her spine, then sliding down to her ass — squeezing, kneading, his bony fingers digging into the soft flesh. He wasn't gentle about it. His grip was greedy and his breathing was in her ear and she could feel his cock pressing against her lower back through his jeans — insistent, the bulbous head a blunt pressure against her spine.

"Look at her, Dale." His voice had shifted into something feral — not the cheerful, stream-of-consciousness Wicks from the poker table, but something hungrier and more specific. "Look at her face right now. She's gone. She's fucking gone. You put your mouth on her tit and she turned into a different person. Those nipples — the color's changed, Dale, I swear to God. I've been watching them darken for an hour. And the sounds she's making — did you hear that moan? She'd let you do anything right now. Anything. Look at her. She wants it."

"Don't —" she started. The word died mid-syllable. Wicks's hand slid up her ribcage and his clammy fingers grazed the underside of her breast and the touch — different from Dale's, thinner, more frantic, the tremor in his fingertips running into her skin — ran through her like a wire pulled taut, and the tautness was not revulsion.

"The bottoms," Dale said. His hand on her thigh. His dark fingers curling under the bikini string at her hip.

"No." Barely a whisper.

Vince, close, private, the co-conspirator whisper: "One more set, Megan. These idiots don't know what they're looking at. You're taking them for everything."

These idiots. Their money. I'm robbing them. She gripped the thought like a fistful of rope.

Dale's fingers hooked the string. Pulled. Slowly. The bikini bottom sliding off her hip, over her ass, the wet fabric peeling away from her pussy with a sound — quiet, clinging, obscene — that filled the basement.

She lifted her hips. Let it slide down her thighs. Off her knees. Off.

More money appeared — Dale's four hundreds, Wicks's two — but the amounts had stopped mattering. Three thousand dollars on the felt and she couldn't have counted it.

She was nude. In Vince's basement. With three men and cameras. The heels the only thing left.

Three seconds of silence. The men looking at everything. Her breasts first — always first — still extraordinary, still hard-nippled and exposed, spit-traces dried to a faint sheen, the heavy pale weight of them the thing the room had been built around. Below: the flat stomach, the hip bones, the bare mound smooth and waxed clean. Her pussy — the neat pink slit between pressed thighs, the lips thick and swollen from over an hour of arousal, parted slightly, glistening. The wetness visible even with her legs together — slickness on her inner thighs, catching the warm light. The smell of her cutting through the cigar smoke and cologne — musky, sweet, the concentrated scent of arousal that filled the space between her and the men. Dale's slow inhale. Wicks's nostrils flaring. Her face tried to hold the line and failed by a millimeter: blue eyes too bright, mouth soft, the composure cracked where they could photograph the crack.

She stood. Turned. Slowly. Felt every inch of their attention on her bare skin. Her ass — both full cheeks, the dark mole, the crease between. She came back around. Faced them.

"Spread for me," Dale said.

She shifted her feet apart. The swollen lips, flushed deeper pink. The inner pink visible. Her clit swollen. The wetness glistening on her thighs.

Wicks exhaled like he'd been holding his breath for an hour. "Look at that pussy." His voice was ruined — cracked, raw, nothing left of the comedian. "Vince, look at it. It's dripping down her legs. I can smell it from here. I want to lick it off her thighs — I want to get on my knees and put my tongue inside her until she screams." His Adam's apple bobbed. His stained fingers were white-knuckled on his own jeans. "She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life and she's soaking wet in your basement and I can't — I can't —"

"Easy." Dale. Low, steady, the counterweight to Wicks's frenzy. His eyes on the wetness between her legs, his slow inhale audible. "That's mine. You'll get your turn."

The cameras clicked. Her legs stayed open.

Then she saw the phone. Dale's phone — propped on a crate near the chaise, half-hidden among the clutter she'd walked past a dozen times, screen dark, the tiny lens pointed at her. He must have placed it while she was behind the curtain changing. It had been recording the entire shoot. The knowledge landed in her stomach like a stone — Vince's DSLR and Wicks's phone she'd known about, but this silent third eye had been watching from three feet away while she was on her hands and knees and spread and wet and she'd never seen it.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

"One more set." Vince's voice. "Hands and knees. Like before. On the chaise. Face the camera this time."

The echo of the bikini all-fours pose — the same position, one hour and every piece of clothing later. She knelt on the chaise. Palms on the sheet. Bare, arched, her breasts hanging, her ass up. The men were no longer at a distance — the couch was empty, everyone inside the light pool now.

Dale stepped to the head end of the chaise. He planted his feet wide — shoulder-width, then wider, spreading his stance until his hips dropped six inches. On all fours with her arms extended and her head lifted, the chaise's height put her face at his groin. Level with the buckle. Level with what was behind the buckle. His hands went to his belt. The buckle was brass, tarnished, and she could see the wear on the leather — the crease where it folded every day, the dark spots from his hands. She heard the metal first. The clink of the prong leaving the hole. Then the zipper — the rasp, deliberate, drawn out, each tooth separating with a small metallic tick that filled the basement.

The sound and the photo behind the curtain hit her at the same moment. The woman on her knees. The stretched mouth. The watering eyes. The spit. She could see the photo as clearly as if she were still holding it — every detail she'd stared at too long: the mascara tracks, the jaw at its limit, the dark veined shaft disappearing between the woman's lips. That woman had been here. On this chaise. In this light. And now Megan was on her hands and knees in the same light and the zipper was coming down and the photo was turning real in front of her.

"Dale — no." Her voice. The first full word in minutes. She started to sit back on her heels —

His hand caught the back of her skull. Thick fingers in her hair. Not yanking. Holding. Keeping her where she was — face level with his open fly, the denim gaping, the dark thatch of hair visible above the waistband of his briefs.

"Don't move."

"I'm not — Dale, I'm not doing that. Get your hand off me."

"Nobody's fucking you." Vince, stepping aside from the tripod — Dale's body blocked the DSLR now, but the phones were still rolling from their angles. Mild.

Reasonable. The safe one. “One still. That’s it. Cock in the frame, her face next to it. Looks dirty, doesn’t go dirty. Keep shooting.”

“Vince —”

“One photo,” Vince said. “Then he puts it away. You’ve come this far. Don’t blow the set over a still.”

Dale reached in. His dark hand disappearing into his jeans. She watched his forearm flex. Then he pulled himself free.

The photo made flesh. Dark, heavy, thick — the shaft veined and long, the head swollen and darker than the rest, glistening where it emerged from his fist. He wrapped one hand around the base and stroked once — slow, peeling the foreskin back, the full head revealed, the slit already beading a clear drop that caught the clamp light and hung. He was big. Bigger than the denim had promised. The shaft was the width of her wrist. The head was wider. The length settled under its own weight, pulling slightly down despite the hardness, and the veins along it pulsed under dark skin.

He stepped in. One step. His hips at the chaise’s edge. The head of his cock hanging an inch from her mouth — close enough that her breath moved across it, close enough that she saw the bead swell and threaten to fall.

The smell reached her first. Musk. Heat. Skin. Not cologne, not cigar — the concentrated male scent of his cock, earthy and raw, the inside of him pushed into the air between them. It filled her nose. Then her mouth. Her saliva glands fired before she could stop them — pooling under her tongue, thick and sudden, her lips parting on a breath she didn’t mean to take.

“Women like you cross the street when they see me,” Dale said. Low. Stroking. His dark eyes on hers over the thick curve of his cock. “Can’t look me in the eye at the counter.” Another stroke. The head swelling, the bead stretching. “And here you are.”

“Don’t.” She turned her face — an inch toward her shoulder, away from him.

His hand in her hair turned her back. Easy. Inevitable. He brought her cheek alongside the shaft — not on it, beside it — pale skin against the dark length of him, the heat of his cock radiating against her face without touching her mouth. The head rested near her temple. His balls hung heavy below her chin. The contrast was filthy and perfect and impossible to look away from if you were holding a camera: her prim mouth, closed; his black cock, thick and veined and wet at the tip, filling the frame beside her.

Beneath her, her bare tits hung toward the sheet — heavy, swaying with the small tremble she couldn’t stop — and the cameras had both: the magazine face beside a cock that didn’t belong, and the body that had made the whole night inevitable dangling underneath like the rest of the product.

“Hold still,” Vince said. The shutter fired. Burst. Three frames. Four. “Got it. Beautiful. That’s —”

Dale didn’t put it away.

His hand slid from her hair to her jaw. Thumb and fingers opening her face toward him. He dragged the head of his cock across her lower lip — painting it with the bead of precum, salt and slick, the smooth hot skin of the glans sliding left to right over her mouth. She made a sound. Small. Closed-mouthed. Her lips pressed shut against him and he waited there, the fat head resting on her mouth like a question he already knew the answer to.

"Mouth on it."

"Dale — Vince said one photo —"

"Photo's done." Flat. He pressed forward. The head nudged her lips apart by force of girth alone — not a thrust yet, just the blunt insistence of something too thick to keep out once it wanted in. "You've never been this close to a black cock in your life. Go on."

Her mouth opened. The lean she didn't plan — or the failure to keep it shut, which was the same thing.

The head pushed past her lips. Smooth. Hot. Stretching her jaw wider than it wanted to go on the first inch. The ridge of the glans slid over her tongue and the taste hit — salt, sharp, and underneath it a deeper musk that coated the inside of her mouth like a film. Heavy. The weight of his cock on her tongue was a fact, not a metaphor: dense, hot, pressing her tongue flat. Her lips strained white around the dark shaft. Spit welled immediately, flooding around him, shining at the corners of her mouth. She heard herself make a sound — low, in her throat — and the vibration ran into him.

Dale exhaled through his nose. His hand settled back into her hair. Gripped at the root.

"Yeah," he said. Quiet. Certain. "That's how you suck a black man's cock."

Then he pushed deeper — past the still, past the pretense, past the lie Vince had sold her — and the photo behind the curtain stopped being a warning and started being a mirror.

The stretch of her jaw was immediate — aching, her lips straining around the width of him, the girth forcing her mouth wider than it wanted to go. She could feel the ridge of the head sliding past her lips, the smooth taut skin of the glans on her tongue, the heat of him filling her. Heavy. The weight of his cock on her tongue was a physical fact — not metaphor, actual weight, dense and hot, pressing her tongue flat against the bottom of her mouth. Her jaw ached. She tasted him fully now: the precum mixing with her saliva, the musk of his skin, something sharper beneath it that she could only describe as *male*, as the distilled taste of a man's cock, and the taste was making her clench between her legs with every pulse of it on her tongue.

She moaned. The vibration traveled through her lips and onto his cock and he inhaled sharply — a sound from his chest, the first sound she'd heard from Dale that wasn't language. His thigh tensed under her bracing hand. She could feel the vibration of her own voice running through the shaft, through his body, and the loop — her mouth

producing a sensation that produced a reaction that made her want to produce more — tightened something in her that she couldn't loosen.

"Look at her tits while she does it," Wicks said from somewhere behind and to the side, voice wrecked. "They're swinging. Every time he pushes — fuck — look at them."

His grip tightened in her hair. He pushed forward — one real thrust, deeper than she'd planned, his cock sliding over her tongue and hitting the back of her throat. She gagged. Her eyes watered instantly — the reflex involuntary, the tears welling and spilling onto her cheeks. Spit flooded her mouth, spilling past her lips, stringing from his shaft. The sound — wet, choking, obscene — filled the basement. His cock pulled back an inch. Then pushed again. Deeper. The head stretching her throat and the gag repeating and the spit running down her chin and the sound the woman in the photo had made — the exact sound, the wet choking gurgle — coming from Megan's throat now. Her free hand flew to his thigh — bracing, fingers digging into the denim, not pushing away. The pose was the photo. Exactly. The mascara she hadn't bothered with saving her from the black tracks but the tears were the same and the spit was the same and the cock was the same.

Then — while Dale's cock was in her mouth and his hand was in her hair and his taste was coating her tongue — she heard movement behind her. Wicks. The scrape of his shoes on concrete, the quick uneven steps, the fast menthol breathing getting closer. He crouched at the foot of the chaise — she could feel the air shift, feel the heat of his body arriving behind her spread knees. His hand landed on her calf. Bony fingers wrapping around the muscle, trembling. He slid up — over her calf, over the back of her knee, onto the inside of her thigh.

His bony hand on the inside of her thigh. Sliding up. The clammy fingers she'd felt on her ribs earlier, the nicotine stains, the nervous tremor — all of it on the inside of her thigh now, climbing. On all fours, knees apart, she was open to him from behind. She couldn't close her legs without losing the pose. She couldn't speak with Dale's cock in her mouth. She felt Wicks's fingers reach the crease of her thigh, trace the edge of her pussy where the wetness had been running down, and find the slit.

He slid through the wetness. Two fingers parting her, sliding along the outside of her lips, the slickness coating his fingers immediately. Then his middle finger pressed inward and slipped inside her. One finger. Thin, bony, curving upward. The first penetration by a man who wasn't Tyler.

The sensation was a collision. Dale's cock on her tongue, filling her mouth, the taste and the stretch and the wet sounds — and now Wicks inside her, his finger hooking, pressing against her front wall, finding the spot that Tyler found on good nights and pressing it with a certainty that had nothing to do with tenderness. She made a sound around Dale's cock — muffled, desperate, involuntary — and the sound vibrated through both of them and she could feel Wicks's finger respond to the vibration and Dale's cock twitch against her tongue.

She was full at both ends. Her mouth and her pussy occupied by two different men at the same time. The sensation was beyond anything she could process — the two points of penetration sending signals that tangled in her spine and arrived at her brain as a single overwhelming current. Her hips pushed back against Wicks's hand. She didn't choose to. She felt her pelvis tilt and press and the pressing was hers and she couldn't take it back.

And she heard footsteps at her flank. Heavy. Deliberate. Vince. Stepping around the camera, his shoes on the concrete — one step, two, three. She couldn't see him — Dale's cock in her mouth, his hand in her hair, Wicks's finger inside her — but she could hear. The rasp of a zipper. His zipper. The metallic teeth separating. Then the sound of his hand — the rough, stained hand she'd felt on her waist all night — gripping himself. The thick wet sound of skin on skin. He was stroking. Moving closer. She could smell him now — cigarettes and grease and the deeper musk — arriving at the side of the chaise, his shadow falling across her ribs, his cock in his hand, approaching with clear intent.

The compound of all three — Dale in her mouth, Wicks inside her, Vince at her flank with his cock out and closing — the triangle sealed around her. She was surrounded. She was filled. She was being touched by three men at once and each man wanted more than he was getting and the *more* was seconds away.

The breaking point.

"Last call."

She pulled back — three inches, four — Dale's cock sliding from her mouth, spit stringing between her lips and the head in a glistening bridge that caught the light and broke. She was still on her hands and knees, still close enough to feel the heat of him against her face. She said the words. Clear. Steady. The steadiness cost her everything she had left.

Vince stopped. Immediately. Stepped back. Tucked himself away. "Done. We're done." His voice sharp, directed at the room. "Guys."

Dale — right as she said it — came. The timing was the cruelty: the signal couldn't recall what was already airborne. His cock in his hand, the orgasm past the point of stopping. His hips jerked. His cum hit her face — across her cheek, her lips, her chin, a lash of it catching her eyelashes — warm and thick against the pale pretty skin, striping the blue eyes, painting the mouth that still looked like it belonged at a Christmas party. She was still on her hands and knees, her face still at his groin, her bare tits hanging, and there was nowhere to go in the half-second it took. The one thing the signal couldn't undo.

She stayed frozen on all fours. Dale's hand loosened in her hair — the fingers uncurling, the grip releasing, his palm sliding down the back of her skull and away. She felt the cum on her face — warm, thick, sliding down her cheek toward her chin, a streak of it across her lips that she could taste, salt and bitter and the musk of him, a line of it caught in her eyelashes and blurring her left eye. The cameras were still on that

face. On the ruin of it. She didn't wipe it. She didn't move. She stayed on all fours with his cum cooling on her skin and the taste of his cock still filling her mouth and her nipples still hard in the cold air like her body hadn't received the signal either.

Wicks pulled his finger free. Shoved himself back into his jeans. Turned away without looking at her.

Dale stepped back. Tucked himself in — slow, deliberate, zipping, buckling, the thick ridge still visible through the denim. He looked at her once. The look said *paused*, not *finished*.

Vince appeared with a blanket. Draped it over her shoulders. She sank back on her heels, her spine curving, her weight folding. His hand on her arm — brief, warm. "You did great. That was — you were incredible." The guardian act. The handler with the show horse. The tenderness was worse than the groping because the man who'd put her in this room was now folding her in a blanket and telling her she'd done well.

She wiped her face with the blanket's corner. Dale's cum smearing across the fabric — warm, then cooling, then gone from her skin but present on the cloth against her shoulder. Her legs closed. Her breathing ragged — she could hear it, the shake in each exhale.

The signal worked. She'd said it and they stopped. She was safe.

She was safe and sixty seconds ago she'd had Dale's cock in her mouth and his cum was on her face and a man's finger had been inside her and she'd been making sounds she didn't recognize.

She reached for her clothes.

She dressed behind the curtain. Her hands were shaking badly enough that the zipper took three tries. The black dress over her body — covering her, containing her, the fabric settling on skin that was still hot and damp. Her bra and underwear were on the shelf where she'd left them, folded neatly by a woman who'd expected to put them back on. She couldn't. The thought of pulling lace over skin that was still slick, still swollen, still humming — she stuffed them into her clutch. Went bare under the dress. The fabric sliding against her bare pussy with every step, against nipples still aching from Dale's mouth.

The photo was still on the shelf. The woman on her knees. Dale's cock in her mouth. Megan looked at it and saw herself — the same stretched lips, the same watering eyes, the same dark hand in the hair. She put it back facedown.

She walked out from behind the curtain.

Vince was at the card table. The money stacked. He counted it — his stained fingers flipping bills, sorting. "Twenty-four hundred," he said. "Photos minus the house. Plus your tips from upstairs — what was that, a hundred? Twenty-five hundred for the night."

She took it. The bills warm from his hand. Twenty-five hundred dollars. She folded the stack into her clutch without a word.

Dale was on the couch. Still. His eyes on her as she moved toward the stairs — that sleepy, certain gaze — the hunger banked to something calmer, the look of a man who'd confirmed what he wanted and could afford patience.

"See you Saturday," he said. Flat.

She didn't respond. Went up the stairs. Vince behind her. The living room — the poker table, the bottles, the stain on the carpet. A house. Not the place where she'd just been naked and touched and wet and had a man's cock in her mouth and his cum on her face and —

Vince walked her to the front door. His hand on the small of her back — the same spot Tyler touched. The same pressure.

"Tyler doesn't need to hear about the photo stuff," Vince said. Quiet. His face close to hers in the porch light. "We keep the poker and the photos separate. His thing and our thing."

Our thing. Two people sharing a secret.

"Did you actually tell Tyler?" she asked. "About the photos. Before he left."

Vince's face didn't change. "I told him if you wanted to, I'd take care of it. He said your call."

"Saturday," Vince said. The next appointment.

She left without answering. The screen door banging behind her.

The walk home. Three houses. The night air cold on her bare legs, cold through the black dress on nipples still tender from Dale's mouth, the fabric dragging across them with every fast step — a private filthy friction on a public sidewalk. Her heels loud. Faster than she'd come. Nothing underneath the dress but skin and the wetness she hadn't finished. The smell of Vince's house in her hair, on her skin, between her legs. Cigar smoke and cologne and the musk of Dale's skin where his mouth had been and between her thighs the drying evidence of what she'd done. She was three doors of ordinary night away from a basement where men had photographed her tits and put a cock in her mouth, and the dress still made her look like she was coming home from somewhere nicer.

Inside the duplex. Lock. Deadbolt. Chain. The dark house quiet and Tyler's boots still gone.

She went to the bathroom. Turned the shower hot. Stood under it.

The water hit her shoulders and ran down. She watched it track her breasts — over the nipples that were still hard, still aching from Dale's mouth, the skin around them red and raw from his stubble, the pale heavy flesh that had been in his hands and in the clamp light and in every lens in the room. She cupped one under the spray without meaning to, felt the weight, felt the tenderness, and the touch almost put her on her knees in the tub. The water washed the spit off first. Then the streaks she'd missed with the blanket — behind her ear, at her hairline, a dried line along her jaw — the last traces of his cum dissolving off the face that was supposed to be the careful one. She could still

taste him. She brushed her teeth twice and the taste survived the toothpaste — the musk, the salt, the bitter trace on the back of her tongue that wouldn't rinse clean.

She soaped between her legs and her hand slowed. The heat of the water and the slickness of the soap and the swelling that hadn't gone down — she was still aroused. Still throbbing. The shower's pressure was doing something to her clit that she could have turned into something else with two minutes and the right angle and she wanted to. She wanted to lean against the tile and close her eyes and let herself finish what Dale's mouth and Wicks's finger had started.

She pulled her hand away. Turned the water cold. Stood in it until the ache dulled into something she could carry to bed.

She toweled off. Got into bed in nothing because everything she owned felt like a costume.

The dark. Tyler's side cold. His pillow still holding Friday morning's dent.

She lay still for ten minutes. Then she got up. Opened her clutch. Counted the bills. Twenty-five hundred dollars. She separated twelve hundred — the number she could explain, the number that sounded like tips and a poker game where the men lost because they were drunk and she was pretty. Twelve hundred was what Tyler expected. Twelve hundred was the lie's price tag.

She put the twelve hundred on the dresser. The remaining thirteen hundred she folded into a tight square and zipped into the inner pocket of her gym bag in the closet. The zipper closed with a sound like a door locking.

She got back into bed. Didn't sleep.

Sunday. Tyler's truck in the driveway at four. The engine cutting. The door slamming. His boots on the step, his key in the lock. He came in smelling like sawdust and sweat and road coffee. Sunburned on the back of his neck. The eight hundred in his pocket.

"How was the game?" he asked. Casual. Already reaching for a beer.

"Fine." She was at the counter, wiping something that was already clean. "Same as always."

The lie. Her first direct falsehood in the history of them. She looked at him and said words that weren't true and let them sit between them like a piece of furniture.

He accepted it. Cracked the beer. "Who won?"

"They all lost. Vince ran the table most of the night." She paused. Made herself look at him. "Wicks kept trying to get me to sit on his lap. I told him to earn it."

Tyler smiled. The easy smile. "That's my girl. Tips?"

"Twelve hundred. Between tips and the poker."

"Jesus." The smile wider. "That's what I'm talking about." He pulled the eight hundred from his pocket. "Two grand this weekend. We're gonna be okay, Megan. We're actually gonna be okay."

She let him kiss her. His hand on her hip — casual, possessive — and she held herself still against the flinch. The same hip. Dale's hand. The size difference.

"Just tired," she said. Stepped back.

"Did Vince behave?"

"Vince was fine. He ran the game. Professional."

"And Dale?"

She held his eyes. The truth pressed against her teeth and she swallowed it. "Dale was Dale. Big. Quiet. Tipped well."

Tyler nodded. Satisfied. He didn't ask what Dale's tips looked like, or what favors he'd taken, or how close his hands had gotten. He took the answers at face value — Megan said fine, so it was fine. She handled things. She always handled things.

Sunday night. In bed. Tyler's arm across her waist, his face close to hers on the pillow, the light off.

She'd been quiet all evening. He'd noticed, and the noticing sat in him alongside everything else — the relief that she was home, the eight hundred in his pocket, the sense that something about her weekend was slightly off-center but nothing he could put a finger on. He rubbed his thumb across her hip bone under the covers.

"Was it weird?" he asked. "Without me there?"

"A little."

"Weird how?"

She didn't want to tell him anything. She wanted to turn onto her side and go to sleep and let the silence hold. But the silence was dangerous — Vince could say anything to Tyler next week, could frame the night however he wanted, and if Tyler heard a version from Vince first, the version from Megan would be the lie. She had to give him something. Had to build the wall before someone else knocked it down.

"Dale won a favor," she said. Her voice low, and the lowness wasn't performance — it was the sound of words being dragged up through a throat that didn't want them. "The same thing as last time. Lap sitting."

She paused. Her stomach clenched. Saying it brought the room back — the cigarette smoke, the weight of Dale's thighs under hers, the cock pressed against her. She swallowed.

"His hands were higher than before. On my thighs. Under the skirt a little."

Tyler's thumb stopped on her hip.

"He's... big," she said. The word came out wrong — too small for the memory, and the memory was pulling other memories with it, the ones from the basement, the ones she couldn't say. She could feel the heat rising between her own legs and the heat horrified her because she was lying next to her husband and the telling was doing this to her. "I could feel him. Under me. Through his jeans."

Tyler's breathing had changed. She could feel his cock growing against her hip. He was aroused and the arousal disgusted him — she could feel that too, the tension in his

arm, the way his thumb had stopped moving. He wanted to hear more and he hated that he wanted to hear more and she could feel both things pressing against her hip.

"Did you say anything?" His voice rough. Rougher than he meant it to be.

"I told him that was enough. He let me up." She stalled. Gripped the sheet. The next sentence came out cracked: "His hands were shaking."

"His hands?"

"Like he couldn't —" Her voice broke. She heard herself and the break was real — the telling was dragging the basement up through her, not the sanitized version but the whole night, Dale's mouth and the taste and the cum, and her pussy was wet and her eyes were stinging and she was telling her husband about a lap-sit while the truth screamed underneath it.

"Like he wanted more than what he got," she finished. Barely a whisper.

Tyler was hard against her hip. He was hard and the hardness made him sick — she could feel the fight in his body, the rigid muscles, the way he was holding himself still as if stillness could undo what he was feeling. He wanted to ask her to stop. He wanted to ask her to keep going. He asked: "And did you? Move them?"

She reached down. Found him through his boxers. Wrapped her fingers around the shaft. Not deliberate — desperate. Desperate to end the telling, desperate to give him something physical that would stop the words, desperate because her own arousal was choking her and she needed it to be about Tyler, needed it to be this bed and this man and not the other one.

She stroked him. Her hand shaking. Tyler groaned — a sound that was half want and half something he'd spend the next week trying to bury. His hips pressed into her hand. She felt the pulse under her palm and she thought about Dale's pulse under her palm and the thought made her grip tighten and Tyler's breath stuttered against her neck.

He came. Fast. Pulsing into her hand, his hips jerking, a groan muffled against her shoulder that sounded like it hurt on the way out.

She held him until it was over. Wiped her hand on the sheet. Lay in the dark with the basement still alive in her and the telling still echoing and the wet heat between her legs that belonged to a man who wasn't in this bed.

She'd given him the lap-sit version. The sanitized one. One step past what he'd seen at Game 2 — the hands, the thighs, the cock through denim. She'd told him nothing about the basement. Nothing about the photos or the nudity or the kiss. Nothing about Dale's cock in her mouth or the cum on her face or Wicks's finger inside her. The version she'd given him was the moat around the truth, and Tyler's orgasm was the drawbridge closing.

Monday morning. Tyler left for work. Megan cleaned the kitchen. Did laundry. Tried to work on a pitch deck for a landscaping company.

Tyler came home that evening and set his duffel on the closet floor and the duffel bumped the gym bag and the gym bag tipped sideways, the zipper pocket half-open. She

heard the thump from the kitchen. Came down the hall.

Tyler was picking up the gym bag. Straightening it. The zipper pocket gaped — the fold of cash visible inside, the edge of a hundred-dollar bill.

"Your bag fell," he said. Holding it by the strap.

"Oh." She crossed the room. Took it from him. Zipped the pocket shut with her fingers steady and her face calm. "I keep cash in there. For the gym. Water, snacks." She hung the bag back in the closet. "You know me."

He smiled. "Cash-only Megan."

He walked back to the kitchen. She stood in the closet doorway for three seconds with the blood gone from her face. Then she went to the bathroom and closed the door and sat on the edge of the tub and her hands shook against her knees for a full minute.

Thirteen hundred dollars in a gym bag in the closet. The distance between the life she was showing Tyler and the life she was living measured in a zipper pocket.

She didn't tell him about the basement.

She thought about it. Tuesday night, lying next to him, she mapped what telling would look like: the words, his face, the silence after. The marriage dissolving in the space between one sentence and the next. *Dale's cock was in my mouth. I put it there. His cum was on my face. Wicks had his finger inside me. They photographed everything. I was wet the entire time.* She imagined Tyler hearing it. The face he'd make. The sound he'd make. The questions that would come after — not about the men but about her. *Did you want it?* And the answer she'd have to give. The answer that was the reason she couldn't tell him.

Not telling let her keep the version of herself that Tyler loved. The composed one. The sharp one. The woman who handled rooms and took men's money and came home intact. Telling would replace that woman with the one in Vince's photos — the one on all fours, the one with spit on her chin, the one who arched into Dale's mouth and moaned.

She chose the version Tyler loved. She kept choosing it, meal by meal, night by night, and every time she chose it the choosing got lighter.

Never again. She said it to herself Wednesday morning, standing at the kitchen sink. *That was the last time. I'm done.* She meant it. She meant it while her hands were in the dishwater and the sun was coming through the kitchen window and the ordinary world was ordinary and the basement was two days and three houses away. She meant it the way you mean it at noon.

But the ordinary week pressed against her. The dental pitches. The Visa minimum. Tyler's optimism and his hands on her hips that were too light and too narrow. The apartment quiet in a way that felt like a lid closing. And underneath the quiet, the basement kept replaying — Dale's mouth, the weight of his cock on her tongue, the stretch, the taste.

Thursday at dinner. Tyler forking chicken. “Vince says the cabin owner wants another weekend. Same money.” He chewed. “Also says the game cut’s coming — he’ll settle up next time I’m at the table. You good for Saturday?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m good.”

The lie came easy now. She watched herself say it — watched the word leave her mouth and land between them and do nothing, cause nothing, change nothing — and the ease horrified her more than the lie itself.

Thursday night. Tyler asleep. His breathing deep and even, his arm warm across her waist.

She lay in the dark and the fantasy built itself.

In the fantasy, she doesn’t say “last call.” Dale’s hand tightens in her hair and he pushes deeper — past the gag, past the reflex, his cock sliding over her tongue and into her throat. She takes it. The sound is wet and obscene and his hips rock and she can feel the pulse of him against her tongue, can taste the salt and the musk, can hear Wicks behind her saying something filthy she can’t make out. Wicks’s finger inside her — one, then two, his bony knuckles pressing against her entrance, his free hand on her hip pulling her back onto his hand while Dale holds her head in place.

In the fantasy her tits hang under her the whole time — heavy, swinging with every thrust of Dale’s hips into her mouth — and his free hand finds one and squeezes like he’s confirming the claim while he uses her face. She can see herself from outside: the pretty mouth stretched, the blue eyes watering, the body that stopped rooms reduced to what it’s for.

Her fingers found her clit under the covers. Already wet. Already swollen. She pressed her thighs apart and circled — fast, tight. Tyler’s arm across her waist. His breathing steady on her shoulder.

In the fantasy, Dale comes. In her mouth. His cock deep and pulsing and the taste of him flooding her and she swallows because there’s nowhere else and the swallowing is the crossing of the last line, the one thing she’s never done for anyone. His hand holds her hair while she swallows and his voice says *swallow it* and the words make her clench around Wicks’s fingers.

And then — shameful, horrifying, unstoppable — the fantasy turns. Wicks pulls his fingers free and replaces them with his cock and the head stretches her open and she pushes back against him. And Vince is there — she can feel his thickness against her cheek, smell the cigarettes and the grease, and she turns her head and takes him in her mouth while Wicks fucks her from behind and the taste of Vince is different from Dale, more bitter, the foreskin sliding on her tongue, and she is being used by three men in a basement and the cameras are rolling and she is making sounds that would make Tyler divorce her if he heard them.

She came. Hard. Her teeth clenched, her stomach rigid, her toes curling under the covers. The orgasm rolled through her in tight, silent waves — clenching and releasing

in rhythmic spasms, every muscle seizing. She didn't breathe until it was over. Tyler's arm didn't shift.

She pulled her hand away. Wiped it on the inside of her thigh. Lay perfectly still with her husband's arm across her waist.

The fantasy had gone further than the night did. It had reached toward Wicks — toward Wicks, the man she could barely stand, the bad teeth and the menthol breath and the jittery hands — and the reaching had made her come harder. She'd wanted him too. All of them. In the dark, next to her sleeping husband, she'd wanted all three, and the wanting was still warm between her legs while the shame spread cold through her chest.

Saturday was coming. The text from Vince was on her phone — *Saturday. Same deal. The guys are in.* — and she hadn't deleted it and she hadn't responded and she hadn't said no.

The basement smelled like sex and cigarettes.

Vince sat in the folding chair with the camera in his lap, scrolling through the memory card. The clamp lights were off. Just the LCD's glow against his face, the white backdrop sheet hanging limp behind him.

He went slow. The dressed set first — Megan in the black dress, the warm light, the poise on her face that still read as armor. Pretty. Professional. And under the poise, the real product already shipping: her tits in that neckline, held up and lit like the camera knew what it was for. The kind of shot that could hang on a wall in another house in another life. The kind of shot that made him hard in this one.

He scrolled. The bikini. White strings on pale skin. Her tits straining the triangles, the nipples pressing through, the bare mound visible through thin cotton. He could see the exact frame where her guard started to slip — the slight loosening around her mouth, the way her shoulders dropped a quarter-inch. She was starting to let go and the camera caught it.

The all-fours set. Her back arched, her ass raised, the thong string framing everything the cotton failed to hide. The wet strip between her legs — transparent, clinging, the pink of her visible through it. He zoomed in on one frame and the image filled the screen: her pussy, wet, swollen through thin white fabric, the dark crease of her slit. The smell was still in the room.

Topless. The triangles falling. Her bare tits in the clamp light — the size, the shape, the nipples tightening. The progression on her face: from refusal to negotiation to the moment she pulled the string and something in her eyes opened. Wicks was in the background of one shot, his mouth hanging open. Dale in another, leaning forward, tongue against his lower lip.

His cock was hard. He unzipped. Gripped himself. Not rushing. The images deserved patience.

The touching set. Dale's dark mouth on her nipple, her back arching, her fingers in his grey hair. The kiss — her face tilted up, Dale's hand in her hair, her mouth open. He could see her tongue. Could see the exact second she kissed back.

Nude. He scrolled slowly through these. The full inventory — her bare mound, the pink slit, the wetness on her thighs. Standing, turning, her ass toward the camera. The legs apart shot — her pussy open, swollen, glistening. He stroked and thought about how she'd smelled when the bottoms came off. How the scent had cut through everything.

The last set. On her hands and knees. Dale's cock out, her face six inches from it, her pale hand wrapped around dark flesh. Then — her mouth opening. The head disappearing between her lips. Her cheeks hollowing. The spit. The frame where Dale pushed deep and her eyes watered and the last of her cracked open.

And the money shot. Her face. The cum. Her blue eyes wide through lashes streaked with it.

He came looking at that one. Thick, pulsing into his hand. He sat with it for a moment — the spent warmth, the slow pulse fading.

He cleaned up with the rag from the workbench. Lit a Marlboro and the Zippo's wheel caught on the first try. Looked at the LCD one more time. The cum shot. Her face. The pale blue eyes that had looked through him for six months like he was furniture.

She'd be back Saturday. She'd wear the dress and walk three houses and knock on his door and the shame would sit on her shoulders like a coat she couldn't take off. The shame would keep her quiet. And the quiet would keep the game going.

Next Saturday: his hands. Longer. Lower. The photography pretense dissolved further. Dale's cock in her mouth again — he'd bet on it. She'd last maybe ten minutes before she opened up. And when she did, Vince would be there. Patient. Waiting. The architect's turn was coming. He could taste it.

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

The machine worked. Better than he'd planned. Better than he'd dared imagine, sitting in this chair six months ago, watching her jog past in a sports bra with those blue eyes pointed straight ahead like he was invisible.

She'd look at him next Saturday. She'd know what his hands felt like on her bare skin. And that was the leash he kept himself on — hands only. Dale got the mouth. Dale got his cock down her throat. Vince let him. Let Dale break through the door so Vince could walk in after, when she was already open, already past the point where stopping made sense. His turn would come. And when it did, he wouldn't be sharing.

He looked at the camera one more time. Her face — blue eyes, cum-lashed, the pretty ruined just enough. The open mouth. And in the frame below, out of focus but unmistakable: the pale heavy hang of her bare tits, still in the shot, still the reason he'd built the room.

Next Saturday.

THE HUSTLE



Part 3: The Window

Sire Rickenbach

Chapter 3: The Window

The text came in at noon on Friday. Two words on his lock screen: *I'm done.*

Vince read it from the garage. Folding chair angled at the street, the Zippo in his right hand, the wheel turning under his thumb without catching. He looked at the phone. Looked at her duplex — the clean half, the window boxes, the swept step. The curtains drawn.

He'd given it a week. She'd lasted six days.

He typed back: *Okay.* Sent it. Set the phone on his thigh. Lit the Marlboro that had been waiting between his fingers since the text buzzed.

The quitting was the play. Always had been. You let a woman like Megan walk herself into a room she shouldn't be in, let her taste something she can't untaste, and then you let her try to leave. The trying was where the leverage lived. She'd sit in that duplex for a week with the photos and the knowledge that men she couldn't control had documentation of things she couldn't explain. The quitting wouldn't hold. It never held. He'd watched it work before — the other one, the tan woman, two years back. Same quit. Same week. Same door she walked back through with her chin up.

He scrolled to Dale. Typed: *She quit. Expected. Give her a week. Nobody touches her, nobody goes near her, nobody says a word to her. Wicks especially. I handle it.*

Dale's reply was three seconds: *Bet.*

The noise complaint turned over in his gut — a reflex now, the same way a man with a bad knee feels weather coming. January. The concrete. The mattress seams. Ninety days because a pretty girl in a duplex didn't like bass on a Tuesday. He looked at her curtains.

He could still see Tuesday's run without opening a file — grey sports bra dark with sweat, those tits slamming the fabric mid-stride, the bounce he'd been filming from the garage for six months, puffy nipples printing through the wet cotton when she hit the cold air at

the end of Maple. She was in there telling herself she'd walked away clean. The self-image. The composure. The altitude. The tits that started the whole machine.

He called Wicks.

"She quit," he said. "You don't go near her. You don't talk to her. You don't drive past her house slow. You stay angry and you stay invisible. I need her scared, not threatened."

"She can't just—"

"She can do whatever she wants. For now. I'll handle it."

He hung up. Texted Tyler: *Cabin owner pushed the job a week. Scheduling thing. I'll let you know.* Then, separately: *Game's off this Saturday. Dale's got something.*

Two minutes. Tyler's reply: *No problem. Let me know on the cabin.*

Vince flicked the Zippo open. Closed it. The garage smelled like old oil and cigarette ash and the summer heat baking the concrete. Across the street, her curtains stayed drawn.

He had the library. Dale's phone video — her on all fours in the clamp light, pale back arched, the white thong string splitting those cheeks. Then the later frames: her bare tits hanging heavy and conical under her while Dale's dark cock filled her mouth and spit stringed off her lip. The kiss: blue eyes half-shut, tongue out, fingers in grey hair pulling him in. The facial — cum striped across that magazine face, lashes stuck, those same blue eyes staring past the lens like she still couldn't believe the room. Wicks's footage was worse for being worse: shaky, too close, the swollen pink mounds filling half the frame, the waxed bare seam of her pussy when she turned, pink and tidy until the lights and the hands made it swell. Three SD cards from the DSLR held the clean versions of all of it — dress, bikini, topless, nude — every frame sharp enough to jerk to, and he had. Six months of street work sat under those cards: the grey sports bra mid-stride, those tits fighting the fabric with every bounce, sweat dark between them. And he had her quit — her own decision, freely made, which meant she was afraid of exactly the right things.

She told Tyler on Saturday morning. He was at the kitchen table with his laptop open, scrolling job postings like a man trying to outwork a problem. He'd already told her about Vince's texts — game off, Dale had something; the cabin pushed a week. The kitchen had the leftover quiet of a Saturday that wasn't going to pay.

"I'm done with the games," she said. Standing at the counter. Coffee between her hands. "I want my Saturdays back."

Tyler looked up. The screen cast blue across his face. "Tonight's already off."

"I don't mean tonight. I mean all of them."

He closed the laptop halfway. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I'm just done." She drank. The coffee was lukewarm. She'd been standing there for ten minutes working up to the sentence. "I don't want to be in that house anymore."

"Did someone—"

"Nobody did anything. I'm tired of it." She set the mug down. "I don't want to pour drinks for men who look at me like I'm on a menu. I don't want Wicks breathing on me. I don't want to walk home smelling like their house."

Tyler was quiet. His thumb traced the edge of the laptop. The number was in the room — the Visa minimum, the power bill, the truck payment, the rent — but he didn't say it. He said: "What about the money?"

"The cabin pays. Your real work pays. We'll figure it out."

"Megan, in the last three weeks we've cleared almost five grand between the game and the cabin. That's—"

"I know what it is."

"—that's the difference between drowning and breathing."

"Then we'll breathe slower." She held his eyes. The conversation had a floor and she was standing on it. "I'm done, Tyler."

He watched her for a long moment. Something in his face — the project manager calculating margins, weighing the number against whatever he saw in hers. Then his shoulders dropped an inch and he nodded.

"Okay." He opened the laptop. "Your call."

She'd expected a fight. She'd prepared for the fight — the numbers, the logic, the careful argument that their finances couldn't survive losing the income. She'd rehearsed Tyler pushing back, and she'd rehearsed pushing harder. His agreement landed wrong. Too easy. Like a door opening onto a room she hadn't checked.

She went to the sink. Washed the mug. Watched water spiral down the drain.

Done. The word lodged under her sternum and stayed there, whole, undigested. She meant it. She meant it the way she'd meant *never again* at the kitchen sink three days ago, and the meaning was the same temperature — warm in daylight, cooling toward dark.

The days pressed in without a single word spoken.

Sunday she walked to the mailbox and Wicks's Civic was parked across the street from Vince's house. The engine off. He was sitting in the driver's seat. He didn't look at her. Didn't wave. Sat there with his window down and his stained fingers on the steering wheel and his face pointed at his own phone. But the car was there. Sixty feet from her front door at ten in the morning.

She took the mail inside and locked the door and checked the lock twice.

Monday she came home from the grocery store and found a cigarette butt on her step. Marlboro Red. The brand Vince smoked. It could have blown from his driveway. It could have been anyone's. She picked it up with a paper towel and threw it away and washed her hands and the filter left a yellow stain on the towel.

Tuesday. Nothing. The nothing was worse — a held breath she couldn't hear the end of.

Wednesday Vince texted: *Just checking in. Hope you're good.* She didn't respond. An hour later: *The guys are upset. I'm keeping them calm but they feel like they got cut off. Wicks especially. I told them to leave it but I can't promise.*

She read the text three times. Turned the phone face-down. Picked it back up and read it again. *I can't promise.*

She went for a run. Four o'clock. The route she always took — down Ridley, left on Maple, the loop through the park, back along

the creek path. Headphones in. The late-afternoon heat heavy and still, the air tasting like hot asphalt and mowed grass. She ran harder than usual. Trying to shake something loose — the knot in her stomach, the feeling of being watched from a parked car, the Marlboro butt on her step.

She was on the creek path — the straight quarter-mile stretch, no houses, old poplars throwing long shadows — when Vince stepped out from the bench at the halfway point.

He was sitting when she saw him. Elbows on his knees. The gold chain visible at his collar. He stood as she approached — not blocking the path, off to the side, hands visible. A concerned neighbor. A man who happened to be at the park on a Wednesday afternoon.

She pulled one earbud out. Her chest heaving. Sweat ran between her breasts and she could feel her sports bra straining with every breath, the dark patches spreading.

"Hey," he said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"You didn't." He had. Her pulse was already high from the run and the sight of him spiked it further — the deep-set eyes, the stubble, the way his gaze went to her chest and stayed there for one second too long before climbing to her face. She smelled him in the clean air — cigarettes and something greasy underneath. "What do you want, Vince?"

"Just wanted to talk. Off the record." He stayed where he was. Hands easy at his sides. "The guys are angry."

"You texted me that."

"I'm telling you in person because a text doesn't cover it." He scratched his jaw. The stubble rasped. "Wicks is furious. He keeps saying she doesn't get to just walk. Dale's quieter about it but Dale's always quieter about it."

"They'll get over it."

"Maybe." He shrugged — the shrug that looked like agreement and felt like a fist closing. "They've got photos of you, Megan. On their phones. Wicks has video. Dale has — you know what Dale has."

The sweat on her skin went cold. The creek beside her sounded like static.

"I'm keeping them in line," he said. "I told them to leave it alone and they're listening to me. For now." He rubbed the back of his neck. "But these guys — they did time, you know that. They're not the kind of men who get cut off and shrug. I'm trying to protect you here."

She gripped the earbud cord. Her hand was shaking and she wrapped the cord around her fist to hide it. "Protect me from what?"

"From nothing, if I do my job." He met her eyes. The deep brown, heavy-browed. The face of a man who'd been reading her since she moved onto this street. "I'm just being honest. These guys know where you live. They know your schedule. They've got enough on their phones to make your life very complicated. And I'm the only thing standing between that and you."

She stood on the path with sweat cooling on her arms and the creek running and the poplars casting shadows that moved when the wind moved and the man who had photographed her naked telling her he was her shield.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said. Quieter than she meant to.

"Nobody said you did. I'm just telling you how it is." He took a step back. Creating space. Being reasonable. "Go finish your run. I'll handle them. Just — don't disappear on me, okay? If I can tell them there's a plan, they'll stay calm."

He walked away. Down the path, toward the parking lot, his thick shoulders square, already done with her. She watched until he was gone.

She didn't finish the run. She walked home. The front door. The lock. The deadbolt. The chain.

She sat on the couch in her running clothes with the sweat drying on her skin and the sports bra still dark with it and the fear settled into her — not the sharp fear of a threat, but the steady one. The fear of men who had photos of her body and knew her address and did time together and were angry.

Vince came to her door on a Thursday. Late afternoon. Tyler at work. She'd known he was coming the way you know weather — the

pressure dropping, the air changing, the inevitability of something overhead.

She opened the door on the chain. His face in the gap — the slicked hair, the stubble, the gold chain.

"I've got something for you," he said. "A way out."

She looked at him through two inches of open door. Then she unhooked the chain.

He stood on her step. She stood in the doorway. He didn't come inside and she didn't invite him.

"I talked to the guys," he said. Hands at his sides. "All week. They were ready to — they were angry, Megan. Genuinely angry. They felt like they paid for something and it got taken away."

"They paid for poker and drinks."

"They paid for you." He said it flatly. The directness was the cruelty and the courtesy. "They know it and you know it and pretending otherwise doesn't help you right now."

She pressed her lips together. The taste of coffee and something metallic.

"Here's what I got them to agree to." He pulled a pack of Marlboros from his pocket. Tapped one out. Held it without lighting it. "One more Saturday. One night. You come to the house, you're the entertainment at the game — lap dances between hands, a strip tease for the table, look-mostly — and then you walk out and it's over. Permanently. They leave you alone. I leave you alone. You never see any of us again."

The word *entertainment* landed hard and stayed — cold weight she couldn't shift.

"What does 'look-mostly' mean, Vince?"

"It means what it sounds like. They look. Maybe they touch — shoulders, waist, nothing crazy. You dance, you strip, they play poker, you go home."

"And the photos?"

"You walk out with the SD cards. All of them. Every card from my camera goes into your hand at the door. And I wipe the phones in front of you — mine, Dale's, Wicks's. You watch me do it."

"You can recover deleted photos."

"You can." He put the unlit cigarette behind his ear. "I'm not going to lie to you about that. But the cards are the originals. The phone copies are compressed shit — thumbnail quality. And these guys aren't tech people, Megan. Wicks can barely send a text."

She leaned against the doorframe. Her arms crossed over her chest — the instinct, the posture, the armor — and the compression shoved her tits up hard against the fabric, the heavy shape announcing itself in the gap of the doorway whether she meant it to or not. Vince's eyes dropped there for half a second, collecting, then climbed back to her face. "Why would they agree to this?"

"Because I told them it's this or nothing. And something is better than nothing for men like Dale."

"And Tyler?"

"Tyler doesn't hear about it. He doesn't know. You go, you come back, Saturday night is Saturday night."

"The safe word."

"Same as always. You say last call, I stop everything. That hasn't changed and it won't change."

She looked past him. The street. Her car in the driveway. The mailbox. Ridley Street in late afternoon — the sprinklers, the parked cars, the above-ground pool two doors down. Ordinary life on an ordinary block, and behind her the wedding ring in the ceramic dish and the thirteen hundred dollars in the gym bag and the days of parked cars and Marlboro butts and a man on a creek path telling her the men with her photos were angry.

"One night," she said.

"One night. And then it's done."

She knew the pictures wouldn't really be gone.

She also knew that three men who did time together had naked photos of her and video of Dale's cock in her mouth and Vince lived three doors from her front door and Tyler was gone every Friday through Sunday and the police report she could file would start with *I voluntarily went to his house and removed my clothes for money.*

"Saturday," Vince said.

"Saturday." She stepped back. "And then you're gone."

"Gone." His hands up. Open palms. The reasonable man. The deal-honorer.

She closed the door. Leaned her forehead against it. The wood was cool and smelled like the lemon cleaner she used every Monday. The ordinary smell. The careful life.

She was buying her way out. One night. The last night. She'd walk in, do what they wanted — dances, a strip, whatever *look-mostly* meant in a room where the definition had been written by the men doing the looking — and she'd walk out with the cards and the wiped phones and the knowledge that it was finished.

The cost was one more Saturday in that basement.

She could survive one more Saturday.

Tyler drove up Route 11 on Friday afternoon with his duffel on the passenger seat and the voltage tester rattling against the console. The same cabin. The same hollow. Eight hundred dollars and a summer of contracts if the owner liked the work.

But first: Vince's kitchen. The settle-up.

He'd texted Vince that morning — *Heading north. Can I swing by for the cut?* Vince said come by at four. Tyler pulled onto Ridley at 3:55 and parked in Vince's driveway.

Inside, the house was the house — wood paneling, stained carpet, the permanent smell. Vince was at the kitchen table with a beer and a roll of cash.

"Slow night while you were gone," Vince said. He peeled three hundreds from the roll. Set them on the table. "The guys were off their game. Nobody was feeling it."

Tyler took the bills. Folded them into his front pocket. Three hundred. Less than half of what the first two nights had paid. "Megan said it was fine."

"It was fine. Just quiet." Vince tilted his beer toward the counter. "Hey — can you grab me the opener? Drawer by the fridge."

Tyler walked to the drawer. Opened it. Rummaged past twist ties and takeout menus. "Not seeing it."

"Other drawer. My bad." Vince stood. "I'll get it. Hold on — check this out while I'm up." He went to the counter where the camera sat

on its strap, the LCD screen on, a thumbnail gallery visible. "Got some shots from last weekend. Nothing crazy — just the guys playing, some candids. Thought you might want to see."

Vince tapped the screen, scrolled to a middle frame, and turned it toward Tyler. A shot of the poker table — chips scattered, Dale's cigar in the ashtray, Wicks mid-laugh. Normal.

"Not bad, right? I'm thinking about setting up a real game night. Proper league. Charge an entry fee."

"Yeah," Tyler said. He was looking at the screen. "Looks good."

"Hang on — let me find the opener." Vince walked out of the kitchen. Through the living room. Tyler heard the bathroom door close.

The camera sat on the counter. Screen on. The thumbnail gallery open.

He didn't mean to scroll. He was going to set it down, pocket his three hundred, and drive north to the cabin. That was the plan.

He scrolled.

Warm light. A white sheet on a curtain rod. The basement, dressed like a studio. The shapes in the frame didn't mean anything for a second, and then they did, and the meaning was Megan.

The Christmas dress. Cedar Heights, two years ago, three glasses of champagne, his hands on her before they'd even found the car. Here it was on a stool in Vince Barella's basement: black, short, her legs crossed the way they crossed when she knew the hem was doing too much and she did it anyway. The V of the neckline poured her tits forward — that heavy pale shape he'd buried his face in on their own sheets, the cleavage a dark line you could lose a mouth in — and someone had lit her so that was the whole photograph. She was smiling. Not the coffee smile. The half-smile she made when something was funny and she hated that it was, the one that meant she was already in on it. Aimed at the camera. Aimed at Vince.

He looked until looking got worse than scrolling.

White strings. Two triangles that had already lost. Her tits spilling out the sides, the inner curves fat and pale against the cotton, and through the thin fabric the nipples he knew by mouth — that swollen, pillowy punch, the raised areolas, the exact shape that

printed against his chest when she rolled onto him in the dark and wouldn’t let him turn a light on. He’d asked to keep this. A picture. Just one. Phone held close, promise he’d delete it, lights off if she wanted. She’d said no like he was asking her to do something cheap. And here it was anyway, lit, her chin up, those pale blue eyes bright, her mouth set in a no that the rest of her had already stopped voting for. He could see the weight of her. He could see how the triangles cut into the undersides and still couldn’t hold her. He was hard. In this kitchen, with Vince down the hall and three hundred dollars in his pocket, he was hard looking at a photograph of his wife in a bikini she’d never worn for him.

His thumb jerked.

All fours. The chaise. Her back bowed, that round pale ass up in the clamp light, the dark mole on the left cheek he’d put his mouth on in the shower without thinking about it for years. The thong a white string splitting her. Knees apart. And between them, through cotton gone translucent, her pussy — the lips swollen the way they got when she’d been wet for a while, the slit showing, a dark bloom where she’d soaked the fabric. She was wet in the shot. Not posed-wet. Actually wet, the way she got on her back in their bed when he found the right angle, except she was on her knees in a basement and the camera was right there, filling the little screen with his wife’s pussy through a scrap of white. He could practically smell her. He couldn’t, the LCD was plastic and Vince’s kitchen smelled like beer and old grease, but his mouth filled anyway with the musk of her when she was like this, and he had to swallow before he could move his hand.

The triangles were gone.

Her tits bare in that light, heavy, high, the conical jut of them that still didn’t make sense on a chest that full, pink tips dark and tight like a mouth had already been on them. He knew the weight of each one in his palm. He knew the faint freckles across the tops. He knew the face above them — he’d kissed it that morning, or a morning like it, dark hair and blue eyes and that mouth — and in the photograph that face was watching the lens with her nipples hard for a room that was not their bedroom. The light wasn’t for her face.

The light was for her chest. Whoever was holding the camera had understood the assignment.

Nude. All of her, finally, the way he'd never been allowed to keep. Standing. Turning. Then her feet apart on the concrete and the waxed smooth mound he only saw with the door locked, and below it her pussy open to the lens, pink and tidy and then not tidy at all — lips thick, split, shining, wet painted down the insides of her thighs. Eight years of that being his. Three feet of basement air between it and a man who smelled like motor oil.

Tyler's thumb left a smear on the screen. He wiped it on his jeans. It didn't matter.

Then Dale.

Dale's mouth on her. Dark lips sealed around her nipple, her breast disappearing into him, her back arched so hard she was putting it in his mouth. Her fingers in the grey hair, pale, gripping his skull. Tyler knew the sound she made when he did that to her. He could hear it off a still frame. He could see her face tipped back, the composure gone, and the worst part wasn't Dale's mouth. It was her hands holding him there.

He scrolled because the alternative was making a noise.

The kiss. Her face tipped up into Dale's, his big hand in her hair, her mouth open, and her tongue — he could see her tongue against Dale's, the wet shine of it — and her other hand on the back of his head pulling him in. Sunday night that mouth had been on Tyler's mouth saying *fine, same as always.* In the photograph she was kissing Dale like she wanted him closer. The shutter had caught the pull. You couldn't fake the pull.

He went past it.

Dale's cock filled the next frame — dark, thick, veined, the head already wet, bigger than the picture wanted to admit. Then Megan, on her hands and knees beside it, pale cheek an inch from the shaft, those bare tits hanging under her, heavy and conical and in the shot like they belonged there. The contrast made his stomach drop and his cock throb in the same pulse. Next frame: her lips stretched around it. The head gone inside her mouth. Her cheeks hollowed. She was sucking. Spit bright on her chin, a string of it from her

lower lip to the shaft when the angle changed. His wife. Kneeling. Doing that.

There wasn't a frame after the last one. He stopped because the gallery did.

Her face. Cum across it — a stripe on her cheek, her pretty mouth glazed, her chin wet, a lash of it caught in her lashes so those pale blue eyes were wide and stuck and looking through the lens like she still couldn't believe what the room had made of her. Below, soft-focus and obvious, her tits hanging used, nipples still tight. The face he kissed good morning. Dressed in Dale.

Tyler set the camera down. His hands were steady. His vision was very clear and very narrow, like looking through a pipe.

He heard the bathroom door. Vince's footsteps. He stepped back from the counter. Picked up his duffel from the floor where he'd dropped it.

Vince came back with the opener. "Found it. Hiding behind the—" He looked at Tyler. "You good?"

"Fine." The word was a flat surface with nothing underneath it. "I gotta hit the road. Two hours to the cabin."

"Drive safe." Vince walked him to the door. His hand found Tyler's shoulder — a brief grip, man-to-man. "Good work up there. The owner loves you."

Tyler walked to the truck. Set the duffel on the seat. Sat behind the wheel. Started the engine. The F-150 backed out of Vince's driveway and turned north.

Behind him, Vince stood in the doorway. He waited until the truck was out of sight. Then he walked to the kitchen.

The camera was on the counter. Powered down. The strap coiled beside it — not how he'd left it. He'd left it powered on, the gallery open, the strap draped across the lens cap. Tyler had set it down carefully. Had coiled the strap like a man putting away evidence he shouldn't have touched.

Vince picked it up. Turned it on. Scrolled to the last image viewed — the facial. Cum striped across her cheek and those full parted lips, chin glossy, pale blue eyes wide through stuck lashes, bare tits hanging soft and heavy in the bottom of the frame, pink nipples still

tight from the room. The frame Tyler had been looking at when he'd decided to stop.

He set the camera back. Lit a Marlboro. The bait was taken.

Tyler drove north. The F-150 ate Route 11 in the long light, the shadow of the cab stretching east. He drove at the speed limit. He drove with his hands at ten and two. He drove like a man who was holding a container of acid with both hands and any sudden movement would spill it.

The images kept coming. He couldn't stop them. The bikini shot — her nipples pressing through thin cotton, the wet strip between her thighs transparent, clinging. His wife's pussy documented through fabric so thin it was confession. The topless frames — her bare tits in studio lighting, the puffy nipples hard and flushed, tits he'd been waking up next to for eight years lit for men who paid for the privilege. Three times he'd asked her for a photo. Three times she'd said no. Not even for him. Not even with the lights off and the phone held close and the promise he'd delete it. And these men — these men got the full library. Got her nude, legs apart, her pussy wet and swollen and shining.

The kiss. She'd kissed him back. He could see it in the frame — her hands on Dale's skull, her mouth open, her tongue. The pulling. She was pulling Dale's face toward hers. That was voluntary. That was choosing.

Dale's cock in her mouth. He kept coming back to that one. The size of it — thick, dark, veined, bigger than anything Megan had ever — bigger than him, by the kind of margin you couldn't rationalize away. Her lips stretched around it. Her cheeks hollowing with the suck. His wife, his wife, kneeling on a chaise in a basement sucking a fifty-five-year-old man's cock while cameras rolled.

And the cum. The cum on her face. The blue eyes through streaked lashes.

She'd told him *fine. Same as always.* She'd lain next to him Sunday night and given him the lap-sit version and jerked him off while the truth sat three houses away on an SD card.

He pulled over at a rest stop an hour north. Cut the engine. Sat. The hollow was another hour further — the dead zone, the cabin, the eight hundred dollars, the wiring he was supposed to care about.

He was hard. The knowing made him sick. He was hard because his wife had another man's cock in her mouth in photographs that existed and the photographs were in his head and his cock was responding to images of his own wife's infidelity with a specificity that made him want to put his fist through the windshield. He gripped the steering wheel. He didn't touch himself. The not-touching was the only dignity he had.

She quit. She quit the arrangement because these things happened and she couldn't face going back. The logic was available and it was poison because it was almost right. She'd quit because she was ashamed of what she'd done, and the shame meant she knew it was wrong, and the knowing meant it had happened — all of it, every frame. Her mouth. Her hands. Her moaning face and her wet pussy and the cum painting her like she belonged on a website.

He sat at the rest stop for forty minutes. Then he started the truck and drove.

He didn't go to the cabin.

At the junction where Route 11 forked — north to the hollow, east to the county highway that looped back south — he turned east. The decision was less than a decision. He was already turning before the turn signal clicked. The F-150 swung onto the county road and the cabin disappeared behind him.

He called the owner from his cell at a gas station in Millbridge. "Got held up. Family thing. I'll be there Saturday morning — first thing. I'll work straight through Sunday to make up the time." The owner grumbled. Tyler apologized. Hung up. He was not going Saturday morning. He knew that while the phone was still in his hand. The call bought him Friday night. Saturday he would deal with Saturday.

He drove south. Back toward Ridley Street. Back toward the house three doors from his, where the cameras were and the chaise was and the white sheet hung from a curtain rod.

He parked the F-150 three blocks away, on a side street behind the elementary school. Cut the engine. Locked it. He could not go home. She was in the duplex. She thought he was two hours north in a dead zone with a voltage tester. If she saw the truck on Ridley, the night became a conversation, and he did not have a conversation. He had photographs.

He slept sitting up. The seat back. The duffel for a pillow. The school's sodium light through the windshield, orange on the dashboard. He woke with a stiff neck and the taste of the rest-stop coffee still in his mouth and the images waiting for him like they'd been sitting in the cab all night.

Saturday. He drove to the diner on Route 9. Eggs. Coffee that tasted like the pot. He sat in a booth with his back to the parking lot and did not look at his phone because looking at his phone meant looking at her name. He went back to the truck. Sat. The day was hot through the glass. He cracked the windows. A mower started somewhere. A kid yelled. Ordinary Saturday, three miles from the block he could not be seen on.

If the quit was real, she would stay inside. Saturday was still when that house ran. He would watch their door. If she stayed, he would know one thing. If she walked, he would know the rest.

The shame of the wanting was already on him. He could feel it — a film, greasy and warm, covering the rage, making the rage slippery, making it hard to hold. He wanted to see. The wanting was the worst thing about him and he was waiting for dark so he could do it.

Saturday evening. 7:45. Tyler stood in the shadow of the duplex two doors past Vince's, wearing dark jeans and a navy t-shirt from his duffel. The streetlights were on. The air smelled like charcoal and cut grass and the above-ground pool's chlorine.

He watched their step.

Megan came down it in jeans — dark wash, fitted — and a black top he recognized, high at the throat. A jacket. Flat shoes. Her hair down. She looked like she was going somewhere ordinary. She looked like she was wearing armor. He knew what the armor was losing against anyway: those heavy tits compressed under the high

neck, the raised areolae that would already be announcing themselves if the fabric were thinner, the long volleyball legs the denim only traced. The camera had shown him the bare versions. The bare versions walked inside her clothes toward Vince's porch light, and his cock thickened in his jeans while the rest of him went cold.

She didn't look toward the school. Didn't scan the street. She walked the ninety seconds to Vince's house with her hands in her jacket pockets and her chin up and she knocked and the door opened and the light inside swallowed her.

He stood in the shadow and watched the door shut. Then he walked back to the truck.

Sat behind the wheel. Doors locked. The bass reached him anyway, faint, three blocks of ordinary night between him and it. Ten minutes. Twenty. Thirty. A porch light. A dog. He had seen her walk in. That was the thing he had come to know, and knowing it did not tell him what to do with it. The wanting sat in the cab with him and did not get smaller.

He got out. Walked the three blocks.

She'd dressed for survival.

Standing in front of the closet at six, she'd reached past the denim skirt, past the Christmas-party dress, past anything that announced itself. She pulled the dark-wash jeans — the fitted pair from Cedar Heights, the ones that cost two hundred dollars when two hundred dollars was a Saturday brunch and a bottle of wine. They sat low on her hips and held her close, the denim thick enough to be between her and whatever hands arrived. A black top — fitted, long-sleeved, high-necked. No V. No lace edge. No cleavage visible. A top that said *I'm here because I have to be* and nothing else.

She pulled her leather jacket off the hanger. The one that cost four hundred dollars two years ago and had hung unworn since they moved to Ridley Street. She put it on and the weight of it on her shoulders felt like something she'd forgotten — the woman who wore good leather to bars where men bought her drinks she didn't need and looked at her like she was the reason the room existed.

That woman. The one who lived before the duplex, before the Visa, before the basement.

Flat shoes. No heels. She wanted to be able to walk out fast if the walking-out was necessary.

Hair down. Minimal makeup. The French perfume — a spray at her wrists, her neck. The last luxury.

The ring sat in the ceramic dish by the door. Among the keys and loose change. She looked at it. Didn't touch it. Walked past.

Outside, the air was warm and thick with summer. She walked the ninety seconds with her hands in her jacket pockets. The leather creaked softly with each step. Vince's porch light was on.

She knocked. He opened the door. His eyes dropped — the instinct, the inventory — and found jeans and a high neck and leather and nothing worth his time. Something crossed his face that might have been amusement.

"Come in."

The house. Cigarette smoke, the carpet, the wood paneling. She took the air through her teeth.

The living room was the living room. The poker table was there — the same felt, the same mismatched chairs — but it was dead. No chips. No cards. Dale stood at the far end of it anyway, occupying the space like the furniture still belonged to him, cigar going, thighs planted. Those dark eyes finding her the way a scope finds a target. Wicks beside him, leg bouncing, grinning with all his bad teeth. His gaze went to her chest first and found nothing and his expression soured for half a second before the grin came back.

"She's wearing a jacket," Wicks said. "A fucking leather jacket. Like it's October."

"So?" she said. "I like it."

"You looked better last time."

"Last time was last time."

Vince closed the door behind her. She heard the lock turn. The sound ran through her spine. *Locked in. The deal was words, and the man who said them had the only key.*

He walked her to the bar. His back to the room. Voice low.

"Same deal. Last call. You say it, I stop everything."

"I know."

"The terms are what we talked about. You do the entertainment — the dances, the strip — and you walk out with the cards and the wiped phones. One night."

"One night."

"You're buying your life back, Megan. Ninety minutes and it's over."

She nodded. He handed her a glass. Gin. She took it and the first sip burned and the burn was welcome.

The basement stairs were to her right. The door was open. The light below was warm — the clamp lights, the same triangle of warmth she remembered. That room. The chaise. The sheet. Dale's mouth. The cameras.

"We're downstairs tonight," Vince said.

She looked at him.

"The game," he said. "Private. Like we talked about." He tipped his chin at the open door. "Camera stuff's put away. You can see for yourself."

The photo room. He was taking her back to the photo room and calling it a game. She drank. Set the glass down.

"Let's get it over with."

The basement. Cooler than upstairs. The dropped ceiling tiles grey above them, the concrete floor under her shoes. The clamp lights threw their triangle of warm white, illuminating the center of the room — a poker table dragged into the light, four chairs, the felt. Not the living-room table. This one. The couch angled into the far corner beside the window wall — one arm near the glass, the other pointing into the room — a folded blanket draped over the far arm. A Bluetooth speaker on the workbench, bass thudding low. A card table with bottles and glasses. The ashtray. The workbench itself in the corner near the window, a row of drawers beneath it, tools hanging above. The garment rack pushed to the wall, empty. The white backdrop sheet hung limp, unused. The changing curtain in its corner. A spare folding chair against the wall near the stairs.

No tripod. No DSLR. No chaise. No propped phones that she could see. The space where the camera had stood was just floor.

The men came down behind her. The weight on the stairs. Dale's mass — each step deliberate, the wood groaning. Wicks quick and light. Vince last, pulling the door closed at the top.

She stood in the warm light and breathed through her mouth and the gin burned low and stubborn in her gut. The missing cameras were the proof. She made them be the proof.

Vince dealt. The game began.

She poured. Heavy for the men — the routine she'd learned over three Saturdays, muscle memory now, though the word *hustle* was a memory she couldn't touch without flinching. Gin for herself.

One night. The cards. The phones. Done.

The countdown ran in her head like a clock she couldn't turn off. Every minute survived was a minute closer to the door.

Dale won the first hand.

"Dance for me," he said.

The word landed. Dance. She'd agreed to dances on her step, in daylight, with the chain still on the door. Down here it was a man telling her to start.

"I don't dance, Dale."

"Dance for me." Same temperature. He hadn't heard a no. He'd heard a delay.

She looked at Vince. He was watching the cards. Ninety minutes. Look-mostly. Then out. She set her glass on the card table. Walked to the space between the poker table and the couch. The warm light found her. She felt it on her face, on the black fabric across her chest, and she felt the three of them find it with her.

"Jacket off," Dale said. Low. Flat. Stating. Waiting.

"The jacket stays."

He looked at her. Not at the leather. At her. The cigar between two fingers. The dark eyes that had been on her tits through a high neck since she came down the stairs.

"Jacket off."

When we were inside. She'd kept the question shut for two weeks. Robbery, she let herself think now. Beating someone. Worse.

Whatever it was, they'd done it together, and tonight she was alone in a basement with all three of them.

She unzipped it. The sound was too loud in the concrete. She shrugged it off her shoulders and hung it over the back of the spare folding chair by the stairs — carefully, the way she'd hang it in the closet at home, because the jacket had cost four hundred dollars in a life where four hundred dollars was a decision about a jacket. She walked back to the warm light. The black top underneath, fitted, long-sleeved. No V. She'd chosen it for that. It still showed them the shape. She knew. She'd known in the mirror at six. She crossed her arms and uncrossed them because crossed looked like hiding and hiding looked like an invitation to take more.

She moved. Hips first — a slow roll, weight shifting onto one thigh, the other leg straightening, the denim pulling tight across the seat of her ass and up into the seam between her legs. She felt her tits move inside the high neck, heavy, a half-beat behind her shoulders. She felt the jeans show them the full seat of her, the long volleyball line of her thighs, the narrow waist they'd been waiting to get their hands on. Wicks made a sound in his throat. She kept her face pointed at the far wall and thought about the pictures. The phones. The door.

Wicks whistled. His leg bounced faster.

"Jesus Christ. Look at that ass. Dale — are you seeing this? The jeans are painted on. She's got a high neck like a librarian and an ass like—"

"Wicks." Her voice came out dryer than she felt. "I'm right here."

"I know you are, sweetheart. That's the whole point."

Dale watched without expression. His cigar between two thick fingers. His dark eyes tracking her hips. She felt the track. She always felt it. The difference was she was moving on purpose now, and the purpose was his.

"Slower," he said.

She slowed. Faced away from them. The back of her — jeans, waist, hair falling between her shoulder blades — and nothing to look at but the dropped ceiling and the knowledge of their faces behind her. Last call sat against her teeth. She swallowed it.

Stopping a dance forfeited a night. She turned again. Dale's eyes hadn't moved from where she'd been.

"That's the dance," she said. It came out thinner than she'd meant.

"Play the hand, Wicks." Dale, level, to the table.

The poker resumed. She walked to the card table and drank. The gin was warm. Her face was warm. She could feel the heat in her cheeks and hated that they could see it.

Dale won the next hand. "Lap," he said. One word.

She walked to his chair. The size of him filled it — two hundred and fifty pounds, thighs wider than the seat, the gold chain at his throat catching the clamp light when he breathed. She'd sat on this man before. Upstairs. A skirt. A favor. She knew what was under her before she turned.

"Look-mostly," she said. To Vince. To the room. "That was the—"

"Waist is fine," Vince said. Easy. Already dealing. "Sit down, Megan. We're playing cards."

So that was the deal's shelf life. One dance. *Sit down, Megan*, like she worked here. Arguing was how she found out what this room was with Vince against her.

She turned. Lowered herself onto Dale's thighs.

The mass of him. She sank into it — heat, certainty, the denim of his jeans and the denim of hers, and then the ridge. She felt it the second her weight settled: thick, already hard, running from the base of her spine up the cleft of her ass through two layers of fabric. The same cock she'd had in her mouth two weeks ago. The same one on the printout behind the curtain. It pulsed against her. She bit the inside of her cheek.

His dark hands found her hips and settled there. Proprietary. The stained fingers curling over the waistband of her jeans, thumb along the seam, her pale forearms braced on the chair's arms because she needed somewhere to put them that wasn't him. She could smell him this close: cigar, the warm musk of his skin, something denser underneath that filled her nose and sat in the back of her throat. Her French perfume was going thin against it. Clean notes drowning.

"Sit back," Dale said. Into her hair. His hands on her hips pulled once, seating her harder on the ridge.

She sat back.

His hips shifted beneath her — once, slow — and the ridge ground against her and the denim made a soft, dragging rasp. The friction went through her pelvis like a struck match. She tried to sit still enough to starve it. Her nipples had gone tight inside the high neck; she felt them drag on the cotton with every shallow breath, two points the fabric couldn't hide if anyone looked, and everyone was looking. Between her legs, under the jeans, she was starting to get wet — a warm slick she could feel when she pressed her thighs together on his lap. She caught herself doing it. Thighs locked on Dale. She stared at the poker table, at Vince's hands on the deck, at anything, and waited for the next hand. *Almost done.* The word last call was still in her mouth. She drank gin off the card table instead, leaning for it, and the lean put more of her ass against him. He made a sound. Low. Satisfied. She sat back like she'd meant to.

Two more hands. Vince won and asked for a close pour — she stood beside his chair, grateful for the standing, and poured, and his hand found her hip, the rough pad of his thumb on the strip of skin above her waistband where the top had ridden up. Two seconds. His thumb traced a slow arc on her bare hip and the calluses scraped and she felt the scrape in her teeth.

"You're doing good," he said. Quiet. For her. The handler. The man who'd built the stairs.

She didn't answer. She finished the pour.

Then Wicks won.

"Lap dance," he said. Immediate. His legs spread, his bony knees sharp through his jeans. Patting his thighs with stained fingers. "Come on. My turn. I've been waiting, I've been so good, Dale got the real one, I get— come here."

"Wicks." Vince, mild. "She's coming."

She walked to his chair. Turned. Lowered herself onto his lap.

He was all angles. Narrow thighs, restless, the jitter running through his legs into her. She could feel him shaking. His erection pressed against her hip through his jeans — small, insistent, blunt,

nothing like the thick ridge she'd just left, and somehow worse for being so eager, a man leaning through a doorway he'd been waiting behind. His hands landed on her waist. Clammy. Thin-fingered. The grip too hard, the tremor running from his fingers into her ribs. Menthol on her neck. Then her ear. His mouth close enough that she felt the heat of the words before she heard them.

"You smell like money," he said. His Adam's apple worked. The grin stretched across the bad teeth. "Feel that? That's because of you. That's been because of you since the first night."

"I felt it." She stood the moment Vince started dealing. Walked to the card table without looking back. Poured herself another gin. Her skin crawled where his hands had been — the clammy print of them on her waist, the menthol still in her hair. She drank. The gin didn't do enough.

Then Vince won a hand and instead of a dance or a lap, he looked at her and said: "We've got an outfit for you back there." He nodded toward the changing curtain. "Go put it on."

The curtain. Last time. The photo on the shelf. The woman on her knees. She looked at it and her stomach dropped.

"I'm not going back there."

"It's a change of clothes," Vince said. Mild. Already stacking the cards. "That's the strip. We talked about a strip."

"I can do that out here. I have clothes on."

"Curtain, Megan." He tipped his chin at it. "You want the night over, you keep moving."

Dale's cigar glowed. He hadn't said anything. He didn't need to. The chair, the heat of him still on the backs of her thighs, the way he watched her not walk.

She looked at Vince.

"What outfit?"

"You'll see."

Sent, like staff. She could walk herself over or be helped over.

She picked up her glass, drank what was left, and went.

Behind the curtain she was alone.

The propped mirror. The bare bulb. The same space she'd changed in three weeks ago — same concrete smell, same shelf, same bare wall. But the garment rack was empty. No robe. No bikini on a hanger. What was waiting sat on the shelf: a sports bra and a pair of runner's shorts. Both still had store tags.

She picked up the sports bra. Held it up in the bare light. Looked at the tag. Looked at the size.

A size too small.

The brand was the same one she wore on her morning runs — the same cut, the same seaming, a different color. And the size was wrong. Wrong in a way that wasn't a mistake. Wrong in a way that was a sentence: *I've been watching you run past my house for six months and this is what I see.*

She stood in the changing space and held Vince's sports bra and the ice of it spread through her stomach. He'd bought this. He'd gone to a store and looked at sports bras and chosen this one — this size, this cut — because the version of her that lived in his head was the one where the fabric was losing. The morning runs. The folding chair in his garage angled at the street. His dark eyes on her chest when she jogged past, tracking the bounce and the strain. He'd been taking notes. And tonight he'd dressed her in them.

The shorts were the same. Tiny runner's shorts, high-cut, the kind that showed the underside of her ass when she bent to stretch on the front step. Tags still on. Bought for her. By the man who lived three doors away.

Then she saw the photos.

On the shelf, propped where she couldn't miss them. Two of them.

The first she recognized: the same photo she'd found behind this curtain last time. The previous woman — tan, on her knees, Dale's cock down her throat, mascara running in dark tracks down her cheeks, eyes up. The photo that had made her wet and sick at the same time. The photo that had walked out with her that night and stayed in her head for the two weeks between. *Was this left here for me?* She'd asked herself that two weeks ago, standing in this same

spot. The ambiguity was Vince's. Could have been careless. Could have been placed.

The second was new.

Her own face. Her own mouth. Her own stretched lips and watering eyes. A printout — not a phone screen, a physical printout on glossy paper — of the photo from the solo night. Dale's dark cock between her lips, the contrast filthy and clean at once. Her cheeks hollowing. Spit stringing from the corner of her mouth. Her blue eyes wide through wet lashes. Below the frame line: the pale heavy hang of her bare tits, soft conical weight, pink puffy nipples caught mid-sway and slightly soft-focus — unmistakable, trademark, the reason the camera existed.

She stared at it. At herself. At the woman on her knees with a cock in her mouth who was also the woman standing in a changing room holding a too-small sports bra. The heat came before the thought — involuntary, deep, a pulse between her legs that she couldn't stop and couldn't explain and didn't want to examine. The same heat from last time, but worse, because the woman in this photo was her. That was her mouth. Her spit. Her eyes.

She put the printout face-down on the shelf. Her hand shook.

Was this left here for me?

She knew the answer now. She just couldn't say it aloud.

The trajectory was clear. The previous woman went from a glamour shoot to Dale's cock in her throat. Megan went from a dress on a stool to Dale's cock in her mouth. And now she was standing in a changing room about to put on a costume these men chose for her, and the trajectory pointed to one place.

Then Wicks — specific, unbidden. Two weeks ago, on the solo night — Dale's cock in her mouth on all fours — Wicks had crouched behind her and put a finger inside her — thin, bony, hooking up against that front wall — the first penetration by any man other than her husband since she'd married Tyler. The flash ran that forward into full sex: his cock instead of the finger, the bad teeth close to her face, the clammy hands on her hips, the menthol breath and the jittery thrusting and the running narration. The flash unsettled her in a way that went past revulsion into something that tasted like panic.

She pulled the thought apart. Replaced it with a plan.

If I can make them cum with my hands, they're done. Men who've cum don't want more. Wicks would cum in thirty seconds. Vince would take longer but he'd get there. Even Dale — even Dale's body has limits. I jerk them, they finish, I walk out. Handjobs. That's all. I can do handjobs.

The plan sat in her chest like a fistful of rope. She gripped it.

Last call. The word sat against her teeth. She could say it right now. Walk back out in her own clothes. End the night.

She set it down. *The photos are on the SD cards and their phones. The men know where I live. Vince is three doors from my front door. The crew is angry and reachable and I am alone on this street. If I walk out now, I've done nothing and gained nothing and the photos still exist and the men are still angry.*

She peeled the store tags off the bra and the shorts — snapped the plastic ties, dropped them behind the shelf. Evidence of purchase. Someone had stood in a store and bought these for her.

She kicked off the flat shoes and set them under the shelf. Took off her jeans, folded them, placed them on the shelf beside the photos. Her top. Her bra — folded, stacked on the jeans. Her own clothes under the men's costume, the neat stack of a woman who still folds things in a room where the folding won't matter. She put on the running kit.

The sports bra was obscene. Her breasts compressed into fabric that had no chance of containing them — the swollen pink mounds visible through stretched cotton as sharp points, the upper swell of each breast bulging above the neckline in a soft, heavy spill, the underside of each threatening the hem with every breath. The shorts rode up to the crease of her thighs. The elastic dug in.

She looked in the propped mirror. The sports bra losing. The shorts riding up. Pale blue eyes, dark hair, her tits shoved up and out until the cotton went thin at the nipples. The woman who jogged past his garage at seven in the morning, except the lights were on her now, and the clothes were his, and in a minute she had to walk back out to the men who'd already had her on her knees. She looked like what they wanted. She squared her shoulders anyway.

She walked back out.

The room went quiet.

She stepped into the warm pool of the clamp lights wearing Vince's running kit and three men stopped what they were doing.

Wicks's chair creaked as he half-stood — a swallowed noise in his throat, recognition and hunger colliding, the imagination outrun. "Oh my God. Look at her. Vince — look at her tits in that — look at the fucking — the *nipples* —"

Dale leaned forward. His cigar forgotten in the ashtray. His eyes went from the sports bra to the shorts to the bare strip of stomach between them and settled there, on the pale skin above the waistband, the narrow waist, the soft trail of freckles that disappeared into the elastic.

Vince said nothing. He dealt the next hand.

She stood in the clamp light while they played it. The shorts had crawled into the crease of her ass on the walk out from the curtain. She could feel the elastic there, a thin wet line. The sports bra cut with every breath, the upper swell shoving over the neckline, pale and public. Wicks's cards were still face-down. He was looking at her stomach the way Dale was. Vince turned a card. The snap of it carried.

Dale won.

"Dance," he said.

She came around the table. Stopped in front of his chair. Close enough that the cigar smoke sat on her tongue, close enough that his knees bracketed her calves. His face was level with her chest. She felt his breath warm the cotton.

She moved.

Hips first — a roll toward him that put her tits in his face, then away, the too-small band riding up and dragging the weight with it. She felt them shove against the stretched fabric, heavy, a half-beat behind her hips, the neckline losing another inch. The freckles on her stomach passed under the clamp light and vanished into the waistband and came back. She turned. The shorts gave up what

they'd been holding: the underside of her cheeks, pale, the elastic a string now. Wicks made a wet sound through his teeth.

"Jesus. The shorts — Vince, they're in her ass, look at the—"

"Play your cards," Vince said.

She rolled her hips again because standing still in his breath felt like refusing. Her hands found her own waist. The sports bra rode down on the next pass and her tits shoved up over the neckline, the swell of them going soft and public above the band, and she felt Dale look at that and keep looking.

His dark hands found her hips.

Heat. Size. The cigar-smell of his skin. His thumbs settled in the hollows inside her hip bones and pulled her a step in, until her thighs brushed denim and her tits sat in his breath. She felt the exhale through the cotton — warm, damp, aimed at the place the bra was failing.

"Dale."

His right thumb hooked the hem.

"That's not—"

He pulled.

The band slid down over her breasts and settled underneath them. The elastic held. Her tits spilled free above the fabric — bare, heavy, the puffy nipples hard in the cool air — and the band sat under them like a shelf, pushing them up, pressing them together, holding them high and firm. Cool basement air licked the newly exposed undersides; she felt every freckle there announce itself. Her shampoo lifted off her skin into the cigar haze — clean, expensive, wrong for this room — and underneath it the warmer smell of her own chest, sweat and heat.

Her hands came up. She caught herself — the pale weight filling her palms, hot — and covering shoved them together into a cleavage the bra had been too small to make, and Wicks groaned like she'd done it for him. She dropped her hands.

"Dale. The bra."

"Leave it."

Wicks sucked a wet breath through his bad teeth. "Jesus — look at 'em. Look at those fucking tits sitting up like that—"

She left it.

The shelved weight pulled at her posture. Every breath made the pale flesh shift over the band. Dale's eyes were on the undersides, on the way they sat up because he'd put them there. She stood in it. Playing along. The thought that came with the air on her chest was ugly and she kept it: if they were looking at her tits they would finish in her hand. She needed them to finish. She stood in the clamp light with her breasts out and let them look, and when she shifted her feet the lining of the shorts clung, wet, a small filthy secret against her pussy.

She walked to the card table. Poured gin. Drank. The glass gave her hands somewhere to go.

Behind the curtain she'd made a deal with herself. Hands. Get them off. Walk out. Wicks would go in half a minute; she'd felt him shake on her lap an hour ago, leaking through denim at the idea of her. Vince would take what he was given and call it even — he liked the appearance of a deal. Dale was the one her mind kept snagging on. Even Dale's body had a limit. She'd told herself that with the printout face-down on the shelf and her own clothes in a neat stack, and it had felt like a plan. Standing here with her tits out and the shorts already soaked, the plan was thinner. She was going to offer it anyway. Last time had been Dale in her mouth, Wicks's finger, the photos, the week of being afraid of her own street. She could still taste all of that if she let herself.

She was wet. The line she was about to give them would sound like she wanted this. She needed it to sound like that. Last call sat against her teeth. She swallowed gin instead.

She turned back to the room with the glass in her hand. The band cut under her bare tits; she felt them move when she breathed — heavy, free, indecent — and the tiny shorts were damp where her pussy had soaked the lining. She tried for the bartender voice. It came out thin.

"You guys have been so good tonight," she said. Breathy. Trying for generous and landing on scared. "And I'm so turned on right now that I'll tell you what — we can break the no-touching rule. I'll jerk off the winners of the hands."

She watched the felt go still. Wicks's leg stopped bouncing. Dale's eyes went from her chest to her face. Vince set his cards down and looked at her with something she couldn't read and didn't want to.

"Deal," Wicks said. Fast.

Dale said nothing. He picked up his cards. But the corner of his mouth moved.

The game continued. Barely. Each hand lasted two minutes. Each hand had a winner. Each winner got her.

Dale won first.

She set the gin glass on the card table — the click of the base on the wood louder than it should have been — and stood there with her hands empty.

Dale had already pushed his chair back. His legs open. The gold chain sitting in the crease of his neck. The dead cigar in the ashtray. He looked at her tits, then at the concrete between his boots.

"Come here."

She walked. Her tits bounced once, high on the band, and Wicks's breath punched out of him. She stopped between Dale's knees. His breath warmed the skin under her breasts. Close enough that if she leaned she'd be in his mouth. The ridge in his jeans ran thick along his left thigh, a shape she knew from two weeks ago, from the printout, from the dark behind her own eyelids on Thursday when Tyler was asleep and she had no business remembering it.

"On your knees."

"Just hands," she said. Small. To him. To the room. "That was what I—"

"On your knees."

Her shoes were behind the curtain. The stairs were past three men. *Get down before he says it again.*

She lowered herself to her knees between his spread legs. Concrete, cold. His thighs on either side of her shoulders, denim and heat. Her tits hung over his lap, nipples an inch from the fly. She could smell him this close — cigar, the warm musk of his skin, the trapped salt of a cock that had been hard since she walked out of the curtain. The button of his jeans sat in front of her mouth. She looked at that.

Dale's dark hand settled on her shoulder. Heavy. Holding her there. His thumb scraped the side of her left breast, callus over the freckles, and she made a sound she hadn't meant to give him.

"Unzip me," he said. Low. Almost amused. "I want those shaking while you stroke it. Get it out."

The side yard — narrow, unlit, dead grass and a coiled hose. Tyler moved along the foundation, his shoulder brushing the vinyl siding. The basement had a window — small, ground-level, set in a concrete well that collected leaves and cigarette butts. The glass was dirty, clouded, but the light from inside came through. The hopper was cracked open a finger's width. Sound seeped through: muffled bass, the scrape of chairs, a woman's voice he knew.

He lowered himself into the window well. His boots crunched on dry leaves. He knelt. Pressed his face close to the glass.

Megan.

Running clothes. The creek-path kit, the one he watched her tie her shoes in on the front step while the coffee was still going — except the bra was a size too small, cotton stretched shiny, her tits shoved up and out over the neckline in a pale spill the band couldn't hold, nipples punched through hard enough to read through the dirt on the glass. An hour ago she'd walked over in a high neck and her leather jacket. Now this. Vince's basement. Dale in the big chair. Wicks talking. Vince dealing. His wife in jogging clothes that were losing.

He had come here for the rest of it. He was getting it.

The band was under her breasts now. She'd left them out. Pale, heavy, sitting up in the clamp light, and she was pouring a drink with them like that, the bartender turn of her wrist, the same wrist that set his coffee down Saturday morning when she told him she was done with the games. She wanted her Saturdays back. She didn't want to pour for men who looked at her like a menu. She had meant it. He had watched her mean it.

Her voice came through the hopper in the warm tone she used on waiters. On his friends' parents. On anyone she was being pretty and polite at.

"You guys have been so good tonight. And I'm so turned on right now that I'll tell you what — we can break the no-touching rule. I'll jerk off the winners of the hands."

Tyler went still.

That was her. That was the voice. Generous. Breathy. The one that meant she had a room and she was charming it. *I'm so turned on right now.* Megan. Who slept in his t-shirts. Who wrinkled her nose at Vince's carpet. Who had told him no every time he'd asked for a naked picture of her — three nos, a little laugh like he was being ridiculous. Who had lain next to him last Sunday and told him Dale won a favor and she'd sat on his lap and his hands had gone up her thighs and that was all, and then she'd put her hand on Tyler in the dark and he'd believed her.

The camera had shown him her mouth on Dale. He'd told himself that was a thing that had happened to her. A night that got away. She had quit. She had stood in their kitchen and quit.

She was offering. She sounded like she wanted to.

What else. The cabin weekends. Every Saturday he'd been two hours north in a dead zone believing she was pouring drinks. The photos on Vince's camera — was that the whole night or the part someone bothered to shoot. Had she been on her knees in this room before. Had she liked it. Was she liking it now. The shorts were dark between her legs where the light caught. He could see that from here.

His cock was thickening in his jeans. He hated it and it kept going.

Dale won. Dale — the man from the table, the fifty in her pocket, the thigh she'd sat on while Tyler stacked chips and called it the hustle. The man from the stills. His wife walked to him. Knelt between his legs. Tits hanging over Dale's lap in the dirty glass, the face Tyler kissed in the kitchen over a recipe, down there, looking at Dale's fly.

Dale said something. Low. The hopper ate most of it.

She unzipped him.

The zipper was warm. She drew it down. The rasp filled the space between his knees. Denim opened. Dark hair, the thick base of him already shoved toward the gap, and she had to reach in with both hands to lift the weight of it free.

It came out heavy. The head cleared the fly and the whole of him settled in the air between her tits and his stomach — long, dark, veined, a slow shine already bright at the slit. Her pale hands on it. Fingers that would not meet. The same cock that had been in her mouth two weeks ago. The same cock that had striped her face with cum when she said last call. She was putting it in her hands because she had offered. Because the plan needed him to finish.

A nipple dragged the open teeth of the zipper. She flinched. Kept hold.

Wicks made a wet sound in his throat. "Oh my God. Look at it in her hands — she can't even close her fingers. Those tits hanging over it, Dale, look at her, she's—"

"Play the hand," Vince said.

Dale didn't look at Wicks. He looked at her face. The gold chain sat in the crease of his neck. The dead cigar in the ashtray. His dark eyes waiting to see what she would do with what she'd asked for.

She stroked.

Root to head, a tight dry pull. Her fist climbed and dropped. Fast. Get him off. Get him done. She turned her face half away so she wouldn't have to watch the dark head disappear into her pale fist and come back shinier.

Dale's hand covered hers.

Stopped her.

"Slow," he said. "You're pumping like you want it over." His palm was huge over her knuckles. He dragged her fist down the length of him, base to ridge, and up again, and the bead at the slit smeared across her thumb. "Spit on it. Both hands. Don't look at the floor. Look up at me."

She swallowed. Leaned. The band under her breasts pushed them forward until they nearly rested on his thighs. She gathered spit and let it fall — a clear string from her lower lip to the dark

head, breaking, running down the shaft into her fist. Wicks groaned like he was the one in her fists.

She put her other hand on. She had to. One fist at the base, the other working the head, the spit making a soft wet cling every time she crested the ridge. She looked at it because he'd told her to. Pale fists on dark meat. The veins standing. The head swollen darker, wet now, sliding through her grip with a sound too wet for the quiet. Her tits shook the way he'd asked. She felt them — heavy, free, the nipples grazing denim on every downstroke.

Dale settled back into the chair. Watching her face.

This is working. He's close. Keep going.

Vince turned a card. The paper sound was very small under the wet one her hands were making. Wicks's cards were still face-down. His watery eyes were on her chest, on the way the weight bounced on the band, on her pale fists climbing that dark shaft.

"Jesus, her nipples — they're dragging his jeans every time she — Dale, you seeing this, she's soaking those shorts, look at the crotch, you can see it from here—"

Dale's breathing changed. A slower pull through his nose. His hips rocked once, a small push up into her fists, and she felt him thicken. She went faster. Both hands, wet, the head shining, her shoulders working. The plan had a shape: this, then Wicks, then Vince, then the door.

He didn't cum.

His cock stayed hard in her hands, heavy, pulsing, the edge sitting just out of reach. His dark eyes stayed on her face. Patient. A man who had all night.

Vince set a card down.

"That's me," Wicks said. Too loud. Already half out of his chair. "That's mine. I won. Come here — come here, sweetheart, come here—"

She looked at Dale. His cock stood out of his open jeans, wet from her spit, a thread of it hanging from the head. Still hard. Still waiting.

"Go on," Dale said. Almost amused. "He won't last thirty seconds."

She let go. Stood. Her knees had gone stiff on the concrete; the blood came back in pins. Her tits bounced and Wicks made the same sound he'd made when she walked to Dale. Two steps. The clamp light moved across her chest. She stopped between Wicks's knees.

He already had himself out. His skinny hips shoved forward on the chair, his stained fist working the shaft in quick jerks, a wet bead flying off the head before she'd even knelt. Menthol on his breath. The Adam's apple jumping. His watery eyes went from her face to her chest to her hands and couldn't pick.

"On your knees, on your knees, oh my God, look at those things, they're right there, they're—"

She knelt. His thighs were nothing like Dale's — bony, denim loose, a jitter she could feel through the floor. His cock stood up from his fist, pale, average in the shaft, and then the head: a swollen mushroom crown that flared wide, the ridge a thick lip, the slit already pouring. She took him out of his hand.

The strangeness of it landed in her palm. The width of the head versus the thinness under it. The way the ridge caught under her thumb. She closed her fist around the crown because that was the part of him that was a problem, the part that would finish him, and he barked a sound that was almost a laugh.

"The head — she's got the head, Dale, look, she's squeezing it, oh fuck, her hand's so small, those tits hanging right there, I need to —"

His bony hands came off the chair arms and found her.

No asking. Both palms, shaking, closing over her breasts, fingers sinking into pale flesh, lifting, pressing them together, his thumbs dragging across the nipples until they tightened into points against the stained skin. He made a noise through his bad teeth. He squeezed again, harder, and she made a small sound, and he heard it and squeezed a third time.

"Soft — they're so soft, I knew they'd be, I knew from the first night, Vince, you seeing this, I've got my hands on her tits and she's jerking me, she's actually — the nipples, look at the nipples, they're like —"

"Wicks," Vince said.

She shut as much of him out as she could. Fast strokes. Tight on the head, the ridge popping through her fist on every pass, his precum making it filthy and easy. His hips jerked. He couldn't hold still. The chair legs chirped on the concrete. His fingers stayed on her breasts, kneading, shaking, one nipple trapped between two stained knuckles, and every time her fist climbed the crown his grip tightened like the two things were wired together.

He was close. She could feel it — the stutter in his hips, the way the head swelled even wider, the high broken sounds stacking on each other. *Thirty seconds. Dale said thirty seconds. Then Vince. Then Dale again. Then out.*

"I'm gonna — I'm gonna — don't stop, don't you fucking stop, look at her, she's gonna make me — those tits in my hands, I'm gonna paint 'em, I'm gonna—"

Vince turned a card.

"I got this one," Vince said.

Wicks's mouth stayed open. His hands stayed on her. "Vince — I was — she was about to — Vince, come on, I was right there—"

"Rules," Vince said. He pushed his chair back. The gold chain at his collar caught the light. "Come here."

She pulled her hand off Wicks. He made a wounded noise. His cock stood there leaking, the bulbous head shiny, his bony fingers still cupped under her breasts like he could keep her by holding them. She had to lean back to get free. His thumbs dragged off her nipples at the last inch and the air on them was worse than his hands.

She stood. Walked. The two steps to Vince's chair felt longer than the ones to Wicks. Her palm was wet. The lining of the shorts clung. She was going to the safe one. The calm one. The one who'd stopped on a word and put a blanket around her shoulders and told her she'd done well. If she could get him off, he was done. One down.

She knelt between his legs.

He already had himself out. Held loosely in his stained hand. She reached for him expecting something she could cover. Her fingers wrapped it and kept stretching.

Wide.

The girth filled her fist before she'd gotten halfway down. Blunt. Dense. Dark from the year-round tan, the foreskin half-back, the head a thick blunt cap under it, nothing like Dale's length, nothing like Wicks's strange crown. This was width. A cock that made her hand look small in a different direction. Hot against her palm. A slow heavy pulse.

She stared at it. The arm of his chair. Comfortable. That was all he'd ever taken. The safe one, and this was what he'd been keeping in his jeans while he dealt and nodded and honored the word.

Vince watched her face do it. The smirk sat at the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah," he said. "That's what you think it is."

His other hand came up and covered her left breast.

The whole of it. His palm was rough and oil-stained and warm, and her tit filled it and overflowed it, the nipple caught under the base of his thumb. He squeezed once, slow, testing the weight, and made a sound in his chest that wasn't language. His gold chain swung forward and tapped the back of his own wrist. He thumbed the nipple and watched it tighten and thumbed it again.

"Been thinking about these," he said. "Six months. Every time you ran past the driveway."

She stroked him. She had to. The plan. The width dragged through her fist and her fingers ached around it. He hardened further in her grip, swelling against the already-impossible girth, and she felt her own pulse between her legs answer it and hated the answer. Why was he doing this. He'd been the one. The blanket. The *done, we're done.* His stained hand on her breast and his cock stretching her fist and the deep-set eyes on her mouth like he was deciding something.

"Vince." Small. "Hands. That was what I said."

"You're doing fine." His thumb rolled her nipple. "Keep going."

She kept going. His breathing changed — slower, through his nose, the Marlboro smell coming down to her off his shirt. His hips shifted on the chair. She could feel him getting close the way she'd felt Wicks, a thickening, a hold in his gut. Then his hand left her

breast and found the back of her head. Rough fingers in her hair. Pressing her face toward his lap.

She pulled her head back. Kept stroking.

"Vince—"

"Suck my balls and I'll cum," he said. Low. Just for her.

She hesitated. His hand stayed on her head. The weight of it. The direction of it. The safe one. The man who'd stepped back the second she said the word. And now this — his cock in her fist, his stained fingers in her hair, asking for her mouth on something the offer had never included.

If he cums, he's done. One down. The plan works if they cum.

She lowered her mouth.

Warm. That was the first thing — his lap, the skin, the dark hair at his groin against her cheek. Tobacco-sweet. The living smell of a man who'd been hard watching her for an hour. His balls were heavy in the loose skin, drawn up some already. She took one into her mouth and it was alive on her tongue, warm, and she sucked, a wet sealed sound, and felt it tighten.

Vince grunted.

Low. From his chest. The first real sound she'd heard out of him all night, and it went through. His fingers flexed in her hair. His other hand came back to her breast and held it, thumb working the nipple in time with her mouth, and her tits pressed his shins, pale against the stained denim, and she sucked again because the sound he'd made was the sound of a man about to be finished, and finished was the point.

Wicks was talking. She let it be noise. Dale was silent in the big chair. Vince's cock jerked in her fist.

He came.

It was working. He was finishing. She could get through this.

Hard. His hips shoved up off the seat and his cock pulsed against her fingers, thick ropes landing on her wrist, her forearm, the concrete between his shoes — hot enough she heard the first stripe hit the floor with a soft spat. His hand gripped her hair for one second, hard, involuntary, and then released. His thumb froze on her nipple. His chest worked. The gold chain rose and fell.

She pulled back. His ball left her mouth with a wet sound. She stayed on her knees with his cum cooling on her wrist and his cock softening in her fist and his stained hand still cupping her breast like he'd forgotten he was holding it.

Wicks laughed, high, bright with envy. "He painted her — look at her arm, she made him, Vince, you lasted what, a minute, look at her mouth, she had your balls in her—"

"Wicks." Vince's voice was rough. He took his hand off her chest. Leaned back. Eyes half-closed. His cock lay thick against his thigh, spent, a last slow bead at the slit. The smirk was gone. What was on his face was simpler. Done. For now. A man who'd just come in front of the room.

She wiped her hand on her thigh. The cum streaked. The heat of it stayed.

One down. The plan is working.

She looked at Dale.

He was still hard. He'd been watching. His cock stood out of his open jeans where she'd left it, darker now, a slow drip from the head onto the denim of his thigh. His dark eyes on her face. On the shine on her lower lip. On Vince's cum on her wrist.

"Come here," Dale said.

"Nobody won." She stayed on her knees at Vince's chair. The bartender voice, trying for the rule. "That was — winners of the hands. Vince just—"

"We're past poker." Flat. Almost amused. "Come here."

The cards had been the leash. If the cards were done, the leash was gone, and the room would take whatever it wanted next. Wicks still hard in his chair. Dale still waiting. Get them off. Fast.

She walked. Knees complaining. The two steps back felt like going under. She knelt between his spread legs. His thighs closed a little, bracketing her. The gold chain. The dead cigar. The cock she'd already had in both hands, waiting like it had all night, because it did.

She wrapped him again. Both hands. Wet from Vince's cum and Dale's own precum, the slick filthy, the sound louder. She worked him. Her tits shaking. She put her back into it because this time he

had to — he was thick in her fists, the veins standing, his breathing gone deep, his hips pushing up to meet her.

"You're close," she said. Breathless. Trying to make it true. "Dale. You're close. Just — let me."

He watched her face.

She went faster. The slick drag on every crest. A thread of spit and cum swinging between her fist and the head. His cock pulsed, swelled, the edge right there, right there, and she heard herself make a small encouraging sound that belonged to a different woman, a woman who wanted this over, and his hips pushed, and the edge stayed out of reach.

His patience ran out in his hand. His voice stayed quiet.

His dark fingers came forward and cupped her face. Firm. The thumb found her lower lip and pressed it open, dragging the lip down, holding her mouth that way. He tilted her face up. The head of him filled what she could see — broader than her mouth wanted, shining, a bead gathering at the slit, the smell of him right up against her open mouth: cigar on his clothes, the wet of a cock her hands had failed.

"Dale." Around his thumb. "Just hands. That was what I—"

"Mouth on it."

The head nudged her open lip. Hot. Slick. Waiting.

Last call. The two syllables sat behind her teeth, in the space his thumb was occupying. She could still say it. He would stop. Vince would make him stop. The night would end and the cards would stay in Vince's pocket and the phones would keep what they had and she would walk home with Vince's cum on her wrist and Dale's cock unspent and the week of being afraid of her own street would start over.

I've already jerked all three of them. I've sucked Vince's balls. His cum is on my wrist. If I stop now I've done all of that and the photos stay with Vince. I'm past the point where stopping saves me anything.

She let the word go.

Her mouth opened. The last inch was hers — the lean she didn't plan, the tongue that made room. The head pushed in.

Stretch. Immediate. Her lips went tight around the dark ridge and the taste of him spread over her tongue, bitter at the slit, then warmer, skin and spit and the leftover of her own work. Heavy. The weight pressed her tongue flat. Spit welled and ran from the corner of her mouth in a thin string that swung and broke on her left breast, a clear line over the nipple. She made a sound around him. He exhaled through his nose.

"Yeah," Dale said. Quiet. Certain. "That's better."

He fed her another inch. She took it. The ridge slid back over her tongue. She gagged when he found the halfway point — a thick wet choke that slapped off the concrete — and her eyes watered and the curtain photo came up behind the tears: the woman on her knees, the stretched mouth, the same cock. That woman. Her. She gripped his thighs through the denim and stayed.

"Look at her," Wicks said. His voice had gone high again. "Look at those lips around it, Dale, she's — her tits, the spit on her tit, oh my God, she's sucking him, she said hands and she's sucking him, look at her face—"

Dale's hand moved from her jaw to her hair. He gripped. He pulled her down onto him and let her up and pulled her down again, and the wet sound of it filled the basement, filthy and steady, her breasts shaking on every stroke the way he'd wanted when this was supposed to be a hand. Her jaw ached. Spit ran. She was on her knees at the poker table with Dale's cock in her mouth and the plan was a thing she'd had at the curtain. What she had now was the night. Finish it. Get the cards. Get the phones wiped. Get out.

He used her mouth. Deep enough that she gagged, then shallow enough that she could breathe, then deep again, and she heard herself whimper around the shaft, high, involuntary, and the whimper made his grip tighten. Vince was quiet in his chair. Spent, watching. Wicks couldn't stop.

"Her eyes are watering — Dale, her eyes, she's taking it, she's actually taking that thing, I can't — I need — Vince, when's my—"

Dale's hand slid from her hair to the back of her neck.

He stood.

His cock left her mouth with a wet sound and a string of spit that broke across her chin. She stayed on her knees, mouth open, looking up at him. He was enormous from here. The gold chain. The open jeans. His cock heavy and shining, standing out of the dark of his fly, her spit on it. He didn't bother closing anything. His dark hand stayed on the back of her neck, the palm covering it, and he lifted.

"Up."

"Dale — I can finish you here. I can — just sit. Please. Let me stay—"

He walked her.

His hand on her neck was the steering. She went. He moved and she moved with him, one palm's worth of pressure, like she'd been his to walk around for years. Bare feet on concrete, tits out, spit on her chin, Vince's cum drying on her wrist. His cock bobbed ahead of her, wet, not put away. She saw where he was taking her before they'd crossed the room. The old couch against the wall. The sag in the middle. The blanket over one arm that she refused to look at.

"Dale."

He sat. The springs complained under his mass. He spread his legs, his cock still hard and wet from her mouth, and his hand on her neck put her down between his thighs. Knees on the floor. The same pose as the table. Different furniture. His cock in front of her face again, waiting. She knew what the couch meant. The couch was where the mouth stopped being the point.

Behind her: the scrape of Wicks's chair. Quick uneven footsteps. He'd been waiting for someone to move so he could follow. He dropped onto the other end of the couch. The cushion dipped. His knees spread. His cock was in his hand before he'd settled, the bulbous head still shiny from her, still unfinished.

She was kneeling on the concrete between them. Dale to her left, thick and dark and patient. Wicks to her right, already leaking onto his own fist. Her ass faced the room. Faced Vince. The tiny shorts were the last thing she had on below the band.

Wicks's bony hand found her hip.

Then the waistband.

He hooked it and pulled.

The elastic left her ass. Cool air on skin that had been covered. He dragged the shorts down an inch, two, over the pale of both cheeks, the small dark mole high on the left coming into the light, and she felt the air find the top of the cleft, and his stained fingers were shaking on the fabric, peeling, and his voice went high and happy at once—

"Vince — her ass, I'm taking these off, look at it, I'm gonna—"

"Wait." Her voice. The bartender warmth, thin, cracking. She caught at the shorts with one hand and they were already halfway down her cheeks. "Don't. Leave them. I'll — I can do both of you. With my mouth. Stay like this. Please. I want you in my mouth. Both of you. Just like this. Don't move me. Let me finish you like this."

Wicks's hands kept going for one more inch. Then Dale's voice, low, from above her:

"Leave 'em. You heard her."

Wicks left them. Bunching under her ass, the elastic cutting the tops of her thighs, her cheeks bare to the room. He made a frustrated sound and sat back, cock in his fist, waiting.

She was still on her knees on the floor between them. She turned to Dale, to the wet dark head of him still shining from her, and took him back in before the words cooled.

From the window, Tyler watched his wife on her knees in front of Dale.

Her head was moving. The bob that only meant one thing. Dale in the big chair, gold chain, jeans open, and Megan's mouth on him — the mouth that said goodnight in their kitchen, down there, working. The cock from the camera, live now, dark against her face, wet, disappearing and coming back. Spit on her chin in the clamp light. Her tits still out, shaking with it.

He had told himself the stills were a night that got away. A thing that had happened to her. She had quit. She had stood in their kitchen and quit. An hour ago she had offered her hands in that warm waiter voice and he had gone still in the leaves listening to it.

This was her mouth.

Megan, who gave him this in the dark and always came off him before he finished — a little shake of her head, her hand instead, eight years of that, and he'd stopped asking. And here she was taking Dale under the clamp lights like she had a rhythm for it. Like the photograph had been practice.

Did she like it? The stills had looked like she liked it. This looked like she liked it. The offer had sounded like she wanted to. If she had offered hands and gone to her mouth, what else had she given them on the Saturdays he was two hours north. What was she going to give them next?

His cock was hard in his jeans. He hated it and it kept going.

Get her. The thought was simple. Go in. Stop this. Take her home.

He backed out of the well. His hands scraped the concrete. Along the foundation, around the corner, the porch, the door. He was going to open it. Walk down there. Pull her off Dale's cock and get her out of Vince Barella's house.

He gripped the knob. Twisted.

Locked.

He stood there. Weight on the balls of his feet and nowhere to put it. Three men on the other side. Dale, who filled a doorway. Wicks. Vince, three doors down from their duplex, the man who'd put cash in Tyler's hand and left a camera on the counter. His wife on her knees among them with her tits out. His own cock pressing the denim he'd have to explain if he went through this door. The stills he'd scrolled and said nothing about. The truck parked streets away because he'd told her he was at the cabin.

He couldn't build the version of himself that kicked it in. That man would have to look at her and say he came to save her. That man didn't have an erection. That man hadn't watched her unzip Dale and stayed in the leaves.

He let go of the knob.

He walked back to the window.

The table was empty. The couch. Dale at one end, Wicks at the other, and Megan on her knees between them, her head dipping toward Dale, then turning. Her hand on Wicks. The shorts were

down — bunched under her ass, pale cheeks in the light. She'd added Wicks while Tyler was standing on the porch with his hand on a locked door.

Her voice came through the hopper. Warm. Breathy. The same tone as the offer. He couldn't make out the words. She sounded like she wanted to be there.

He knelt in the well. He stayed.

Dale's cock filled her mouth again. Wet. Heavy. The taste she knew. She took him as deep as she could manage and her hand found Wicks without looking — the slick crown, the thin shaft under it, already leaking onto her fingers. A wet gluck when she dropped on Dale, spit sealing, small and filthy between his knees.

Mouth. Get them off. Don't let them move you.

Wicks's bony knees boxed her right shoulder. Menthol and bad teeth and a wet noise he kept making in his throat. Dale's dark hand rested on the back of her head. Weight. The gold chain. The open jeans. Her tits hung over his lap, the band under them doing less work now that she was on her knees; they swung when she moved, nipples dragging denim.

She worked Wicks while she sucked Dale. Fast on the head. That was the part of him that would finish. His hips jerked. His fingers hovered, wanting her hair, her chest, anything.

"Dale — look at her go, she's got you in her mouth and she's jerking me, those tits swinging, oh my God, I need — I need her to —"

She pulled off Dale. A string of spit broke across her chin. She turned.

Wicks.

His cock stood up from his skinny hips, the crown flared and shiny, bigger than the rest of him, waiting. She had held it. The head pushed her lips wide on the first inch — blunt, the ridge a thick lip — and caught the inside of her lower lip and then the roof of her mouth and there was no room. Width. All at once. She whimpered around it, high, and his whole body jumped.

"Oh God — oh fuck — her mouth — Dale, she's sucking me, she's actually — look, look at those lips around the head, it's stretching her, it's—"

His hands landed in her hair. Bony. Clammy. Trembling. He pushed. The crown scraped past her palate and her eyes watered and she took it, a wet slurp as the ridge passed, and she sealed on it. That was all there was room to do. *If he came he was done.* His thighs shook against her shoulders. Menthol breath, short and punched. The Adam's apple jumping every time she dropped.

His stained fingers left her hair and found her chest. One hanging breast, then the other, squeezing while she sucked the head, his thumbs dragging the nipples until they tightened against the nicotine-yellow skin. He made a noise through his teeth. She whimpered around him, and he heard it and squeezed again.

She sucked the head. Her tongue worked the slit and he barked a laugh that broke into a groan, and his fingers tightened on her tits, and she felt him swell against her teeth.

"I'm gonna — don't stop, sweetheart, don't you stop, those eyes looking up, those fucking tits in my hands, I'm gonna fill her mouth, Dale, I'm gonna—"

Dale's hand closed on her hair from the other side.

He pulled her off Wicks. The crown left her lips with a wet pop. Wicks made a wounded noise. His hands stayed on her for a second, then slipped. Dale turned her face. His cock was there, darker, wet from her, a bead at the slit. He put her back on it.

"I'm not done."

He pushed. Past where she'd been keeping him. Past the halfway point, the head finding the back of her throat, and she gagged, a thick wet choke that carried, and he held her there. Two seconds. Three. Spit ran down her chin onto her left breast and swung. When she tried to turn toward Wicks his fist kept her.

He let her up enough to breathe and put her down again. Up. Down. The wet of it steady now, her tits shaking, her jaw aching around the thickness of him. Wicks's cock twitched in her fist, unfinished, the head slick with her spit now, and he was talking, he

was always talking, and she shut as much of it out as she could and stayed on Dale.

"Her throat — Dale, I heard that, she's taking it, look at the spit on her tit, I'm still — I was so close, let her come back, let her—"

"Easy," Dale said. Not looking at him. Looking at her eyes.

Footsteps behind her.

Concrete. Slow. A boot scuffed.

The workbench drawer scraped. Bottles knocked. A dull, rubbery thud on wood. The drawer rolled shut.

Dale's fist had her. She heard Vince's boots. Then the smell of him — Marlboros, the greasy heat of his skin — and his voice, low, from right behind her ass, where the shorts were still bunched, where the room was.

"I've got something that'll help."

His hand settled on her lower back. The rough palm. The calluses. Pressure: forward. Down.

She pulled off Dale. A gasp. Spit on her lip.

"Vince." Breathless. Small. "Wait. Let me finish them here. They're close. I can — my mouth. That was what I said. Don't—"

"On the couch. Hands and knees."

Dale's cock stood in front of her face, shining. He looked at Vince over her head. Then at her.

"Up."

He stood. The couch rose under his mass, springs creaking. His cock left her mouth's reach and he walked — around the arm, along the floor, to the end that opened on the rest of the basement. Jeans open. Gold chain. Waiting.

Wicks didn't stand. He scooted down the cushion toward that same end, skinny knees sliding, cock in his fist, making a lane along the seat, his watery eyes bright.

"Vince, what've you got, what is that, is that — oh my God, look at her ass, those shorts, they're already—"

Vince's hands took her hips. Turned her. Lifted.

She put a knee on the cushion.

The old fabric, rough under her kneecap. The other knee. Ass up. Palms down for a second on the cushion, the sag in the middle,

another creak.

Vince was behind her. The heat of him against the backs of her thighs, his belt buckle cold on her skin. A clink as he opened it.

In front of her: Dale. He sat. The couch took his mass again. He spread his knees and the dark wet head of him was at her mouth, waiting, and she leaned down and turned — a twist through her waist — and put her head in his lap. His hand found her jaw. A wet seal, then the extra inch. On her knees, ass up for Vince, her mouth full of Dale.

The turn dumped her tits toward Wicks.

He was right there, on the cushion beside Dale, skinny knees open, and her breasts spilled across his lap, heavy, the band doing nothing. One nipple dragged the wet crown of his cock. He jerked like the touch burned. Her hand found him underneath them — the flared head, slick, buried in the pale weight of her. She held him. Stroked. Her tits moved over him when she did.

His bony fingers slid in around a breast, lifted it, dragged the nipple down his shaft, and let it drop so it slapped against the head.

"Jesus — they're on me, Vince, her tits are on my cock, look, they're just — they're spilling all over it, I can feel her nipple, I can —"

Vince behind her. The buckle. The gut. His zipper, a short rasp.

The shorts.

His fingers hooked what was left of the waistband — already down her cheeks, bunched at the tops of her thighs — and pulled.

"Vince—"

Past her hips. Past both cheeks. To her knees. The elastic snapped against her thigh. Cool air on her pussy. She whimpered around Dale's cock.

From behind she was open. She could feel it — the air, the light, her pussy gone puffy and parted, slick, a thread of it clinging to her inner thigh, trembling, then breaking and running. The smell of her cut through the cigar and the concrete, sharp, her own musk, wrong for this room.

Wicks's voice cracked.

"Vince — look — her thighs, the slick on her thighs, fuck, you can smell her from here, look at her pussy, she's soaked, she's been soaked, look at her face on Dale's cock while you—"

"Wicks," Vince said.

Something pressed against her pussy.

Cool. Smooth. Thick.

She tried to look back. Dale's fist in her hair kept her on him.

"Vince. What is—"

"Easy." His voice, behind her, close. "It's a toy. Take it."

A toy.

A toy. A toy is not a man. Nobody is inside me.

The head of it parted her. Slow. Her own slick giving way in little cling-and-release sounds, filthy and small. The shaft followed. A wet seating as it bottomed, cool silicone warming as it filled her, impersonal, mechanical, and her hips pushed back onto it anyway, a small roll, and she gasped around Dale, a muffled whimper, and Dale's grip tightened in her hair like he'd felt the sound through his cock.

Full. Stretched. The plan could still be the plan.

Vince worked it. Slow strokes. In. Out. The toy dragged out wet on every pull, loud with her slick, shameless. His other hand on her hip, steadying her. She sucked Dale and held Wicks and the toy moved in her pussy. Weight on her tongue. The bulbous head hot in her fist. Silicone stroking where she was wettest. She moaned around Dale's shaft, low, involuntary, and the vibration went through him, and he exhaled through his nose.

"Yeah," Dale said. Quiet.

"She's moaning — Dale, she's moaning on it, the toy's in her and she's moaning, her tits are on my cock, they're all over me, Vince, go deeper, she's taking it, she's—"

Vince went deeper. The toy seated. A wet kiss of silicone against her, held, and her knees slipped an inch on the cushion. Wicks's hand tightened on the breast he was holding. She heard herself make the sound again, higher.

The shorts, bunched at her knees, caught as Vince worked. He tugged them lower, past one calf. She kicked the other leg free. The

elastic snagged her ankle and then it was gone, dropped to the cushion beside her knee, and she was bare from the band down, on her knees, ass up, her head in Dale's lap, her tits spilled over Wicks, the toy fucking her. Gin in her blood. The edges of it easy.

Vince's rhythm stayed slow. Each stroke seated deep, and she heard herself moan again, and her knees slipped wider on the cushion.

Finish them. He's helping. Get Dale off. Get Wicks off.

Then the toy withdrew.

One motion. Out. A schlick, louder than the rest, soaked skin separating. Empty. She heard it land on the cushion beside her knee — silicone on fabric — and the empty made her whimper, a stupid small noise, and she started to pull off Dale to say something, to keep the room where it was.

Dale didn't let her. His fist in her hair held her in his lap. He kept her mouth on him.

And something else pressed in.

Hot.

Live. The silicone had been cool going in. This radiated. Skin. The hands on her hips gripped harder — both hands, rough, stained, the short thick fingers digging in above her hip bones — and the head of him, blunt, broad, thicker than the toy, pushed her lips wide. She stretched around him. A burn, then a give, her pussy gripping the ridge as it popped past, and the sound it made was a deep suck, her own slick taking him, shameless. He fed her an inch. Another. The foreskin slid against her inner walls — the same skin she'd felt under her fist at his chair — and a pulse started inside her. His pulse.

Vince.

The safe one. The blanket. The man who'd stepped back on a word and told her she'd done well. His cock in her. The width she'd held in her fist, the one that had made her hand look small, opening her from behind while she was on her knees with Dale down her throat. He'd said it was a toy. He'd said help. Same as the other two. Politer about it.

He pushed. Another inch. The thick base of him stretching her wider, and then his gut came against her ass, a slap of skin, seated,

and she was full. Wider than the toy. Him.

The two syllables formed.

Last—

The L against the roof of her mouth. The breath she'd need. Dale's cock was past her tongue, his fist locked in her hair, holding her down in his lap, and what came out was a groan into his shaft, muffled, wet, that could have been anything.

Vince's hands stayed on her hips. He kept his cock inside her. He drew back — a slow wet drag, her pussy clinging — and pushed deeper.

She tried again. A fragment. A shape in her throat. Dale's hand put her down on him and the word turned into sound, and the sound went into him, and Wicks was crying out from the cushion,

"Vince — you're in her — you're actually in her, Dale, look, he's fucking her, look at her taking that thick fucking — her face, her face while he—"

He kept that pace. The same one he'd used with the toy, except this was him, live, his stomach meeting her ass on every seat, the gold chain at his collar tapping her spine in time. Hairy stomach, belt open. He found an angle — the front wall, a spot that went through her — and her vision thinned at the edges and a moan tore out of her around Dale's cock, high, helpless, and her hips pushed back for the next one.

The SD cards. The phones. The week of being afraid of her own street. If she stopped now she kept all of this and lost the door.

Truth was, she wanted the next stroke. She caught herself waiting for it, hips loaded, ready to go back for more. All week she'd been afraid of the photos, the crew, the street. Full of him now, she found the real thing to be afraid of: she liked it.

The fullness. The heat. The way it felt, which was good. That was the problem. The wanting went through her like a flush and she stayed where they had her — on her knees, ass up, her mouth in Dale's lap, her tits on Wicks — and Vince's thickness dragged that same spot again, wet, deep, and she stopped trying to speak.

Vince pulled out of her.

The empty made her whimper into Dale's lap, a stupid small sound, her pussy clinging after him, a wet cling that ended in air. His gut left her ass. The gold chain at his collar stopped tapping her spine. She stayed where she was — on her knees, ass up, her mouth on Dale, her tits spilled over Wicks — and the empty kept going.

Dale's fist loosened in her hair.

"On your back."

"Dale." Off him, spit on her lip, the bartender voice down to almost nothing. "I can finish you like this. My mouth. You and—"

"On your back."

His hands found her hips. Vince's too, from behind, stained and certain, turning her. The cushion scraped her knee. She went. Shoulder blades on the old fabric. The sag under her spine. Ceiling tiles above her, grey, water-stained.

The band under her breasts pushed them up again. They sat there in the clamp light, heavy, nipples tight, shaking from the turn. Cool air on her wet pussy. Her knees were still bent. She was on her back on Vince's couch with her shorts gone and three men around her.

Wicks was still at her head. Menthol. Bad teeth. His cock still wet, the crown shiny, hovering over her mouth. His watery eyes went from her face to her chest and couldn't pick.

"Oh my God she's on her back, Dale, look at her, look at those tits sitting up, her legs, you can see everything, she's — put it in her, put it in her, I want to watch it go in—"

Vince stood at the side of the couch. Close. The heat of him. His cock still hard, still wet from her, standing out of his open jeans. His stained hand came down and covered her left breast, the whole of it overflowing his palm, and he squeezed once, slow, and watched her face.

Dale stood from the end.

The couch rose. He moved between her thighs — the mass of him filling the space Vince had left, gold chain, open jeans, his cock dark and heavy and shining with her spit. He pushed her knees apart with his own. His hands were huge on the pale of her inner

thighs. He looked at her pussy the way he'd looked at her face when she was on her knees at the table. Appraising. Certain.

He notched against her. Huge. Blunt. Slick with her.

"Dale—"

He pushed.

The head of him spread her. Wider than Vince at the first inch, and then the length started, and she felt herself take him and keep taking him, the dark shaft feeding into her inch by inch while she watched — pale lips stretched around him, clinging, a slow wet sound as each inch disappeared. Halfway and she was full. He kept going. Her mouth opened. A broken whimper. His hips met hers and the whole of him seated, a slap of skin, deep enough she felt it high, behind her navel, and she cried out, high, and her nails found his shoulders through the shirt.

He filled her. Dark buried in pink. Cigar on his clothes. The heat of his stomach. His heavy-lidded eyes on her face, watching what this was doing to her.

"Yeah," he said. Quiet. Certain.

He drew back. Her pussy followed him with a soft filthy kiss of wet skin, clinging, and he drove in again, and the sound of it was shameless, and she heard herself moan, and Wicks groaned like it was him inside her.

Wicks's bony hands held the sides of her face. The crown pushed at her lips. She opened. He shoved in — the blunt stretch, the ridge catching her lower lip — and his hips jerked, frantic, and the two of them were in her at once, Dale's length burying her to the hilt, Wicks's head filling her mouth, and Vince's thumb rolled her nipple and she whimpered around Wicks and the whimper made him shove deeper.

"Dale — look — she's taking both of us — she's — oh God, look at her face, those lips around me, you're in her, you're actually in her, I can see it, I can see your cock in her pussy, it's stretching her, she's—"

Dale's hands moved to the backs of her knees. He pushed them toward her chest. The angle changed. The depth changed. She cried out around Wicks — high, raw — and Dale fucked her like that,

folded, his mass over her, the chain tapping, every stroke a wet smack against her, and she was looking up at the stained ceiling and then at him, at the dark of his throat, at the place where his cock was going into her, and her tits shook on the band, and Vince's stained fingers squeezed in time with Dale's hips.

Last call. The two syllables. She could still make them if Wicks came out of her mouth. She did not make them. And underneath that, worse: she was wet around Dale, soaked, and every stroke dragged a sound out of her she would have paid money not to make, and the sound kept coming.

Dale's rhythm was steady. Deep. He was in no hurry. Wicks was the opposite — bony hips stuttering at her face, the crown popping past her teeth, menthol breath punched out of him, his stained fingers in her hair, talking through it, always talking.

Vince watched. His gold chain. His cock. His hand on her breast. Six months of the driveway in his thumb.

"Wicks," Dale said. Not looking at him. Looking at her. "Easy. You'll get yours."

He fucked her through that. Another stroke. Another. She moaned around Wicks and her hips lifted to meet Dale and she felt the lift happen and hated it and did it again.

Then Dale pulled out.

The empty was worse this time. A wet suck, her pussy open, clenching on the leaving. She whimpered. Wicks pulled free of her mouth with a pop, a string of spit from her lip to the crown, and she lay there on her back with her knees still up and her tits still shaking and nobody inside her, and the empty felt like falling.

Dale stood. His cock stood with him, dark, soaked with her, a thread of it hanging from the head. He looked at Wicks.

"Go on."

Wicks made a noise that was almost a laugh. He was already moving — off the cushion at her head, around the couch, skinny and fast, his cock in his fist, the head flared and dripping. Vince's hand left her breast. He stepped back one pace, still at the side, still in the room, his wet cock standing out of his jeans. Watching.

Dale sat. The end of the couch. The springs. He spread his knees. Waiting.

"Up," Dale said. To her. "On your knees."

Vince's stained hands helped. Her hips. The turn. Palms on the cushion. Knees. Ass up. The band hanging her tits toward the fabric. She was on her hands and knees on the old couch and the men closed in from both ends.

Dale came over onto his knees in front of her. The mass of him filled what she could see. Gold chain. Open jeans. His cock in her face, dark, soaked with her, a thread of it hanging from the head. He took her jaw. Put her on him. A wet seal, and the taste of herself spread over her tongue, salt-sweet, unmistakable.

Wicks behind her. She felt him there before he touched her — the skinny heat and the jitter. His bony hands on her hips, gripping too hard, clammy, shaking. His thin thighs against the backs of hers. The head of him — that head, the one she'd held, the one she'd had in her mouth — notched against her open pussy.

"Vince — Dale — I'm gonna, I'm gonna put it in her, look at her ass, look at that little mole, I'm gonna—"

He pushed.

The crown went in and the ridge dragged, and the shove sent her forward onto Dale. Dale's hand on the back of her head met it and held, so she was full at both ends at once, Wicks's skinny hips flushing her ass, Dale's cock at the back of her throat, and when Wicks pulled back Dale's grip kept her where she was until the next thrust drove her onto him again.

She whimpered around Dale. High. Surprised. A pitch she hadn't hit on Vince, hadn't hit on Dale, thinner, and Wicks barked a laugh that broke into a groan and did it again, and the ridge was inside her, a thick lip, and when he pulled back it caught.

It hooked — he was leaning over her, driving downward, the angle deliberate.

Every stroke: the blunt crown dragging her front wall, the ridge pulling forward on the way out, pressing on the way in, a slick rhythmic sound where he stirred her, and her mouth making the wet gluck of being pushed onto Dale. His average shaft came out

shining. Strands of her clung to the mushroom tip before he shoved back in. The ugly part of him. The part she'd noticed in her hand and tried not to think about. Working her from the inside. Driving her onto Dale. Dale's fist answering, putting her back.

She gripped the cushion. Her back arched. Her hips pushed back against Wicks and the pushing was hers and she couldn't stop it, and the push put her deeper on Dale, and Dale took it. Menthol and the smell of her own pussy off the cushions, sharp, shameless. Wicks's skinny body slapping against her, a light wet smack, nothing like Dale's mass, nothing like Vince's gut.

Vince's cock found her right hand. She closed on it without looking. The girth. The foreskin. He was still wet from her, still at the side of the couch. He made a sound in his chest, low, and his stained fingers settled at the back of her neck, just there, while the other two moved her between them.

"She's wet — Dale, she's soaking me, I can hear it, listen, listen to that, her pussy's making that sound on my cock, the head's catching, I can feel it catching, she's — oh God she's pushing back, she's pushing back onto me, look at her, look at her fucking back, I'm shoving her onto you, Dale, look at her mouth—"

Dale's fist in her hair. He didn't look at Wicks. He looked at her eyes, when they were open. His cock heavy on her tongue. The gold chain. When Wicks thrust, Dale held. When Dale pulled her down, Wicks met her.

The ridge dragged again. Again. She heard herself go high, a thin sound around Dale, and her knees slipped wider, and Wicks's bony fingers dug into the pale of her hips, and he found the angle he'd been hunting and stayed on it, frantic, the crown rubbing that same spot — catching, hooking, a blunt drag Dale's length had slid past and Vince's girth had only filled — and every shove rocked her onto Dale, and the pleasure stacked on that ugly head.

The skinny one. The mouth. That ridge. I'm—

It was coming and she tried to stop it. Bit the inside of her cheek. Dug her nails into the cushion. Thought about the Visa bill, the cold concrete, anything. The fighting wound it tighter. By the end she wanted it more than she wanted it to stop.

She came.

It started deep and spread. Her thighs locked. Her spine arched. A broken cry tore out of her into Dale's cock, muffled, vibrating through him, and her pussy seized on Wicks's ridge in pulses she could hear — a filthy wet kiss on every clench — and she pushed back onto him through it, which put her throat on Dale, which made Dale's grip tighten. The pleasure was enormous. The horror sat in it. Wicks. The bad teeth. The menthol. The hands that made her skin crawl. And it was the head of him doing it, that flared mushroom crown she'd held in her fist and taken in her mouth, hooked on the spot the other two hadn't stayed on, and she was coming on it, clenching on it, her tits shaking under her, and she could not make it not be true.

Wicks felt it. The squeeze. His whole skinny body jumped. His voice cracked up into a question, frantic, delighted, like she'd picked him:

"You — you're cumming? On me? On my cock? Dale, look at her, she's — sweetheart, that was me, that was the head, you feel that, you pushed back, that was you, you wanted it, you chose — tell him, tell him you came on me, you like it, you like my—"

She couldn't tell anyone anything. Dale's cock was in her mouth. What came out was the cry, high, broken, and Wicks heard it as yes. He whimpered — ugly, thin, a sound that didn't belong next to Dale — and the clench pulled him over. His hips stuttered. The talk broke.

"Oh — oh fuck I'm — I'm gonna — she's squeezing me, I can't —"

He came in her.

Hot. Deep. The ridge pulsing against the same wall it had hooked, a thick twitch she felt from the inside, his skinny hips flush and shaking, a high broken noise punched out of him as he dumped into her in spurts she could count. Heat spreading. Filling. The evidence. His bony fingers dug hard enough to bruise and he shoved through it, still in her, still talking once he had air:

"I made her — Vince, I made her cum, she came on me—"

Wicks. That cock. The one she'd dismissed. The ridge that caught. She came because of that, and he was coming because she

had, and the heat of him was inside her now.

He fucked the last of it into her. The smack of his skinny hips driving her onto Dale. Her cry going ragged around him. Vince's cock jumping in her hand. Dale's grip in her hair, holding her on him while she shook, while Wicks pulsed, while the leak of it started down her thigh, warm.

Wicks stayed in her. Still talking. The stream finding a new shape, bigger, stupider, like the cum had convinced him of something:

"Dale, you saw it, she didn't do that on you, Vince, she didn't — it was me, the head, she loves it, she loves *me*, look at her, we should, we should date or something, I'm not kidding, a girl cums like that on you that's a girlfriend, that's — sweetheart, say it, you like me, you can say it, I already know—"

Dale didn't answer. Vince didn't either. She couldn't. His cock was still twitching in her and the word girlfriend was in the basement now, and Wicks was waiting like she might nod.

From the window, Tyler saw her back.

Arched. Pale. The sports-bra band still on, her tits hanging under it, heavy, shaking, the nipples he'd put his mouth on in their kitchen pointing at Vince's old cushion. She was on her knees on the couch. Wicks behind her, flush to her ass, bony hips snapping, and Dale at the other end, gold chain, her head in his lap.

They were fucking her.

Wicks's hips were driving into her, the slap of it coming through the glass, and that was a cock in his wife, Wicks's cock, Wicks from the table who talked through every hand and laughed too loud at Dale's jokes. Inside her. Fucking her. Dale filling her mouth while he did it. Three doors down from their duplex. On Vince's couch.

The cracked window let the basement through. Bass from the speaker. Springs. Skin. And Wicks, too loud, the way he'd been too loud since the first Saturday, the words arriving in pieces through the open gap:

"—came on me — Dale, look — she loves it — girlfriend — we should date — sweetheart, say it—"

Her voice under it. High. Broken. The sound she made in their bed when she was close, and she was making it around Dale, and Wicks was the one in her, the one claiming it.

She came. He could hear that she came. On Wicks. That mouth. Those teeth. That skinny, jittering body on Megan's back. She was above him in every way a person could be above someone, and she was coming on him anyway.

Get her. The thought was still there. He'd already tried. The door. The locked knob. The man who would have kicked it in was not the man kneeling in dead leaves with his forehead on dirty glass, watching two men from a poker night put their cocks in his wife.

His hand was in his jeans. He didn't remember the zipper. His cock was in his fist, hard, wet at the head, and his fist was moving, and he hated the moving, and he didn't stop. Megan. The mouth that said goodnight in their kitchen. The mouth that always came off him before he finished, a little shake of her head, eight years of that. Down there. Full of Dale. And Wicks behind her, in her, fucking her, talking about dating her like she'd picked him. The stills had been her mouth. This was her pussy. This was her making a noise he thought he knew, for them, and his hips were already jerking into his own hand.

Silent. Mouth open on the glass. The orgasm tore through him in the well, leaves crunching under his knees, his cum hitting the inside of his fist, hot, then cooling, and he kept looking. He could not look away. Wicks was still talking. Still in her. Still saying *girlfriend*, *date*, *say it*, like he could talk her into it. Tyler's forehead fogged the pane. He stayed.

Vince let go of her hand.

Two steps back. Three. The heat of the clamp lights on his chest, her wet still on his cock, standing out of his open jeans. Dale had her mouth. Wicks was still buried in her, skinny ass flushing, the talk going and going. He turned his head.

The window. Ground-level, dirty, the well full of leaves. And in the glass, lit from below by his own basement: a face.

Tyler.

Forehead on the pane. Mouth open. Eyes on the couch. His right hand in his jeans, denim bunched at the wrist, the motion unmistakable even through the smear. Breath fog. Cigarette butts around his knees.

Vince held his phone at his ribs. Angled. Screen dark. No sound. Megan on her knees, pale back, tits shelved on the band, Dale's dark hands in her hair, Wicks's skinny hips at her ass. And above the couch, small in the dirty glass: her husband. Open mouth. Hand in his jeans. Watching.

One shot.

He put it in the locked album. Pocketed the phone. Grinned. Wicks was coming off her now — a wet sound, her pussy clinging, a string of him following the crown out of her — and Vince stepped into the space Wicks left.

Wicks staggered.

Jeans around his thighs. Cock shining, shrinking, dripping her and himself onto the concrete. He found his game chair and dropped into it with his mouth open, stunned, and the talk started again before he'd sat all the way down.

"I made her — you saw it — that's a girlfriend, that's — she came on the head, I'm telling you — Dale, what if she's pregnant, I came in her, I dumped it, what if I got her pregnant, I'd marry her, I would, I'm not kidding, a girl cums like that and you knock her up that's a wife, sweetheart, you hear me—"

She felt him leave. The empty. His cum already in her, warm, a slow leak down her inner thigh, and the empty after that ridge was a stupid ache. She shifted once after him, chasing it, before she caught herself. She stayed on her knees. Dale's cock heavy on her tongue. The band hanging her tits toward the cushion. Ass up. Open.

Vince's gut found her ass. The gold chain. Marlboro and oil. His stained hands on her hips, the same hands from the driveway, and the blunt head of him notched into the mess Wicks had left. Girth. The foreskin. He pushed.

She whimpered around Dale. Vince filled her in one thick slide, stretching what the ridge had hooked, and her sound went high, and Wicks laughed from the chair like it was for him.

Vince fucked her. Slow. Deep. Soaked and shameless, Wicks's cum making the slide filthy, a soft schlick on every stroke. His gut slapped her ass. His stained fingers dug into the pale. Dale's fist in her hair held her on him, and every time Vince drove in she was pushed onto Dale, and Dale took it, certain, the gold chain at his throat.

"Soaking," Vince said. Low. To the room. To her.

She moaned. The moan surprised her. It kept happening. Vince's girth dragged her open, thicker than the ridge, packing her, and Dale's taste filled her mouth, and her tits shook under her, the puffy nipples tight, grazing the cushion when Vince bottomed out. The leak of Wicks ran down her thigh and Vince packed it back in. She heard herself go continuous — a keening, open sound around Dale, threaded through the slap of Vince's hips — and she let it.

"That's the sound," Vince said, low behind her. Just for her. "Knew you'd make it."

Almost done. Almost—

Vince's stained hand left her hip and covered her breast. The whole of it overflowing his palm. He squeezed. His thumb rolled the nipple. She pushed her chest into it. She hated that she did. She pushed back onto him anyway, which put her throat on Dale, which made Dale's grip tighten, and Wicks was talking from the chair about dates and girlfriends and a baby and marrying her, and she wanted Vince to keep doing what he was doing. *Don't stop.* The thought was hers. It stayed. Some part of her was supposed to be screaming. She listened for it and heard the wet slap of Vince's hips and her own voice keeping time.

Wicks had left his chair. He crouched at the side of the couch, jeans hobbling his knees, and got his face level with hers, and his clammy hand cupped her cheek while Dale rocked into her mouth. "So pretty," he breathed. Menthol, close. "So fucking pretty, sweetheart. You're perfect — I could make you so happy, I swear—" He kissed her shoulder, wet and quick, like he was stealing it.

Dale's free hand found Wicks's shoulder and put him back toward his chair. Wicks went, and the talking went on from there.

From the window, Wicks was off her. Vince had taken his place — the shoulders, the chain, the driveway. His neighbor. Inside his wife. Fucking her now. Dale still at her face. Her tits swinging under her with every thrust. Her voice coming through the cracked glass now without breaks, a moan that didn't stop, and Wicks's crowing from somewhere off the couch, a new shape to it:

"—pregnant — I came in her — I'd marry her — that's a wife—"

Pregnant. Marry her. Vince's gut hitting her ass. Vince in her now. Dale in her mouth. Wicks talking about a baby like he'd put one in her. Tyler's hand was still in his jeans. Wet. He was hard again, or still, he couldn't tell. His fist moved. The denim was already cooling from the first time and he was doing it again, watching Vince fuck her, watching her back work, listening to her sound like she wanted it. Get her. His cock jumped in his fist instead.

He came a second time. Thinner. Wrung. His mouth open on the glass. His jeans soaked. He stayed anyway.

Dale's rhythm changed.

Deeper. His patience had run out. He gripped her hair hard and used her mouth, his cock swelling on her tongue, the musk of him packing her nose — cigar, sweat, the salt of her own pussy still on him from earlier. She gagged. The gagging was wet. Vince kept fucking her through it, thick, relentless, and she was full at both ends and leaking Wicks down her thigh and the sounds she made had no words left in them.

"Swallow it." Dale. Low. His cock deep. "When I come. Swallow it."

She didn't pull off.

He came.

A growl rolled out of Dale's chest, low and long, and his fist tightened in her hair. "Yeah," he said, thick. "Every drop."

The first pulse filled her mouth — thick, hot, bitter, flooding her tongue, pooling at the back of her throat. She choked. Her throat

worked. The swallow went down with a gulp she heard inside her own head. The taste coated her teeth, her sinuses, the soft tissue at the back. He pulsed again. She swallowed again. Each one easier. The ease sat in her like a bruise.

Tyler. The bedroom. His hand on the back of her head and her coming off him, every time. I don't do that. You know I don't do that. Eight years. Never. Not with him, not with anyone. And Dale's fist in her hair, and Dale's cock, and the first swallow of her life going down because he'd told her to.

Dale pulled out. A wet pop from her lips. A string of spit and him breaking across her chin. He stepped back. Looked at her mouth, at the swallow still working in her throat. A slow nod. Then he was done with it.

Vince was the last.

He pulled out of her. The empty made her whimper, open, ass up, Wicks's cum and her own slick shining on her thighs in the clamp light. Vince's stained hand gripped one pale cheek and spread her. She heard him stroke — the wet fist on his cock, fast, her mess all over him. His other hand stayed on her ass, the thumb in the crease, holding her where he wanted her.

He came on her.

Warm stripes across both cheeks. Thick. Running into the crease. Pooling in the small of her back. The last pulse jumped and a glob of it hit her asshole dead-on — that tight pink pucker he'd been holding open — and clung there. The smell of it rose immediately, cutting through cigar and menthol and the French perfume she'd put on in her own bathroom. His grunt was low. Satisfied. Then, rough: "Yeah. All over that pretty ass."

Wicks, from the chair, still going:

"That's — that's her, that's my girlfriend, Vince, she came on me first, you saw it — what if she's pregnant, I'm serious, I'd marry her, I would — sweetheart, tell them, tell them you felt it, just say it once __"

"Wicks." Dale. Low. "Enough."

The stream stopped. Wicks's mouth stayed open. Nothing came out of it.

Vince's stained palm rested on the cum he'd put on her, a brief press, like checking a mark.

The basement was quiet. The clamp lights hummed.

She stayed on the couch. Wicks's cum inside her. Dale's cum in her mouth, the taste in her teeth, her sinuses, the back of her throat. Vince's cum on her ass, cooling. The sports bra band still under her breasts, shelfing them. The shorts on the cushion somewhere behind her. The leather jacket on the spare chair by the stairs.

She breathed. The couch smelled like old cigarettes and sweat and she could smell herself — the musk of sex, the salt of cum, the clean note of the French perfume underneath all of it, fading, losing to the rest.

Done.

The word came from the same place it had after the solo night — flat, final, carrying nothing but survival. She meant it. She'd survived. The composure was gone. The voice was gone. The woman who'd zipped the leather jacket two hours ago was not walking back out of this room.

Under *Done*, something else sat. The empty between her legs. The ache. The men pulling off her and the stupid pulse that wanted them back. She would not look at it. She put *Done* on top of it and pressed.

Vince appeared with the blanket. The rough wool. He draped it over her shoulders and the covering felt like something she'd been owed for hours. It also felt like the end of it, and the end of it made her throat tight in a way she would not examine.

She pulled it around herself. Her legs shook when she tried to stand.

In the window well, Tyler watched the movement slow. The men pulled away from her — one, then another. She was on the couch. A shape brought something to her — dark fabric, a blanket — and draped it over her shoulders. The men were still in the room. Still moving. Voices through the glass, too low to separate.

He'd seen enough. He'd seen more than enough.

He pulled himself out of the concrete well. His knees ached from the dirt. Dead leaves stuck to his jeans, to the wet denim at his thighs. His hands were shaking. The night air hit his face. Side yard of Vince's house. Dirt under his nails. Wet denim cold against his thighs. The truck was three blocks away and he still couldn't stand what he'd watched — couldn't put it next to the woman he knew and make the two fit.

He walked to the truck. Got in. Sat behind the wheel. Started the engine. Drove north.

Vince opened the camera drawer. The SD cards — three of them, small black rectangles. He set them on the card table in a row.

"These are yours," he said.

He picked up his phone. Showed her the photo gallery — thumbnails from the solo night, small and sharp: her bare tits in the clamp light, the puffy nipples lit pink; her on her knees with Dale's dark cock stretching her mouth; the facial, blue eyes through streaked lashes, cum gone matte on her cheek. She flinched from each one and still saw them. He selected all. Deleted. Showed her the empty folder. Then the recently deleted folder. Purged.

"Dale."

Dale pulled his phone from his pocket. The same process — gallery, select all, delete, purge. His face gave nothing. He set the phone on the table.

"Wicks."

Wicks fumbled his phone. His stained fingers shaking. His gallery was the fullest — he'd been the most prolific shooter during the solo night, every angle, every pose. He deleted. Showed her the empty gallery. Put the phone away.

"We're done," Vince said. He looked at Dale. At Wicks. "Right?"

"Done," Dale said. Low. He stood — his mass rising from the couch, his cigar from the ashtray, his jacket from the chair. He looked at Megan once. The look was different from the one in the basement after the solo night, when she'd been moving toward the

stairs and his eyes had said *paused.* This look said something she couldn't read and didn't want to.

Wicks had his jacket on and he was not at the stairs. He was looking at her. The watery eyes. The mouth already going.

"Sweetheart — wait, we should, we could go out, I'm serious, that was real, you came on me, that means something, I could call you, we could—"

"Wicks." Dale. Same low voice. "Let's go."

"I'm just saying, if she wanted, if she ever wanted, I'd marry her, I told her, I—"

"Done," Vince said. Not to her. To Wicks.

Wicks's mouth stayed open. He looked at her anyway, all the way to the stairs, like she might change it. She kept her fist closed around the cards. She didn't give him anything.

They went up. She heard them — the footsteps, the front door, the car doors, the engine pulling away.

Vince walked her upstairs. Through the living room — the poker table, the bottles, the stain on the carpet. The house that had been the house for every Saturday since this started.

At the front door he stopped. His hand on the knob.

"You're out," he said. "That's it. They're gone."

She looked at him. The slicked hair. The gold chain. The deep-set eyes that had been watching her since she moved onto this street. She couldn't tell if he was lying. She couldn't tell if it mattered.

"Goodbye, Vince."

"Goodbye, Megan."

She walked out. The screen door banged behind her. On the porch she shrugged off the blanket and left it over the rail — his house could keep it. The night air hit her and she could smell herself — sweat and sex and cigar smoke and cologne and the musk of three men's cum and underneath all of it, faintly, the French perfume she'd sprayed a lifetime ago.

She walked home. Three houses. The sidewalk under her bare feet — she'd left her shoes in the basement, she realized. The leather jacket was zipped over her bare skin, the SD cards in her fist.

The concrete was warm from the day's heat. The streetlights threw her shadow long.

A night breeze moved her hair across her mouth and she tasted Dale's cigar in it — trapped in the heavy dark strands, riding home with her. Under the jacket her bare ass still felt the cooling map of Vince's cum. She kept walking.

Halfway home it came back — that ridge, the catch of it — and her pussy throbbed once, hot and ready, like the night was still going. She stopped on the sidewalk. Three men's cum drying on her skin under the leather jacket, and her own want beating in her like a second pulse, and the disgust she felt at it was bigger than anything she felt at them. She walked faster.

Inside the duplex. Lock. Deadbolt. Chain. She stood in the dark hallway and her legs gave out and she sat on the floor with her back against the door and the SD cards biting into her palm and she breathed. Ten breaths. Twenty. The dark house quiet and Tyler's boots gone and the wedding ring in the ceramic dish.

The SD cards were on the nightstand. Three small black rectangles. She looked at them in the dark.

Done.

Tyler arrived at the cabin after midnight. The hollow was black — pines close, no moon. No light in the owner's window — already asleep, or past caring. He'd driven the two hours in silence, no radio, the window down, the night air on his face. His jeans were stiff where they'd dried.

He let himself in with the key the owner had left under the mat. The cot in the kitchen. He lay down without undressing. The ceiling was rough-hewn beams, the kind of wood that smelled like the forest it came from.

He didn't sleep. He lay in the dark and the images came — not the photos from the camera, the view from the window. The shapes through dirty glass. His wife's body in warm light. The dark hands. The sounds through the foundation.

He worked Sunday. The rewire — pulling old knob-and-tube, running new Romex through joists, the precise work that required

his hands and his focus and gave him eight hours of not thinking. The owner paid him in cash and told him the next property was ready when he was. Tyler shook his hand and drove south.

He was home by four. The F-150 in the driveway. His boots on the step. His key in the lock.

Megan was at the kitchen counter, cutting something. Tomatoes. The knife was steady. She wore a faded t-shirt of his, cotton shorts, bare feet. Hair up in a messy knot. No makeup. She looked like a Sunday. She looked like his wife.

Under the knotted hair and his t-shirt he still saw the clamp-light version — bare tits shelved on that too-small sports-bra band, the puffy profile tight, Dale's dark hands on her hips. The cotton shorts hid nothing from the part of him that had watched her waxed pussy take three men through dirty glass. She looked like a Sunday. She looked like the woman in the photographs. She looked like both at once and the overlap made his mouth go dry.

"Hey," she said. Without looking up.

"Hey." He set his duffel down. "How was your weekend?"

"Quiet. Watched a movie. Did laundry." The knife kept moving. Even, measured cuts. "How was the cabin?"

"Good. The owner wants another weekend."

"That's good."

He walked to her. Kissed the top of her head. She didn't flinch. She didn't lean in. She held still — the way you hold still when someone touches a bruise — and then she kept cutting tomatoes.

When she shifted her weight at the cutting board, a deep leftover ache answered between her legs — present, the ghost of being stretched. His mouth on her hair found shampoo and underneath it, faint, a cigar note the shower hadn't fully killed. She kept the knife moving.

"I'm going to shower," he said.

"Okay."

He walked down the hallway. Behind him, the knife on the cutting board. The sound of normalcy, performed.

In the bathroom he turned the water on and sat on the edge of the tub and put his face in his hands. The images. The sounds. The

glass. His hand in his jeans.

He didn't know why she'd been there. He didn't know the deal — the terms, the release, the cards, the phones. He didn't know she'd been buying her way out. He knew what the photos on the camera showed and what the window had shown and what her body had done and what his body had done while watching. That was the complete inventory of his knowledge and it was enough to destroy everything and it was nothing close to the whole truth.

He got in the shower. The water was too hot. He let it be too hot.

They ate dinner at the kitchen table. Chicken and rice and a salad with the tomatoes she'd cut. A glass of wine each — the $6 bottle they always bought, the one she used to call "an apology to France." They talked about the cabin, the owner's next property, the dental group that had finally paid. They didn't talk about Saturday.

Neither asked what the other had done. Neither volunteered. She reached for her glass and he reached for his and their knuckles didn't touch and neither of them corrected the miss.

He did the dishes. She dried. Their elbows touched at the sink and neither pulled away and neither leaned in.

Bed. His arm across her waist. Her back to him. The dark.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight."

Two liars in the same bed. Each grateful the other hadn't asked. Each carrying a Saturday they'd never share. The dark held what their mouths wouldn't.

THE HUSTLE



Part 4: The Room

Sire Rickenbach

Chapter 4: The Room

At ten to one he was still awake, and at one he quit pretending.

Megan slept on her side with her back to him and one hand under the pillow, the way she'd slept since the first apartment, since the futon. Her hair had come loose from the knot and lay across his side of the mattress. He could smell the shampoo on it. Under the shampoo he kept smelling the other thing, a dry stale note that might have been in the pillowcase or might have been in his head. He had smelled it on Sunday when he kissed the top of her head over the tomatoes. He'd been smelling it ever since.

He sat up. Found his jeans on the chair by feel.

"Where are you going." Into the pillow. Barely a question.

"Can't sleep. Gonna clear my head."

"Mm." She shifted. "Don't buy a house."

It was an old joke. When he couldn't sleep he drove, and when he drove he ended up in neighborhoods like the one they'd left, slow past lit kitchens and two-car garages, and once, a year ago, he'd come home at three and told her about a Tudor on Linden with a For Sale sign and she'd laughed so hard she cried. *Don't buy a house.* He stood in the dark with his jeans half buttoned and the joke went into him like a nail.

"I won't," he said.

He took the truck keys off the hook so the keys would be gone if she checked, and put them in his pocket, and went out the front door and down the step and didn't go to the truck. Ridley Street at one in the morning was sprinklers ticking somewhere and a dog two yards over that barked once and thought

better of it. The air was still warm from the day. He walked. He knew how long it took because she'd said it on the first night, on this sidewalk, his hand on her back: *Ninety seconds. I could do this in heels.*

Vince's house was dark except for the front window, where a television threw blue light against the curtain. Somebody sitting up. The Ram in the driveway with its rusted wheel wells. The garage door down for once.

Tyler went up the two steps and hit the door with the side of his fist. Three times. Hard enough to hurt.

He heard a chair creak. Footsteps that weren't in a hurry. The deadbolt turned and the door opened and Vince stood there in a white undershirt gone yellow at the neck, the gold chain lying in his chest hair, gray sweatpants, bare feet. His hair was combed back wet like he'd just done it. He looked at Tyler the way he'd look at a delivery he'd been told was coming.

"Took you a while," he said.

Tyler hit him in the mouth.

It was the first time he had punched a man since the eighth grade and it landed better than it had any right to, a short right hand with his weight behind it, and he felt Vince's lip go against his teeth and something give in his own knuckles. Vince's head went back. He took one step into the house. He didn't fall.

Tyler went in after him.

The second punch was worse. Vince was already inside it, his shoulder turned so Tyler's fist slid off the meat of it, and then Vince was against him, chest to chest, the smell of him all at once — cigarettes and old sweat and the greasy sweetness of whatever he put in his hair — and a hand caught the back of

Tyler's neck. Tyler drove a fist into his ribs. It was like hitting a sandbag. Vince grunted and hooked a bare heel behind Tyler's knee and they went down together through the doorway onto the carpet, and for one second Tyler was on top and swinging, and then he wasn't.

He never saw how Vince did it. His right arm was behind his back and his face was in the carpet and there was a knee between his shoulder blades with two hundred and twenty-five pounds sitting on it. His wrist was being turned toward his shoulder. The pain in his elbow was high and clean and total. He bucked once and it got worse.

"There it is," Vince said. Above him, a little out of breath. "There you go."

Tyler bucked again.

"You can do that," Vince said. "I can do this." The wrist went up an inch and Tyler heard himself make a noise into the carpet. "We can do that all night. Neighbors'll love it."

The carpet was damp under Tyler's cheek, or his cheek was wet. It smelled like beer that had been spilled and dried and spilled again.

"Breathe through your nose," Vince said. He was talking low now, close to Tyler's ear, the way you'd talk to a horse. "You're gonna feel like you can't get air. You can. Through your nose. That's all you gotta do right now. Nothing else."

Tyler breathed through his nose. The carpet. The beer. Vince's breath, cigarettes, blood. He could hear the television, a man selling knives. Somewhere under the pain and the rage a calm cold part of him that had once run project budgets noted that he had walked ninety seconds in the dark to do this and had not thought one step past the first punch.

"You want to know what I did inside," Vince said. "Ninety days. Mostly this. Guy wants to swing, you let him swing, then you sit on him till he gets bored. You bored yet?"

Tyler didn't answer.

"You're getting there."

The knee stayed. The wrist stayed. Tyler felt it leave him the way water leaves a sink, all at once at the end. His free hand opened on the carpet. His legs stopped.

Vince waited another ten seconds anyway. Then the pressure on the wrist eased, and the knee came off his back, and Vince stood up with a grunt and a crack of one knee and walked away from him. Tyler heard the kitchen faucet run.

He got himself up onto his knees, then onto the couch because it was closest. His elbow throbbed. The knuckles of his right hand were split across two of them and already stiffening. Vince came back from the kitchen holding a wad of paper towel to his mouth. When he took it away to look at it there was a bright split in his bottom lip and his teeth were pink.

"Good one," Vince said. He sounded like he meant it. He folded the paper towel to a clean side and pressed it back. With his other hand he took his phone off the arm of the recliner and woke it up and thumbed through something. "Okay. Here's the part you came for."

He held the phone out.

Tyler didn't take it. Vince didn't move it. After a while Tyler looked.

It was dark, the photo, mostly warm brown shadow, the clamp lights blown out to white at the top edge. The basement couch. Megan on her knees on the cushion with her back arched and her hair in Dale's fists, Wicks behind her, his skinny

hips tight against her ass. Tyler knew it. He had watched it. He had watched it from —

Above the couch, in the dark rectangle of the window, there was a face.

Small. Lit from below by the basement light so the eyes were holes and the mouth was a hole. Forehead pressed on the glass. One shoulder dropped, the arm going down out of the frame, and enough of the arm in the frame that there was no other way to read it.

He had not heard anything. He'd been sure of that, crouched in the leaves. He'd been sure of it on the drive north and on the cot in the cabin kitchen and every night since. *Nobody knows I was there.* He'd held on to that like a railing.

"Took it from inside," Vince said. "You were right there. I could've waved."

Tyler's mouth was dry. "Delete it."

"Here's how it goes." Vince sat down in the recliner across from him, slowly, the paper towel at his lip. "You tell her about Saturday. Whatever you want to tell her. You say Vince did this, Vince did that. Fine. Then I walk over there with this, and I tell her you set it up. The whole thing. From the gas station. That you've been sitting in my kitchen getting a cut of your own wife. And she looks at the picture." He turned the phone so the screen faced Tyler again. "Go ahead and tell her the real story. Then look at your hand."

The face in the window. The arm going down.

"I didn't set anything up," Tyler said.

"I know that. Who do you think she believes?"

Tyler sat on the couch with his split knuckles in his lap. The television sold knives. On the wall Vince's mother smiled at a picnic, or a wedding, somebody thirty years gone.

What came out of him wasn't the question he'd walked over with. He'd walked over with *what did you do to her.* What came out was smaller and worse.

"Why was she even there?"

Vince looked at him.

"She quit," Tyler said. "She stood in our kitchen and quit. She said she wanted her Saturdays back. I didn't fight her. Why was she even there?"

Vince took the paper towel away from his mouth and looked at it and put it back. When he talked again his voice had dropped half a step, gone slower, the voice from the gas station on Route 9, a man explaining something obvious to someone who was about to agree.

"She came to me," he said.

Tyler didn't move.

"Week after she quit. She knocks on my door on a Thursday afternoon. You're at work. She doesn't want to pour drinks anymore, fine, she's done with the poker, she's done with the table. But she's been thinking about the basement." He shrugged one heavy shoulder. "One more night. Just the guys. No game, no you. While you're up north. And she asks me to keep it from you. That's what she asked me for, man. Keep it from Tyler."

"Bullshit."

"Okay."

"That's bullshit."

"Okay," Vince said again, the same way, and waited.

And Tyler sat there and the waiting did its work, because he had been there. He'd been in the leaves with his forehead on the glass. He had seen her offer them her hands in that warm waiter voice — *I'm so turned on right now* — and he'd seen her go down on Dale with a rhythm, and he had seen her on her knees with Wicks behind her and heard what she sounded like when she came. He had heard Wicks say it, through the hopper: *You came on me.* Nobody had been holding her down. Nobody had to.

"Women like her get a taste, man," Vince said gently. "Ask her yourself."

Tyler looked at the carpet between his shoes. There was a dark stain there the shape of Ohio. Ask her himself. He imagined it — the kitchen, her face, the question — and he could not get past the moment where she answered it.

"What do you want," he said.

Vince took the paper towel off his lip for good. The bleeding had mostly stopped. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and the chain swung out from his chest and hung there catching blue light off the television.

"The cabin," he said. "Guy who owns it is underwater. Way under. He's got four properties and the bank's about to take two of them. He's insured on that cabin like it's the Taj Mahal. He wants the new copper gone. Spools in the shed, the service cable, the runs you pulled. All of it walks one night, he files a claim, the insurance buys it all again at retail plus labor, plus whatever else he says was in there."

"He paid me to put it in."

"And now he'll pay you to take it out. Funny how that works." Vince smiled, and the smile pulled at the split and he

stopped. "You know every run in those walls. You labeled the panel. You could do it in the dark. Pull it, haul it, I know a yard'll take it no questions. You keep forty percent, and I delete the picture in front of you."

"Why doesn't he do it himself?"

"Because he has to be two hundred miles away when it walks. He's at his sister's in Pennsylvania with a receipt from a restaurant. Copper walks, it's some tweakers from the next town. Happens every week up there." Vince sat back. "I got a utility trailer you can borrow. Wednesday night. You go up after work, you're back by morning."

"And if I say no."

Vince lifted the phone an inch off his knee. That was all.

Tyler thought about the money first, and he was ashamed of the order. The games were over. The cabin had been the only thing on the calendar and now the cabin was this. There was a notice in his desk drawer with a number on it that he hadn't said out loud to anyone. There was three hundred dollars left of the three hundred Vince had paid him on Friday. Forty percent of a cabin's worth of new copper at scrap. He'd know the weight. He'd pulled it. He could do it clean and fast and be on Route 11 headed south with the trailer riding low before anybody in the hollow turned over in bed. It was his site. His wiring. Nobody would do it better.

He noticed that he was already planning the pull order and stopped and couldn't stop.

"Wednesday," he said.

"Wednesday." Vince stood and went and opened the front door for him. The night air came in. "Put some ice on that hand. Tell her you caught it on a box."

Megan's soreness was mostly gone by Tuesday, which was the strange part. It had been there all day Sunday, a deep stretched ache when she sat, when she stood up from the cutting board, a reminder that went off without warning like a phone in another room. Monday it was lighter, a tenderness. By Tuesday it only came at odd moments — reaching for the top shelf, crossing her legs on the bus bench — and when it came now it came with a throb in it, one slow pulse, as if something down there remembered and wanted her to know.

She had stood in the shower Monday night with the water too hot and thought, with no warning at all, in Wicks's voice: *What if she's pregnant.*

She counted. She stood there with the water drumming on her shoulders and counted days on her fingers like a girl in a health class, and got a number, and the number was not a good number, and then she refused to count. She turned the water off hard and stood dripping on the mat and told herself the thing women tell themselves, that it doesn't work like that, that it almost never works like that, and the almost sat in the room with her all the way to bed.

That was the kind of thing she couldn't take anywhere. Not to Tyler, obviously. Not to a friend, because the friends were from the old life and the old life didn't have a sentence that started this way. She had the SD cards and she had the thing in her own head and she had nowhere to put either, and so by Tuesday afternoon, with Tyler at a job in Hartwell until six, she took the cards out of the nightstand to make sure they were real.

That was the reason. She said it to herself and it even sounded true. She wanted to confirm they were the originals,

the actual cards from the actual camera, and not three blank cards Vince had handed her for the ceremony while the real ones stayed in a drawer. It was a reasonable thing to check. It was the kind of thing a careful person checked.

She got the laptop. Sat on the made bed with her back against the headboard, the shades down against the afternoon, the house quiet in the particular way it was quiet when she was the only one in it. She found the card reader in the junk drawer, the one they'd bought years ago for a vacation camera, and she slid the first card in, and the folder opened, and there she was.

The first frames were the dress. The Christmas dress on the stool, her legs crossed, that half-smile she could remember making and could not now explain. She clicked through them with the arrow key, one, one, one, and the camera had been on burst, so the frames moved like a flipbook when she held the key down — the lean coming forward a degree at a time, the hem climbing, her own face sliding from the practiced smile into something looser as the sequence went. She knew she should close it. She told herself she would close it after the dress. She reached the end of the dress set and did not close it.

The bikini. The white strings that had already lost before she tied them. She watched the burst where she'd turned, the triangles sliding on the wet cotton, the frame where the fabric went translucent and the pink underneath came through, and she felt the first of it move in her, low, a tightening she tried to ignore and then stopped trying. The next card held the chaise. On all fours, facing away, her back in that deep arch Dale had told her to find. The mole on her left cheek, lit. She looked at the woman on the screen the way she would look at a stranger — the pale heavy swing of her own breasts under her, the

soaked cotton gone to glass — and she could not reconcile the woman arching on the screen with the woman sitting on the bed in an old t-shirt, and the gap between them was where the heat lived. She knew that now. She'd learned it two weeks ago behind the curtain and she was learning it again. The woman on the screen was wanted the way she had not let herself be wanted in eight years, and the woman on the bed could watch her be it with the shades down and nobody to see.

Her free hand had gone flat on her own stomach without a decision. She noticed and left it.

The top coming off. The frame where the strings went slack and her hands were still at the back of her neck and the room had gone, you could see it in the men's blurred edges at the sides of the shot, silent. The frame right after, her chin up, her tits bare in the clamp light and her face not knowing yet what the next hour was. Then the kiss. Dale's grey head, her mouth open under his, her fist in his shirt. The caption her own body wrote looking at it was not shame. She waited for the shame and it didn't come, or it came in a second layer, under the first thing, which was heat.

The hand on her stomach moved down.

She let it. She watched herself kiss a man she'd never have crossed a parking lot to meet, and her fingers found the waistband of her sleep shorts and slid under, and the first thing she felt was heat — a damp heat that had already come through the cotton before she'd touched anything. She'd been wet since the bikini. Since the chaise, maybe. She touched the outside of herself with two fingertips, lightly, the way you press a bruise to see if it still hurts, and her hips lifted off the duvet half an inch on

their own. She told herself, from very far away, that this was insane.

She pushed the shorts down to her thighs. The laptop tipped and she caught it and set it on the mattress beside her hip, angled so the screen faced her, and she sat there with her shorts around her thighs and her knees open on her own made bed in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon and arrowed forward.

The next card was Dale.

His cock beside her face, dark and heavy against her cheek, the frame catching it before she'd turned toward it. The picture couldn't give her the weight of it and her memory gave it anyway — how it had rested on her cheekbone, warm, heavier than she'd thought a man could be, the slow pulse in it against her skin. She held the arrow key and the burst moved: her head turning, her lips parting, the broad crown at her mouth. Then in it. Her own lips stretched round and shiny around him, her cheeks hollowed, her eyes lifted to someone out of frame.

She drew one finger up through herself, slow, from the bottom, gathered what was there and spread it over her clit, and the sound it made was small and wet and mortifying in the quiet room. She did it again. The little slick click of herself against her fingers, louder than she'd have believed, and under it the whir of the laptop fan.

The taste came back to her in her mouth before it came back to her in her head — salt, skin, a bitterness at the very tip, the heat of him heavy on her tongue — and her mouth actually watered, and she swallowed, and that was worse, because swallowing was what she'd done. The ache at the corners of her lips. The ache in her jaw on the walk home. The low sound Dale had made, a man pleased with a purchase. She could almost smell

that basement — the hot dust of the clamp lights, his cologne gone sour with sweat, the damp in the cinderblock — and she could smell herself for real, rising warm and musky off her own fingers, and the two crossed in her head until she couldn't keep them apart.

She pushed two fingers inside. She was swollen and soft and so wet they slid in to the knuckle without a catch, and she curled them the way she'd never once let herself do with the lights on and ground the heel of her hand down on her clit and rocked. The bed creaked. On the screen her mouth worked down him frame by frame, and her hand found the rhythm of the burst without asking her, her own wet sounds filling the room in time with it.

Somebody is going to see this, some part of her said. *Somebody already has.* She waited for it to frighten her. It made her clench around her fingers instead.

She found the facial. The last frame the card had of that night. Her own face, decorated — a thick white stripe across her cheek and the bridge of her nose, a drop clinging to her lashes, more glossing her lower lip, her mouth still half open as if she'd been about to say something. The blue of her eyes gone bright and strange, staring somewhere past the lens. She had never seen that face. Never once in a mirror: slack and glazed and greedy, a woman who had just been used and was waiting to find out if there was more.

She looked into her own eyes in that frame and she came.

It took her from the inside out — fingers buried, heels digging into the duvet, her head knocking back against the headboard, her thighs clamping shut on her own wrist. She heard herself, a long broken *oh* and then another, the headboard tap-

ping the wall, *tock, tock,* and she kept her eyes open, she made herself, she kept them on the woman with Dale's cum on her face while it rolled through her in waves that pulled her hips up off the bed one after another. She was saying something. *Oh God,* or *oh fuck,* or only air.

It went on longer than she wanted it to. When it finished she was breathing like she'd run, and the laptop was hot against her hip, and her hand was still between her legs, slick to the wrist, two fingers still inside her, and the woman on the screen was still looking past the camera, decorated, caught.

She shut the laptop.

What the fuck. She said it in her head and then, quietly, out loud to the dim room, "What the fuck is wrong with me." Her hand was still there. She took it away. The house was quiet. Somewhere down the block a lawnmower started and ran and stopped.

She should destroy the cards. The reasonable version of her, the one who folded her clothes in a neat stack even in Vince's basement, knew the only safe place for the cards was snapped in half and in three different trash cans. She had told herself she'd do it the first night. She slid them out of the reader instead, three small black rectangles, warm from the laptop, and she put them back in the nightstand under the spare phone chargers where they'd been, and she lay down on top of the made bed with her arm over her eyes until the lawnmower was the only thing in the world.

Wednesday morning she took the trash out and Wicks's Civic was across the street from Vince's house.

Engine off. The same spot as the week she quit, when the car had sat there like a held breath. Vince's garage door was up

a foot, the way it was when somebody had been in there late. She stood on her own step with the kitchen trash bag in her hand and looked at it, and Wicks looked back at her through the windshield and lifted two fingers off the top of the steering wheel. Not a wave. An acknowledgment. *I see you seeing me.* His face behind the glass was doing the thing his face did, the grin that was always a little too wide, and then he put the car in gear and pulled away slow down Ridley and turned at the corner and was gone.

She stood there until the bag got heavy in her hand.

They were supposed to be gone. That was the deal, that was the whole deal, that was the thing she'd walked out of that basement barefoot carrying like a prize: *you're out, they're gone.* Vince had said it at the door with his hand on the knob. And here was Wicks's Civic three doors down on a Wednesday, and she couldn't make it mean nothing, and she couldn't make it mean something she could do anything about. She put the trash in the can and went inside and locked the door and stood with her back against it, and after a minute she made herself move.

She didn't tell Tyler about the car. She couldn't tell Tyler about the car without telling Tyler about everything the car was there about, and so the car went where the rest of it went.

He'd been wrong since Sunday. She'd expected the opposite — expected him to come back from the cabin lighter, the money in his pocket, the summer of contracts in front of him — and instead he'd been somewhere behind his own eyes all week. He went for his night drives. He came back from one Monday with his knuckles split and crusted and said he'd caught his hand on a box at the Hartwell site, and she'd taken

his hand to the sink and run water over it and he'd watched her do it with an expression she couldn't read, something that was close to grief, and she'd thought: *he knows something is wrong with us. He can feel the shape of it even if he doesn't know what it is.* She'd done that to him. She'd put the thing between them that he could feel and not see. The marriage was rotting from the inside and he was walking around at one in the morning because he could smell it.

She decided on Tuesday night, watching him sleep, that she was going to tell him. Not the sanitized version. Not the lap-favor version she'd given him after the solo night. All of it — the photos, the deal, the basement, the men, the thing she'd learned about herself on top of their made bed with the laptop hot on her thighs. She was tired of being two people. She would rather be the woman who'd done it and told the truth than the woman who folded her clothes in a neat stack and lied. She'd tell him Wednesday. After dinner, when he was home from Hartwell, when the dishes were done and the lights were low and there was nowhere for either of them to go. She even knew the first sentence. She'd been saying it to herself for a day. *I need to tell you about Saturday. About all of it.*

She made a real dinner Wednesday. Chicken thighs the way he liked them, the crispy skin, the lemon. She set the table. She was drying her hands when his truck pulled in, and her heart was going hard, and she had the first sentence ready in her mouth.

He came in already talking. Keys, the duffel, a job that had run late and another one tomorrow — the cabin owner, the old service that had to come out before a Thursday inspection, he had to go up tonight, he'd be back by morning. He said it fast,

moving, not quite looking at her, pulling a clean shirt off the drying rack. There was something wound tight in him that she read as the job, the money, the pride of real work. He kissed her cheek on his way past and smelled like the day.

"Tonight?" she said. "I made —"

"I know. I'm sorry. It smells incredible." He was already at the door with the duffel. "He needs it out before the guy comes Thursday morning. It's eight hundred I'm not gonna leave on the table." He stopped with his hand on the knob, and for a second the wound-tight thing in him showed through, and he looked at her like he wanted to say something else. "I'll be back by morning. Save me a plate?"

The sentence was still in her mouth. *I need to tell you about Saturday.* She looked at him standing in the doorway with the duffel and the clean shirt and the split knuckles and the thing behind his eyes, and she thought, *not like this, not with one foot out the door, it'll keep one more night,* and she swallowed it the way she'd swallowed so much by now that swallowing had its own muscle.

"Save you a plate," she said. "Be careful."

He went. She stood in the kitchen with two places set and the chicken going cold and the first sentence dissolving back into all the other things she wasn't saying.

The hollow was exactly as dark as he remembered. Two hours up Route 11, the last twenty minutes on roads that lost their lines and then their shoulders, the pines coming right down to the gravel, and then the dead zone where the phone gave up looking and showed him the little airplane. He'd made this drive three times now. He knew the mailbox with no name,

the turn, the long rutted track to the cabin with the new wire in its walls.

He backed the borrowed trailer up to the shed and killed the headlights and sat for a second in the dark and the quiet with the engine ticking.

It was his wire. That was the thing he kept coming back to on the drive. He'd pulled every foot of it. He'd stood on a ladder in June heat and fed the home runs and labeled the panel in his own block printing — KIT, BATH, BED1, the handwriting he used on everything. There was a kind of insane logic to it being him. Nobody else would know the shed held two unopened spools because the job had been over-ordered. Nobody else would know the service cable ran up the outside of the stud bay instead of inside it because of a knot in the sill plate. He could do this in the dark and he half had to, because the only light he let himself use was the headlamp, turned low, a dime of yellow on the work.

He worked. The shed first, the easy money, the spools and the leftover THHN and a box of fittings that would scrap for nothing but weighed something. Then the service cable, which he'd set with his own hands and now stripped out of the staples one claw at a time, the cable coming off the studs with a sound like tape, coiling heavy over his shoulder. He carried it to the trailer and laid it in and went back. His knuckles ached inside the work gloves, and his right elbow, still sore from Vince's carpet, caught on every coil. He'd found a rhythm, the pull and the coil and the carry, and the rhythm was good, it was the one clean thing in weeks, his own competence in his own hands, and he was most of the way through loading when the night at the end of the track turned white.

Headlights. Coming up the rutted track slow, bouncing, two beams swinging across the pines.

He stood in the shed doorway with a coil of his own cable over his shoulder and watched the lights come, and he understood all at once: *two hundred miles away. Pennsylvania. His sister's. A receipt from a restaurant.* Nobody was supposed to come up this track tonight. The owner being two hundred miles away was the entire reason this was supposed to be clean.

The SUV stopped thirty feet off with its brights on him, a county star on the door. A deputy came around the light with a flashlight already up, saying *hands, let me see your hands,* and then behind the first set of lights a second set turned up the track, slower, with a bar across the top that was dark now and then, as he watched, was not dark.

The red and blue washed the pines and the shed and the trailer full of bright copper, and Tyler stood in it with a coil of wire on his shoulder, and the first thing he thought, absurdly, was that he'd labeled the panel in his own handwriting.

Vince said — the words got as far as the inside of his teeth and died there. Because saying Vince meant saying the photo, and the photo meant the window, and the window meant the cabin trip that was a lie, and all of it unspooled from the first word and there was no first word he could say that didn't end at his wife on her knees in a basement. He set the coil down. He put his hands where the deputy told him to put them. The cuffs went on cold and his split knuckles sang when his wrists came together behind him, and a young deputy with a soft face recited the words everybody knows from television, and the radio on the older deputy's shoulder read back the plate on the trailer, and the older deputy said to nobody in particular, *owner*

called it in from out of state, said nobody's supposed to be up here, and wrote something on a pad.

They walked him to the cruiser. They put a hand on his head so he wouldn't hit it, the way they do. Through the back window he watched a deputy walk the length of the trailer with a flashlight, the beam running over the coils and the spools, his copper, his handwriting out there somewhere on a panel in the dark, and he thought about the F-150 and realized they were going to take the truck too, and then they did — a flatbed came within the hour, he watched it from the back of the cruiser, watched his truck winched up onto the bed at an angle that looked wrong, looked like an animal being dragged, the truck he'd refused to sell because it was the last evidence his life had once been bigger than this street.

The holding cell at the county building was cinderblock painted the color of a bad tooth, a steel bench along two walls, a toilet with no seat, and a man asleep sitting up in the corner with a jacket over his face. They'd taken Tyler's belt and his laces and the three hundred dollars and his phone and given him a receipt for all of it, which struck him as the funniest thing that had happened in his life, a receipt, and he'd had to work not to laugh because he understood that laughing in here was the kind of thing that got noticed.

He sat on the steel bench with his laced-less boots loose on his feet and his elbows on his knees and he did not sleep. They'd given him his call at booking. He hadn't called Megan. He'd called the only number that knew why he was up here, and Vince had picked up on the second ring at three in the morning sounding wide awake, and said, *Sit tight,* and hung up before Tyler could ask him how he'd come to be awake. The

night went by in the fluorescent hum. Sometime toward morning the man under the jacket woke up and took the jacket off his face and looked at Tyler with the frank unbothered curiosity of a man for whom the room was not an emergency.

"You're new," the man said. Not unkind. He was maybe fifty, gray stubble, a drinker's nose, forearms gone soft over old muscle. "First one?"

Tyler nodded.

"They'll call your name when somebody comes. You got somebody coming?"

"I think so."

The man grunted and settled back against the block. He was a regular, Tyler understood — he had the ease of a man in a familiar waiting room, a DMV, a clinic. "Violated my paper," he offered, to the ceiling, like it was a thing worth sharing. "Pissed hot. Thirty days, probably. Could be worse." He looked over. "What'd they get you on?"

"Theft," Tyler said. The word was strange in his mouth. "Copper. Off a job."

The man laughed, a wet comfortable laugh. "Everybody and his brother. Price it's at? They oughta put a cop on every empty house in the county." He seemed to approve, almost, as if Tyler had chosen a respectable trade. Then, idly, filling the gray hour: "Who's coming for you?"

"My neighbor. He's posting it. Vince — Barella."

The man's head turned. Something sharpened behind the drinker's face.

"Barella," he said. "Vince Barella. Greasy hair, gold chain, drives a Ram now?"

Tyler sat up a little. "You know him."

"Did ninety with him. Last winter, down at Middlesex, fourth floor." The man said it the way you'd place a mutual acquaintance at a party. "System's small. Do enough time, you've done it with everybody. Hell of a thing, what put him in. Some neighbor called the cops on his party — he's having people over, music, whatever, and some neighbor calls it in, and he's on paper, so the cops come and they don't just tell him to turn it down, they get to look around. And they find his old man's shotgun in a closet." He shook his head, grinning at the stupidity of it, the pure dumb luck. "Felon in possession. His dad's gun, been in that closet probably twenty years. Didn't matter. He's on paper, there's a gun in the house, that's a felony. Ninety days for a party." He whistled low. "Dumbass. You don't keep a gun in the house when you're on paper. That's the one thing. That's the only thing."

"A neighbor called it in," Tyler said.

"Some neighbor. Noise thing. One o'clock on a weeknight, I think he said." The man shrugged, done with it, the story told. "He came out thin. Lost his truck while he was in, they took it for the payments. He was pretty quiet about all of it, Barella. Not a talker. But he knew exactly who made the call, I'll tell you that. Guys like him remember."

The man put the jacket back over his face.

Tyler sat with it. It didn't go anywhere in him. It was a felon's bad luck with a gun he shouldn't have had — the kind of story that was told in a room like this to pass a gray hour, a cautionary thing, *you don't keep a gun in the house when you're on paper.* Some neighbor, somewhere, on some weeknight, had called about a party. The world was full of neighbors who called about parties. What stuck, the only thing that

stuck, catching on the cold calculating part of him that had surfaced on Vince's carpet with his arm behind his back: Vince was on parole. Vince was a felon on paper, and a felon on paper went back inside for a gun in the house.

They called it a little before ten. *Calloway. You're bonded out.*

Vince was in the lot in the flat late-morning light, leaning on the Ram with a cigarette, like a man waiting outside a school. The split in his lip had scabbed over dark. When Tyler came out through the glass doors with his belt in his hand and his laces loose and a manila envelope holding his phone and the three hundred dollars, Vince looked him over once, the way you'd check a car you'd lent out, and flicked the cigarette and got in. Tyler got in the other side because there was nowhere else to go. The cab smelled like smoke and the pine tree hanging off the mirror.

Vince didn't start the truck right away.

"You were awake," Tyler said. "Three in the morning. You picked up on the second ring."

"I sleep light." Vince thumbed the Zippo open against his thigh and snapped it shut.

"Deputy said the owner called it in. From out of state. The guy who hired me called the cops on me."

"Guy's underwater. Guys underwater do what they gotta." Vince shrugged. "Maybe he got cold feet. Maybe he wants his claim with a name on it. You want to sit in a county lot and work out who called who, go ahead. Or you want to get home and get your story straight before she starts asking. Your pick."

Tyler didn't answer.

"So listen to me, 'cause I'm only doing this once. Guy don't want a trial. He wants his check. A trial, people start asking what was in those walls and what he paid for it. So he goes to the prosecutor and says he made a mistake. You two had a deal on the old wire, he got the night wrong, sorry for the trouble. It goes away." He put both hands on the wheel. "After Saturday."

Tyler looked at him.

"You tell her it was you," Vince said. "All of it. The poker, the little shorts, the cabin weekends. Your idea. You wanted to see her with other guys and you didn't have the balls to ask, so you came to me." The Zippo went still in his fingers. "Then Saturday you walk her over. Not the basement. Upstairs, my living room, the table, same as the first night. You sit in your old chair and nobody deals you in. And she don't pour drinks and go home this time. She comes over dressed for it, and the guys get her. All of her, on the felt where you won your money. Dale's been on me all week about that mouth. Wicks won't shut up about how she came on him." His tongue touched the scab on his lip. "And me, I been patient with your wife a long time. Saturday I'm done being patient. There's things she never let you have. I'm gonna have them." He looked at Tyler. "No glass this time. You're close enough to smell her. She's gonna look at you the whole time she's taking it, and you're gonna let her see you like it."

Tyler felt it move in his jeans and hated it, and hated that the cab was small enough for Vince to know.

"No," he said.

"Yeah, you are."

"No." It came out too loud for the cab. "I'm getting a lawyer. I'll tell them everything. The claim, the trailer, who sent me. He's committing insurance fraud and you—"

"Tell them what?" Vince turned in the seat to face him. "Your neighbor made you do it? I didn't call you. You called me, from in there, to come get you. You got a text from me says copper? A voicemail? You got anything?" He waited. Tyler had nothing. "He paid you, it's in your bank. Your printing's on the panel. Your truck's on a flatbed with his cable in the trailer. And your story is the guy who bailed you out put you up to it." He laughed through his nose. "Public defender's gonna love you. He'll tell you take the plea before you finish the sentence."

He shook a Marlboro out of the pack on the dash, lit it, and cracked his window an inch.

"How much you have on there? Seven hundred pounds? New cable, two spools still in the plastic. That ain't a misdemeanor, pretty boy. That's felony weight. That's state, not county. County I can tell you about, county's ninety days and baloney sandwiches. State's a year, two, more if he says you took twice what you took. He will, 'cause it's his claim and every pound is money." He blew smoke at the crack. "Guy like you up there. Them teeth. Them soft hands." His eyes went to Tyler's split knuckles and stayed there. "You'll make friends."

Tyler's mouth had gone dry again, the way it had on the carpet.

"And she's down here," Vince said, to the windshield. "What's that duplex run, nine hundred? And you got what I paid you Friday and not a dime behind it. I watch that street. Nobody comes to see her. Nobody's car is ever in your driveway

but yours, and yours is on a flatbed." He tapped ash. "She's got me. Three doors down. I'd look in on her. I'm a good neighbor."

Tyler's hand found the door handle.

"Go ahead," Vince said. "It's six miles. I'll be knocking on your door with my phone out before you hit the highway. Save you telling her yourself."

The handle was cold. Through the glass the county building sat in the flat light, the flag hanging dead on its pole. Tyler sat with his fingers on the handle and saw it all the way through. Megan opening the door in his old t-shirt. Vince's thick thumb waking the screen. Her face finding the window, and the face in the window, and his arm going down out of the frame. His fingers came off the handle one at a time.

"She'll never buy it," he said. "She knows me. I've never once said anything, not one time, about wanting—"

"About wanting to watch her get fucked?" Vince grinned around the cigarette. The scab on his lip split a little and he didn't care. "Lotta guys do. It's a whole thing. Websites. Guys put their wives up there, guys write in about it. Lotta them want a black guy doing it, that's like its own section. Tell her look it up. She'll find ten thousand of you." He knocked ash off on the window frame. "And the guys still think you're some card player likes to watch. That holds. Tell her that was part of it for you. Being nobody in the room."

"You said she came to you. She went back on her own." Tyler made himself look at him. "Why would she ever believe I set it up?"

"'Cause she wants to." Vince took a long drag and let it out slow. "I watched her walk home Saturday. Barefoot, holding them heels, hair all over the place, walking like she just got

off a horse." He said it the way he'd tell you what was in the shed. "Woman walks home like that, she needs it to be somebody else's idea. You hand her that, she'll thank you for it." He started the Ram and it shuddered under them. "And Saturday you don't gotta act. You sit in the chair and you get hard. I got a picture says you can do that part."

Tyler looked at his knuckles.

"Okay," he said.

"Didn't hear you."

"I said okay."

Vince put it in drive.

Vince dropped him at the corner of Ridley and Vine, out of sight of the duplex, the way you'd drop a man you weren't supposed to know. "Monday the owner makes his call," he said through the window. "You get through Saturday, this is a bad week you had. You don't, it's a felony and she gets the picture. Put ice on that hand again, it looks worse." And he pulled away.

Tyler walked the last block in the noon heat. A sprinkler. A dog behind a fence. He let himself in and the house smelled like last night's chicken and the two places were still set on the table, one of them with a plate under plastic wrap, saved for him. It was almost noon. He was hours past *back by morning.*

Megan came out of the bedroom in her running clothes, her hair up, her face already moving toward relief and then toward alarm, and he gave her the lie he'd built on the walk from the corner, because he'd had a night on a steel bench and the ride back in Vince's truck to build it. The transmission had gone on Route 11, an hour north, in the dead middle of nowhere. He'd had it towed to a shop in Millbridge. No signal up there, she knew that, he'd had to wait till morning to get a

ride down with the tow guy's cousin. The shop was waiting on a rebuilt transmission from a yard out of state; two weeks, the guy said, maybe three. He heard himself say it, clean and detailed, the detail that sells a lie, and he watched her believe it because she had no reason on earth not to, and he hated the specific competence he was discovering in himself, the ease of it.

"You should've called the second you had signal," she said, taking his hand again, the split knuckles. "I was —" She stopped. "I thought something happened."

"Something happened to the transmission." He made himself smile. "Four grand, probably. Perfect timing."

She didn't laugh. "Four thousand dollars, Tyler. How are we —"

"I'll figure it out." He said it too fast.

She held his ruined hand and looked at it and he thought for one second that she could see all of it in his face, the cell, the cuffs, the flatbed, the window, and then she just pressed her lips together and let his hand go and said she'd heat him a plate.

He went to the bedroom to change. He took the folded charge papers out of his waistband where he'd carried them against his skin the whole way home, the arraignment date, the case number, his own name in a government font, and he opened the bottom drawer of the desk and lifted the old debt notice and slid the new papers underneath it and closed the drawer. Two sheets of paper now, in the dark, stacked. He stood there with his hand on the drawer front for a second. Then he went and ate the plate she'd saved him and told her the chicken was even better cold, which was true, and she watched

him eat it with an expression he couldn't read and he couldn't read it because he was busy not letting her read him.

She started it Thursday night, because Wednesday had been stolen and because she couldn't carry it another day.

The dishes were done. He was at the table with a beer he wasn't drinking, turning the bottle a quarter-turn at a time on the wood, and she'd rehearsed the first sentence so many times that when it finally came out it came out flat, worn smooth, a stone she'd been holding in her pocket.

"I need to tell you about Saturday," she said. "About all of it. The real version. And I need you to let me finish before you say anything, because if you say something in the middle I won't get through it."

Tyler stopped turning the bottle.

"Okay," she said, mostly to herself. She was standing at the counter with her hands behind her holding the edge of it. She'd decided she would stand. "You know how I told you the games were — that I quit because I was tired of it. That part's true. But there's —"

"I know," Tyler said.

She stopped.

"What?"

"I know, Megan." He was looking at the bottle, not at her. "You don't have to do this. I already know."

The floor of the thing she'd been standing on wasn't there. She heard her own voice come out small and careful. "You know what."

"I saw the pictures," he said. "On Vince's camera. He left it on the kitchen counter when I went over for my cut, and I

picked it up, and I —" He turned the bottle. "The dress. The bikini. The rest of it." A pause. "All of it."

He let the word sit there so she'd understand it was not a sanitized all.

"That Saturday. I knew you were over there. I didn't go straight up north." His eyes stayed on the bottle. "I came back. I was at the basement window, down in the well, in the leaves. I watched." He swallowed. "Enough of it. More than enough."

He said it the way you confess, low and even and wrong, his eyes down, and she stood at the counter and felt the ground she'd walked over for three weeks reorganize itself under her feet, every stone turning over to show its wet underside.

"You were at the window," she said.

"Yes."

"The whole —" She couldn't finish it. The things she'd done in that basement, the things she'd told herself no one who loved her would ever see — he had seen them, from the leaves, through the glass, and come home and said *how was your weekend* over the tomatoes, and let her cut herself in half all week keeping a secret he already knew the shape of. The horror of it was so large she couldn't find an edge of it to hold.

And then, while she was still inside that, he said the rest. And the rest was the thing that broke the night in two.

"I set it up," he said.

She heard it and didn't understand it. "You —"

"The whole thing. From the start." He turned the bottle a quarter-turn. "The game. Getting you in that room. The outfits — I pushed the cutoffs, you remember, the first night, I pushed them. The cabin weekends, leaving you here alone on Saturdays — that was —" He stopped. Started again. "I wanted it. I've

wanted it for a while and I didn't know how to say it, and Vince — Vince gave me a way to make it happen without having to say it. It's a thing, Megan. Other guys want it too. Look it up if you think I'm crazy. The guys don't know I'm your husband. They think I'm just some card player who likes to watch. That was part of it too. Being nobody in the room. Being a stranger watching his —" He didn't finish that one either.

The kitchen was very quiet. The refrigerator cycled on.

"Say that again," she said.

"I set it up, Megan."

"How." It came out of her flat. "You and *Vince* —" She couldn't make the two names sit in one sentence. "When?"

"The gas station. That first week." He didn't look up. "He saw how I looked at you. He's not stupid, Megan. He knew what I wanted before I'd said it to myself. I just let him run it."

She didn't say anything after that for a long time. Her mind was doing the thing it did, the fast cold sorting, except now it was sorting backward, taking everything she'd carried as her own crime and moving it under his name. The pitch at the kitchen table, *you're hott, Megan, you walk into a room and men forget how to count* — she'd thought that was Tyler being Tyler, selling her a hustle; now it slid under the new heading and became something she didn't recognize. The cutoffs he'd pulled out of the closet. *We need this.* The denim skirt — *that's apparently the whole point of me* — and his silence. The basement pitch, Vince with the bikini on the rack, and Tyler's four words to the floor: *It's up to you.* She'd stood in that basement waiting for her husband's voice to arrive and protect her and it hadn't come, and she'd spent three weeks thinking the failure was hers for needing it, and now the four words turned over and showed

her their underside: not a man who'd failed to protect her. A man who'd been giving her permission. *It's up to you* had meant *yes.*

And the quit. She'd quit, and he'd folded so fast, *okay, your call,* and she'd thought it was defeat, the money winning, and now —

"You let me go back," she said. Her voice had gone to something she didn't recognize. "I quit. I stood here and I quit, and you — if you wanted it, why did you let me quit?"

"I didn't make you go back." He finally looked up at her, and his eyes were wet and she hated that they were wet because the wet made her want to go to him. "You went back on your own. That's the —" His voice caught. "I watched you go. I watched you walk over there in your jacket and I thought maybe you weren't going to, and then you did, and I —"

"Stop." She put her hand up. "Stop."

She turned around and faced the window over the sink. The backyard was dark. Her reflection was in the glass, and his behind her at the table, two ghosts in the kitchen.

The confession was still in her mouth. She could feel the shape of it there, the first sentence and everything stacked up behind it.

Thursday, a week ago. Vince on her doorstep with the chain still on the door, offering her one more Saturday and then never again: the guys gone for good, the SD cards in her hand, every phone wiped in front of her. Before that, the week she'd been afraid of her own street. Wicks's Civic parked across from Vince's with the engine off. A Marlboro on her front step that she'd picked up with a paper towel. Vince getting off a bench on the creek path while she was still blowing

hard from her run, telling her the guys had pictures of her on their phones, that Wicks had video. *They did time, you know that.* She'd been going to tell him all of it. She'd been going to stand at this counter and say, they scared me, and I went back so it would stop.

She opened her mouth to say it and saw the basement window instead.

He'd been out there. In the dirt by the glass, he said, the whole night. He'd heard her use the bartender voice on them, the one she'd once used for tips, telling them she was so turned on. He'd watched her come on Wicks. *They scared me* would sound like a joke to him. She could see his face hearing it. She could see him trying to be kind about it, and that would be worse.

Under that was a question she couldn't look at straight. Had he known? The Civic, the cigarette, the creek path. Had that been part of it, part of what he wanted? Her stomach turned over. She pushed it against the edge of the counter until the thought backed off. It didn't go far.

She swallowed. It went down like a pill without water and sat in her throat, and then it was gone, and she knew she would never get it back up. Not tonight, not any night. The doorstep and the creek and the phones going blank one by one in Vince's basement. Hers now. She'd carry them around this kitchen the rest of her life, past him, past the coffee maker, past the dish by the door.

"Who are you," she said to the window. It came out quiet.

"Meg. I'm the same—"

"Don't." She shut her eyes. "Don't tell me you're the same person."

Behind her the chair scraped. He stood there. He didn't come to her.

There was a way she'd always ended arguments with him. Get up, rinse her own plate, leave the room. Megan ran water over the clean glass in the sink. She dried it and put it in the cabinet.

"You're on the couch," she said.

"Okay."

"The blanket's in the hall closet."

"I know where the blanket is."

A month ago she'd have told him to take the scratchy one, that he'd earned the scratchy one, and he'd have laughed. She went to bed.

She lay on top of the covers in her clothes, on her own side out of habit. The SD cards were in the nightstand under the phone chargers, a foot from her head. Down the hall the couch springs went when he turned over. The refrigerator cycled on. At some point she noticed she'd been biting the inside of her cheek long enough to taste it.

She kept trying to see him out there in the dirt, in the dark by the glass, and she couldn't get his face. Just the dark where his face should be.

Around one she heard him get up and go to the bathroom and come back. He didn't stop at the bedroom door. She'd have heard him.

She gave up at two. The house was dark. Down the hall he was breathing slow and heavy on the couch, finally under. She took the laptop into the bathroom and locked the door. She sat on the closed lid of the toilet with the fan on for the noise and the screen turned down as far as it went, and she typed it

with one finger. *husband wants to watch wife with other men.* She looked at it a long time before she hit enter, as if the search bar might tell somebody.

It had a name. It had several. *Hotwife*, which sounded like a reality show. *Stag and vixen*, which sounded like a pub. And the one that kept coming up, *cuckold*, which made her mouth go small and tight on its own, the face she made at a dirty joke at a work party.

The forums looked like every forum: usernames, little avatars, a pinned post of rules at the top. The men wrote the way the dads from her old gym wrote on the neighborhood board about a lost dog. *Long time lurker, first post. Wife (31) and I have been married six years. Sorry for the length.*

She read one with her hand over her mouth.

It finally happened Saturday. We talked about it almost two years and I honestly didn't think she'd go through with it. Hotel downtown, guy we met on here, older, good guy. I sat in the armchair by the window. She kept checking on me the whole time, every couple minutes she'd look over to see if I was ok and I'd nod and she'd go back to it. When he had her on her knees she looked right at me with him in her mouth and I swear to God I almost passed out. Never been that hard in my life. After she cried and then she laughed and then we went at it like we were 20. Thanks for reading guys.

Thanks for reading guys. She read it twice. Somebody had written that, then gone and made his kids' lunches.

She was appalled. She could feel it in her face, the lips pressing, the heat climbing her neck. And under the cotton shorts she was wet, and when she shifted on the lid she felt it, slick, and she sat very still and was appalled at that too.

There was a whole section for the other thing. Those men wanted something specific and said so: bigger than them, darker than them, a man who'd make them look small in their own bed. One husband wrote that the first time he watched the guy undress, he understood what he was there for. She read three lines and shut her eyes and saw Dale's forearm across her stomach, black against her white skin. The weight of him in her mouth. The way he'd said *women like you* in that voice, as if he'd been waiting his whole life to say it to her.

She opened her eyes and thought about the first night.

Vince's living room, a month ago, in the frayed cutoffs Tyler had pulled out of the closet for her. Dale had won a hand and pulled her down onto his thigh, and for three hands she'd smiled and poured while he got hard under her through his jeans. Then, at the end of the night, it had been Tyler's turn, the stranger across the table. She'd sat on her own husband's lap and he'd been harder than Dale. She had wondered about that for weeks. And at home in bed afterward he'd put his mouth to her ear, *every guy in that room wanted you*, and she'd come so hard she said it back to him in the dark. *They wanted me. All of them.* She'd been embarrassed for two days. She'd thought the room had done that to her, the strangers, the danger of it.

She put her hand between her thighs and pressed. She didn't move it, only pressed.

The armchair by the window. She put Tyler in it, in Vince's basement under the clamp lights, in a chair by the stairs where she could see him, and Dale on the couch with her, behind her, his hands on her hips. Earlier she'd lain in bed trying to see Tyler's face at the window and couldn't. Now she could. He was hard in his jeans, watching her the way the man in the hotel had

watched, and when Dale pushed into her, Tyler nodded at her. *Go on.*

She took her hand back like she'd touched the stove.

The nod. Nobody had given it to her. She'd made it up herself, on a toilet lid at two in the morning, and put it on his face. It was *it's up to you* again, the four words he'd said to the basement floor when Vince pitched the photos, except this time with his face on it, and it had nearly been enough.

She read until the window over the shower went gray. Then she closed the laptop and splashed cold water on her face and looked at herself in the mirror: the dark hair half out of its knot, the pale eyes red at the rims, her mouth pressed thin.

She went to him Friday evening. He was on the back step with a beer he wasn't drinking. She came out and sat on the step beside him, not touching, with her knees together and her hands folded on them.

"I want you to tell me what you actually want," she said. "Not the apology version. The real one." She looked at the yard. "If I'm going to understand any of this—" She stopped. "Just tell me."

He was quiet long enough that she thought he wouldn't. Then he put the bottle down between his feet.

"The first night," he said. "At the table. When Vince said nobody knows we're married." His hand went to the back of his neck. "I liked that. Being some guy. Nobody in the room knowing you were mine." He rubbed at his neck. "That's why I set it up the way I did. The guys still think that's all I am. Some card player who likes to watch."

"And the rest of it?"

"The rest of it was me. Vince helped. It was my idea." His hand was still on his neck. "I wanted to see you like that, and I didn't know how to ask you, so I didn't ask."

A screen door banged somewhere down the block.

"Saturday," he said, and his hand came down off his neck and lay on his knee. His voice went lower. "You on that couch with your hair in Dale's hands. On your knees. The sound you made with Wicks behind you. I was in the leaves with my face on the glass and I couldn't move. I didn't want to. I came twice out there, Meg. In the dirt. I didn't even—"

"Tyler." It came out sharp. "Please don't. Not like that."

He stopped.

She sat with her hands folded and her face burning. *In the dirt.* Her husband, in the side yard of that house, with his hand in his jeans like some man in a parked car. She wanted to be sick and she wanted to slap him. Underneath both, low and steady where she couldn't argue with it, she was warm. She pressed her knees together until they ached.

"No," she said.

He looked at her.

"No. I read those forums. I sat in our bathroom at two in the morning and read them. Those women post pictures of themselves, Tyler. Their husbands say *thanks for reading guys.*" She heard how high her voice had gone and brought it down. "I'm not one of those women. I don't want to be one of those women. And that house." Her mouth tightened. "That carpet. Those men. You want me to go back there and do that on purpose, with you sitting there watching?"

"Okay," he said. "Then we don't."

He said it too fast and looked down at the bottle. His face went still, the way it went when the firm called about the layoffs. It was the look of a man who'd been told a job had fallen through.

She looked at that face for a long time. She had done this to him, too, along with everything else. Eight years, and he'd wanted something so badly he'd built it in secret rather than ask her, because he knew exactly what her face would do when he asked. It was doing it now.

"One night," she said. Quietly, to the yard.

He looked up.

"One. This isn't a thing we do now. I'm not—" She pressed her lips together. "One night. And I set the terms."

"Okay."

"You're in the room. Not in the dirt, not at some window. If you want to watch, you watch with your face where I can see it." Her voice started to go and she pulled it back. "No coming home after and asking me how my weekend was."

"Okay."

"Is that all you're going to say tonight? Okay?"

Something like his old smile crossed his mouth and didn't stay. "I don't think I get to say much else."

"No. You don't." She looked back at the yard. "Will there be a camera?"

"I don't know. Probably. Vince has his phone out at everything."

She bit the inside of her cheek. The thought of it made her skin crawl, Vince's phone and his thick stained thumb, her on it. "Then I won't stop him," she said. She made herself say the next part. "You'll want to watch it again. After. Won't you."

He didn't answer, which was an answer.

"And after this, no more secrets," she said. Her own secrets sat in her mouth while she said it, the doorstep and the creek path, and she went on anyway. "We did it together. We don't pretend it didn't happen."

"No more secrets," he said.

"And one rule. Mine." She turned until he was looking at her. "If you stand up, I stop. If you get out of that chair, if you come toward me, if you decide halfway through you can't take it, I stop. Everything stops. That one's mine. Do you understand?"

"If I stand up, you stop."

"If you stand up, I stop."

She held his eyes until he nodded. Then she nodded back, and it was settled, and she sat in it with the yard going dark.

She'd expected it to feel like losing. It felt more like paying something off, like she'd found the one way she had to pay what was owed between them, and the way was to walk into the thing he'd wanted. That was obscene, and it was also a relief, and she couldn't get the two to come apart. Under both was the other thing from the toilet lid at two in the morning, the wet in her shorts over a stranger's hotel room. Her knees were still pressed together. She didn't look at why.

"Saturday," she said, and got up, and went inside. She left him on the step with the beer going warm between his feet.

Saturday afternoon she took the bus to the mall two towns over, where nobody knew her. She wore sunglasses the whole ride and felt ridiculous in them, like a woman in a movie about an affair.

The store was one she'd walked past a hundred times in her old life, with girlfriends, with shopping bags from the good department store, laughing about it. Pink light. Tables of folded silk. A mannequin in the window wearing three straps and a smile. She had always said something dry about that window and kept walking.

She stood in front of it for a while. Then she went in.

It smelled like vanilla and new fabric. The music was low, a woman breathing over a beat. Megan walked the walls with her arms folded, the way she'd walk through a car dealership, and felt her face getting hot under the sunglasses until she took them off and it got worse.

She'd thought about it on the bus. Not black. Black was the leather jacket zipped to her throat, the Christmas dress, the woman getting through something. Not white. White was the bikini on Vince's rack. Then she saw it on the far wall, and she knew it the way you know your own handwriting.

It was blue. Pale and clear, almost silver at the edges where the light hit it: the exact blue of her eyes. Tyler's blue. The first apartment, a sundress on a rack at a street fair, and him saying *that's your blue, Meg, you have to get the blue one,* and every year since, a scarf, a sweater, a mug, all the same blue, because it was hers. A lace bodysuit in it. She took it off the hook and held it up and it took her a second to understand what she was looking at.

The cups were open. They were made of lace, a heavy, scalloped edge, but the lace only went around. Where a cup should be there was nothing at all. It was built to hold a woman's breasts up and out and leave them bare, ringed in blue, like

something served on a plate. Below that it went sheer down the stomach, nothing but a blue haze, and between the legs—

She turned it over. She turned it back. It was open there too.

She hadn't known they made them like that. That wasn't true. She'd known. She'd just never stood in a store holding one.

"That one's gorgeous."

Megan nearly dropped it. The salesgirl was maybe twenty-four, a ring through her septum, hair dyed the color of a plum, and she was looking at the bodysuit and then at Megan with frank professional interest, as if Megan were a room she'd been asked to measure.

"I'm just looking," Megan said. It came out in the voice she used on contractors.

"Sure. It's from a little line out of Montreal, the lace is really good." The girl's eyes went to Megan's chest and stayed there without the slightest embarrassment. "You're not gonna want the medium, though. What are you, a thirty-two F?"

Megan opened her mouth. Shut it. "Thirty-four D."

"Oh, honey. No." The girl actually laughed, kindly. "You're wearing a thirty-four D. That's different." She reached past Megan and took a smaller one off the hook. "The band's what holds you up. In the open cup, if the band's loose, they just sort of sit there. You want them up." She held it against Megan's front without asking, the lace ring lining up over the T-shirt, and Megan stood absolutely still and let a stranger hold lingerie to her breasts in the middle of a store. "Yeah. That one. You'll look unreal."

"Thank you," Megan said, because she'd been raised to.

"Fitting room's in back if you want."

"No. Thank you. I'm sure."

The girl shrugged, unbothered. "Special occasion?"

"Anniversary," Megan said, and it came out so smoothly it scared her.

"He's a lucky guy." The girl was already pulling thigh-highs off a wall, nude, with a deep band of lace at the top. "These with it. Trust me." Then, from a rack by the register, she lifted something cream-colored. "And if you want to wear it out of the house and not get arrested."

It was a wrap dress, silk, the color of heavy cream. One tie at the hip. Megan held it and felt how little it weighed, and understood what it was for: one pull, and she'd be standing in nothing but the blue.

She paid in cash. The girl folded everything in pink tissue and put a sticker on it shaped like a pair of lips, and slid the bag across. "Have fun," she said, and winked, and Megan said "Thank you" a third time and walked out into the ordinary mall.

Pretzels. The fountain. A mother with a stroller, a man asleep on a bench outside the Apple store. Megan walked through all of it with the little pink bag hanging off two fingers and felt like everyone could see straight through the paper. On the bus home she held it flat on her lap with both hands. A woman across the aisle smiled at her, and Megan smiled back, and thought, *you have no idea,* and was horrified by the little thrill that went down her back.

She dressed at seven. Tyler was in the living room. She'd told him he didn't get to see it until the room did, and he'd said

okay, and she'd heard the TV come on and then go quiet, like he couldn't decide whether to watch it.

She showered first, too hot, the way she always did. Shaved her legs again though she'd done it that morning. Dried her hair and left it down, heavy, falling past her shoulders. Mascara, a little. The French perfume, the last bottle, at her wrists and her throat and then, after standing there with the stopper in her hand, between her breasts.

Then she laid it all out on the bed, the blue and the nude and the cream, and stood looking at it in her towel like it might do something.

The bodysuit first. She stepped into it and drew it up her legs, and the sheer part went over her stomach cool as water. She got her arms through the straps and pulled it up onto her shoulders, and the lace settled.

She looked down.

The girl had been right about the band. It ran snug under her breasts and pushed them up and out. The scalloped blue ringed each one where it met her ribs and left everything else bare, the full heavy weight of them sitting up high on that frame as if they were being offered. Her nipples had already tightened in the cool of the room, pink and swollen at the tips. She'd never in her life seen herself look like this. In a bra she was covered. Naked she was just naked. This was different. The lace said *look here*. It pointed.

She made herself go to the mirror.

A woman in blue lace looked back at her. Her own pale eyes over a body done up like a present. The blue matched exactly, the girl hadn't lied, her eyes and the lace the same cold clear color, so it looked like she'd been designed. Below the

band the sheer blue went down her stomach to a vee, and below the vee the suit simply parted and there she was, bare, pink, completely shown.

Megan turned sideways. The heavy profile of her breasts in the lace ring, standing out from her body. She turned around and looked over her shoulder: the lace cut high across her ass and left the small dark mole on her left cheek in full view, and she thought, very clearly, *Dale has seen that,* and something low in her went tight and hot.

She sat on the edge of the bed for the thigh-highs. Rolled the first one up over her foot, her ankle, her calf, smoothing it as she went, and set the lace band high on her thigh, and did the other, and when she bent to it she felt the open crotch of the bodysuit part around her. The cool air of the room touched her there.

She was wet.

She sat with her ankle on her knee and the second stocking half up and understood that she had been wet for a while. Since the shower, maybe. Since the bus. And in this thing there was nowhere to hide it. Every man in that room would be able to see exactly what she was.

You don't have to go, she thought. *You can take it off and put it in the bag and give it to the Goodwill and he'll understand.*

She rolled the stocking the rest of the way up.

The heels were the pointed three-inch black ones from the night she'd gone to Vince's alone, and she stepped into them and was suddenly taller and her legs were longer and the whole thing changed, her hips, her back, her breasts lifting another inch as she straightened. She stood in front of the mirror in the blue and the nude and the black heels with her hair down, and

her face looked like her face, and her body looked like something on the internet at two in the morning.

She tried to picture it. Vince's basement, the clamp lights, Tyler on the old couch against the wall. Tyler getting five minutes in and standing up, white, and her stopping, the rule working, all of them walking home together with nothing having happened but this outfit. She held that one a long time. It was the safest picture she had, and it didn't do a thing to the heat in her.

She picked up the cream silk and put it on over everything. Wrapped it across, drew it closed, and tied it once at her hip.

In the mirror she was a woman dressed for a nice dinner. Pretty. A little overdressed for Ridley Street. The silk fell to her knees and hid it all, and only she knew there was one knot between the room and the blue.

The ring was in the ceramic dish by the door, among the keys and the loose change. She stopped and looked at it. On the night she'd gone alone, she had picked it up and turned it in her fingers. Tonight she just looked, and left it, and her bare hand at her side felt like her hand.

Tyler stood up from the couch when she came out.

His eyes went down the silk and back up to her face, and he didn't know. She could see him not knowing, looking at a woman in a cream dress, trying to find the thing in it. She let him look for it.

"Come on, then," she said. She'd meant it to come out steady. It came out low. She opened the front door onto the ninety seconds of sidewalk.

They walked over together at a quarter to eight, the way they had the very first night. His hand found the small of her

back on the sidewalk and she let it stay. The block was doing what it did on a Saturday evening: a grill going somewhere, the above-ground pool two doors down with its filter chugging. The cream silk moved against her thighs with every step. Underneath it the lace held its secret, and ninety seconds of sidewalk had never felt shorter.

Vince opened the door. He'd shaved. The split in his lip had gone down to a dark line. He stepped back to let them in and the house was the house: paneling, carpet, the smell of cigarettes and fried food soaked into all of it. But the poker table was back in the middle of the living room where it had stood the first night, the green felt wiped down, the mismatched chairs pulled in around it.

"Well," Vince said. His eyes went down the cream silk and came back up slow. "Didn't think I'd see you in this house again."

Megan said nothing. The last time she'd stood in this house he'd walked her to the door and told her she was out. *That's it. They're gone.*

"I told the guys your friend here wants to sit in." He tipped his head at Tyler. "Pretty boy from the first nights. Told 'em he heard what you been getting up to down in my basement and he asked could he come watch." He looked at Tyler, and nothing showed on his face. "They're fine with it. They think it's funny." Then, to Tyler: "Your old chair."

Tyler went around the table and lowered himself into the chair on the far side, facing the bar, the one he'd won money in. Nothing in front of him. No cards, no chips. Only the bare felt.

She poured herself a gin at the counter. Drink one. She drank an inch of it, set the glass down, and felt it go warm through her chest without loosening anything.

At eight there was a heavy tread on the front step. Vince opened the door and Dale came in sideways through the frame, the way he had to. She smelled him then, the stale cheap cigar on his clothes, and saw the scarred knuckles on the doorjamb and the dark veined forearm under the rolled sleeve. His heavy-lidded eyes went first to Tyler and the bare felt, and then, slowly, to her. Wicks ducked in under Dale's arm, already grinning, his watery eyes dropping to the cream silk and climbing back up.

Vince shut the door behind them. She heard the deadbolt turn and seat home with a heavy clunk, and for a second she was cold all the way through. Locked in. Three men who'd done time. She picked up the gin and held it in both hands until it passed.

"Knew you'd come back." Wicks came straight at her across the carpet, delighted. "I said it. Didn't I say it, Dale? I said she'd be back."

"You said a lot of things," Dale said.

Vince took the head chair and settled into it, spread, centered.

"Pretty boy's sitting in tonight." He said it flat, to the room. "Heard all about our bartender, didn't want to miss the show. Asked real nice could he come watch." He looked across the felt. "Ain't that right?"

Every face turned to Tyler. Megan watched him sit there in it. Then he nodded, once, at the table.

"I knew it." Wicks slapped the felt. "First night I said is he gay, and Dale said he looks like a cop, and I said no, he's a freak. Look at him. He's a freak. Came to watch." He said it with real admiration, as if Tyler had turned out to be a genius.

Dale didn't laugh. He looked at Tyler a long moment, the cigar turning once between his fingers.

"Man knows what he likes," he said.

Vince dealt. The cards went around the table as a formality and nobody looked at them. She poured for Dale and Wicks, heavy, out of a habit she couldn't switch off, and set Dale's glass at his elbow. He didn't touch it. He laid his hand face up on the felt without looking at it, and looked at her instead.

"Untie it."

The room went still.

She was standing at the end of the table between the bar and Tyler's chair, where every one of them could see her. Her hand went to her hip on its own and found the knot, a plain single tie she'd made in front of her own mirror two hours ago, and stopped there.

"You haven't even touched your drink," she said. Her voice came out cool and clipped, the voice for a man who'd tracked mud on her floor.

"Untie it," Dale said, exactly the same way.

"What's she got under there, Vince?" Wicks was bouncing in his chair. "You know, don't you. Look at him, he knows. What's under there?"

She looked across the table at Tyler.

He was gripping the arms of the chair. His face was white and his eyes were on her hand at her hip, and he didn't move. She waited for him to. One second, two. The knot was one

knot. Once she pulled it there was no tying it back with any dignity, not in this room, not with these men watching. She thought of the salesgirl holding the lace up to her chest in the pink light. *You'll look unreal.*

Tyler stayed in the chair.

She pulled the tie.

The silk loosened. It opened down her front and she felt the air of the room come in against her skin before the fabric had even left her, and then it slid off her shoulders and down her arms and pooled on the carpet around her heels.

Nobody said anything. The room had gone quiet the way it had for the bra the first night, except there was no tank top under it this time, nothing under it at all.

The pale blue lace. Open cups framing her bare breasts and holding them without covering — the lace ringing each one, nipples exposed and tight in the room's air, the heavy round weight of them sitting high and full in the frame, the puffy pink tips already drawn to points. Sheer blue over her stomach. Open at the crotch, the lace edges tracing down her hips to bare skin — her pussy visible through the gap, the neat pink seam of her, the lips already flushed, and under the French perfume the warm musk of her cutting the cigarette smell. Nude thigh-highs. The pointed heels.

Her arms started to come up across her chest. She stopped them. She made herself put them down at her sides, and stood there, and let them look.

The silence held. Dale's heavy-lidded eyes took their time with her — head to heels and back, slow, a man surveying what he'd come to collect. Wicks's mouth was open and for one full second nothing came out of it.

"You wear that for us?" Dale said.

"The lace," Wicks managed. His voice had gone high and thin. "The lace matches her — Dale, her eyes, it's the same blue, who does that, who thinks to — and her pussy, you can see it, the lace just stops, it's right there, Vince — look at her tits, the cups aren't covering anything, they're holding them up, the nipples are right there—"

She didn't answer. She stood in it at the end of the poker table and let them see her. Vince had his phone in his hand, held at the table's edge, the dark lens aimed at her, filming. She saw it. She held the look a second, thought of Tyler, and turned back. He would want the footage. That was the reason she'd settled on during the sleepless hours and it held, for now.

Tyler's hands closed on the bare felt where cards should have been. She watched him see the blue — the color she'd bought with cash for a room like this, on her body with other men in the room for the first time — and something moved in his face and she waited for him to stand up. The rule she'd given him on the back step, the one thing that was hers: *if you stand up, I stop.*

He didn't stand.

She lifted her chin.

Dale came around the table. The mass of him crossing the room at a pace that didn't acknowledge hurry. He stopped in front of her.

"Turn around," he said. "Let him see."

She turned. His dark hands found her waist and he completed the rotation himself, slow, the room watching the full circle of her. His thumbs traced the open-cup edges from underneath, followed the lace where it curved below her bare

breasts, and then his hands climbed. He cupped both from below — dark rough fingers on porcelain, scarred knuckles against pale skin — and lifted. The full heavy breasts rose in his palms and he held them, the weight spilling over his fingers, and then he let go. They dropped, settled, and the bounce was visible across the room.

Wicks made a sound from his chair.

"Can I — let me touch," he said. Half out of his seat. "Just the lace. Let me feel the lace, I just want to—"

"Wicks." Vince. One word, from the head of the table.

"I just—"

Vince looked at him. One second. Wicks sat down. His leg jackhammered under the table and his Adam's apple jumped.

Dale's hands stayed. His thumbs moved to her nipples and dragged across them, the rough scrape of calluses over both tight points, and then he circled them, slow, watching her face while he did it. She stood rigid and tried to keep her face still. She could feel the grain of his thumbs on her. His breath was warm and stale with cigar, close enough to taste, and his gold chain swung forward and touched the top of her breast, cold, and she shivered and hated that he saw it.

His hand slid lower. Down the sheer lace over her stomach, the heat of his palm coming straight through it, and then off the lace and onto her. His rough fingertips found the lips of her pussy and pressed, and held there. Then his thumb drew one slow line up through the seam of her, parting her, and she felt how easily it went. She felt how wet she was.

He brought his hand up between them and turned it in the light. His dark fingers shone.

"She's ready," Dale said, flat, to the room. "She's been ready."

She bit the inside of her cheek. From his chair Wicks made a noise that cracked in the middle.

Dale put his wet hand on the back of her neck. "Come here."

He didn't wait for her to come. He pulled her in by the neck and put his mouth on hers. For one second she held her lips shut against him, stiff, the way she'd hold still for a stranger's kiss on the cheek at a party. His thumb pressed under her jaw, and her mouth opened, and his tongue came in.

He kissed like he did everything, like it was already his. Heavy and deep and wet, no hurry in it, his mouth so much bigger than hers that it covered hers completely. He tasted of cheap cigar and bourbon. She made a small shocked noise into him. His tongue pushed against hers, slow, thick, and pushed again, and she felt her own tongue move back against it before she'd decided anything.

Stop that, she thought. She didn't.

Her hands had gone up against his chest to keep him off, and somewhere in the kiss they'd stopped pushing and curled into his shirt. He felt it and made a low sound in his chest that she felt more than heard, and his other hand came down off her breast and between her legs again. Two thick fingers slid along her, through her, wet, the sound of it obscene in the quiet room, and her hips rolled forward into his hand.

She hadn't told them to. They just did.

The kiss went sloppy. Open-mouthed, spit on her chin, her bare breasts crushed flat against his shirt and the buttons pressing into them. His chain was caught between them. Her breath

came hard through her nose. She was kissing him back now, really kissing him, her mouth working under his, a soft greedy moan coming out of her that she heard as if from across the room. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and let it go wet, and she chased his mouth when he pulled back an inch. She actually chased it.

"Jesus Christ," Wicks breathed. "Look at her. Vince. Look at her go. She's eating his face."

The words came through to her and she opened her eyes.

Over Dale's shoulder, across the felt, was Tyler. He was gripping the arms of his chair, his face white, his eyes on her mouth. Her mouth was still open. It was wet, her lips swollen, and Dale's fingers were still moving between her legs, and her hips were still moving on them. She couldn't make them stop.

Heat poured up her throat into her face. She dropped her eyes. She did not stop kissing Dale when he took her mouth again.

When he finally let her go she was breathing like she'd run, her lips throbbing, her chin wet. He looked at her mouth a moment, satisfied, a man looking at work he'd done. Then he took her by the hips and turned her around, her back to the table, to show her to the room from behind.

"Oh, look at that ass in the lace," Wicks said. "You can see everything. You can see the little mole. Vince, are you getting this?"

Dale sat down in his chair, spread his knees, and patted his thigh.

"Lap."

She crossed to his chair and lowered herself onto him facing out, facing Tyler across the felt. His arm came across her

waist — dark forearm over pale blue lace, the contrast stark in the overhead light. She was on Dale's lap with her breasts bare and framed and the open crotch putting bare skin on rough denim, her pussy on the seam of his jeans, nothing between them. His cock was waking under her. She felt it — the slow thick hardening against the backs of her thighs, the heat through the fabric, the ridge swelling against her bare lips.

She kept her spine straight. She watched Tyler.

She understood, sitting there with Dale's heat under her and his arm across her waist and his cock stiffening against her, that she was braced for it — that some part of her had come here expecting he would stand, that he'd watch for two minutes and the chair would spit him up and it would stop. She watched his face. His hands on his own knees.

He didn't stand. A muscle in his forearm twitched and his fingers pressed the felt and he stayed where he was.

"She's somewhere else," Dale said into her hair. Amused. His hand spread on her stomach. "She's not even here. She's over there." He meant Tyler. He meant it the way he could mean it — a woman distracted by the quiet voyeur across the table.

Wicks leaned from his chair. His stained bony fingers found her hip — clammy, cold — and she flinched. His hand stayed. He traced the lace edge.

"That's why he watches. He knows he can't — look at her on you, Dale, and pretty boy just sits there with his hands on his knees." His fingers crept along the lace band toward the open crotch and Dale's hand came down and closed around Wicks's wrist without looking at him and moved it back, and

Wicks laughed, nervous, and sat back. "I just wanna feel the lace."

"Wicks," Vince said.

She reached for the bottle. The bartender instinct — something to do — and the stretch lifted her breasts in their frame and she felt the room track the movement. She poured gin into her glass on the felt. Drink two, and the last. The warmth spread and loosened the top layer and she told herself that was all she needed.

Vince dealt another hand nobody looked at.

Dale shifted under her. The ridge of him had been pressing thick against the backs of her thighs through his jeans for two hands now, and she'd been sitting on it with her spine straight, the way you'd sit on a church pew. She felt him look past her, across the felt, at Tyler.

"Pretty boy came to watch," Dale said. "Can't see shit from over there."

Wicks cackled. "Give the man a seat, Dale."

Dale stood up, and she went up with him because his hand was flat on her stomach. He turned her by the hip and took the back of her neck in one big hand, not hard, just certain, and walked her around the end of the table. Her heels wobbled on the carpet. She felt every eye in the room on her bare breasts moving as she walked, felt the open lace part between her legs with each step, felt the cool of the room there where she was wet. Tyler was getting closer. His face, his hands on the chair arms.

Dale stopped her beside Tyler's chair, close enough that her hip brushed his shoulder.

"Knees."

She didn't move. For a second she stood there next to her husband in nothing but the blue, and looked down at the dirty carpet, the beer-colored stain by the chair leg, and thought, very clearly: *not on that.*

Dale's hand on her neck pressed down, once, gently.

She went down. The carpet was rough and slightly damp under her knees. Her heels dug into the backs of her thighs. Her bare shoulder settled an inch from Tyler's knee, so close she could feel the warmth coming off his leg through his jeans, and she could hear him breathing. Fast and shallow, through his nose.

Dale stood over her. He undid his belt slowly, the buckle clinking, the leather sliding out of the loops, and she watched it because it was in front of her face and there was nowhere else to look. The button. The zipper, loud in the room. He reached in and brought himself out.

She'd had him before. She knew the size of him. It didn't help. Up close, under the living-room light, he was enormous: dark and heavy and thick as her wrist, veins running down the shaft, the broad head swollen and slick at the tip, already leaking. He held it at the base and let it hang there an inch from her lips, heavy enough that it bobbed. The smell of him filled the small space between them, cigar and musk and hot skin, the smell of a man who'd been hard under her for twenty minutes. Her mouth watered. She hated that it did.

"Mouth on it," Dale said.

She looked sideways and up, at Tyler.

He was right there, a foot away, looking down at her. At her face, and at the cock in front of her face. His fingers were dug

into the chair arms, and his jeans were tented hard. He didn't stand up.

She heard herself before she knew she was going to speak.

"Should I, pretty boy?"

It came out low and soft, almost sweet. It wasn't her voice. It was the voice of some woman in a forum post at two in the morning, and it had come out of her own mouth, on her knees, a foot from her husband. Her face flooded hot. She kept looking at him anyway.

"Is that what you came for?" Quieter. Her lips nearly brushing the head of Dale's cock as she said it, so close she could feel the heat of it on her mouth. "You want to watch me put it in my mouth?"

"Oh my *God*," Wicks said from across the room. "Did you hear her? Vince. Did you hear what she said to him?"

Tyler's throat moved. He swallowed, and swallowed again, and then he nodded. Once, small, his eyes never leaving her mouth.

Something in her low belly turned over hard.

She turned back to Dale and opened her mouth.

She took him. Her pale hand at the dark base, her mouth stretching around the broad head. The taste spread over her tongue — salt, bitter at the slit, then warmer, skin. She sealed on him and worked down the shaft and the wet sound of it filled the small space between the two chairs. Spit gathered and ran from the corner of her mouth in a thin line that swung and broke on the top of her left breast. She took more. The head found the back of her throat and she gagged — a thick wet choke that slapped off the walls — and her eyes watered and

she held him and bobbed and the sounds she made around his cock were small and obscene and continuous.

Wicks crouched by Tyler's chair on his heels, close enough that his menthol breath touched Tyler's arm. Grinning. Pointing.

"You ever had a woman like this, pretty boy?" Right at him. Nasal and happy and cruel. "Look at the size of what she's taking. You and me together wouldn't make that. Look at her lips, the way they stretch — she's gagging on it, listen, hear that sound? That little choke? That's why he watches, Vince. I'm telling you."

Dale's hand settled on the back of her head. Dark fingers in her dark hair, the weight of his palm setting the pace. She took him deeper. The wet sound crested the head on every bob — a soft suck, then a slurp as she pulled back — and her breasts swung in the open cups, the heavy weight pulling, nipples grazing her own forearms on the downstroke.

She heard herself — the wet seal of her mouth, the small choking note when he pressed deep — and she kept going, dutiful, her hand working what her mouth couldn't reach, and Tyler's knee was warm against her bare shoulder. She didn't look up at him. A bitten sound left her around Dale's shaft. High. Small. The kind of sound that escaped when something pushed past the point where she controlled the noise, and Wicks heard it and pointed at her face.

"There — hear that? She made a sound — sweetheart, do that again, do that sound—"

Dale pulled out of her mouth. His cock left her lips wet and shining, a string of spit stretching and breaking across her chin. He looked at her — the wet mouth, the heavy breasts,

the blue eyes looking up — and he pulled her up by the wrist. She came off her knees, unsteady, and he walked her around the table to his chair, his hand on her arm, his belt open, his cock still wet from her mouth, and he sat and the chair took his mass.

Nothing to move aside. The lace was already open for him.

Dale took her by the hips, his dark hands spanning her waist so his fingertips nearly met at her spine, and lifted her like she weighed nothing. He turned her to face the room. Her heels left the carpet. She was looking across the green felt at Tyler, and she felt Dale settle her over his lap with her thighs spread wide over his, and she felt the heat of him underneath her before anything touched.

Then the head of him touched her.

It was just resting there, pressed against her, broad and blunt and slick, and it felt so much bigger than it had looked. She grabbed the arms of his chair. Her thighs were shaking.

"Sit down on it," Dale said behind her.

She didn't. She held herself up on her arms over him, the head of his cock just notched against her, and stared at Tyler across the table and couldn't make herself move. *You don't have to. You can still stand up.*

Dale's hands tightened on her hips and drew her down an inch.

The head pushed into her.

Her mouth fell open. The stretch of it was immediate and enormous, the blunt crown spreading her open around it, and she'd been wet for an hour, soaked from his fingers and his mouth and from kneeling there with him in her mouth, and it didn't matter. He was too thick. She felt her lips stretch wide

around the head and hold there, tight, burning a little, and a high thin noise came out of her that she'd never heard herself make.

"Oh, there it goes," Wicks breathed. "Vince, look at her face."

Dale let go of her hips.

He didn't push. He sat back and let her hold herself up, his cock inside her just to the ridge of the head, and waited. She understood what he was doing. He was going to make her do it.

Her arms were trembling on the chair arms. She looked at Tyler. He was gripping his own chair hard, leaning forward without seeming to know it, his eyes on the place where she was spread open over Dale's lap. He looked like a man watching a car go off a bridge. He didn't get up.

She let her arms bend.

She sank. Slowly, an inch, and the shaft followed the head into her and the stretch doubled, and she gasped and stopped. Then another inch. He filled her in a way nothing ever had, so thick she felt every vein of him dragging against the inside of her, and he kept going, deeper, past where Tyler went, past where she'd thought there was any more of her. She heard herself making small helpless sounds with every inch, *oh, oh,* and couldn't stop them. Her thighs gave out the last of the way and she dropped the rest of the way down onto him all at once.

She cried out. It rang off the paneling.

She was sitting on him. All of him was inside her. She could feel the head of him pressed up somewhere deep that made her whole belly clench, and his heavy balls against her, and the rough denim of his open jeans on the backs of her thighs.

She could feel her own pulse beating around him. She couldn't move. She sat there impaled in her blue lace with her mouth open and her bare breasts heaving, and she was looking straight at her husband.

"Look at that," Dale said, low, satisfied, behind her ear. Not to her. To the table. "Took every inch."

Wicks was half out of his chair. "She's gonna feel that tomorrow. She's gonna feel that for a *week*—"

"Sit down, Wicks."

Dale put his hands back on her hips and lifted her an inch off him, slow, the whole thick length of him dragging out of her, and then let her drop.

She cried out, high and raw, a noise she'd never once made for Tyler, and Tyler heard it, a foot of felt and an ocean away, and she watched him hear it.

"Slow," she said. Clipped. The composed voice, cracking. "Just — slow."

"All of it," Dale said. "Pretty boy's watching you."

She looked. Tyler across the table. His hands on the bare green. Something in his face between pain and the thing she'd never be able to ask him about, and he was not standing up.

Dale's arm came across her waist. His other hand reached between her thighs from the front, dark fingers parting the lips of her pussy where his cock disappeared into her. He held her open. For the room. For the camera. For Tyler.

"She's on him," Wicks said. He'd come around to Tyler's side, bending to see across the table. "She took the whole thing — Vince, look between her legs, he's spreading her, you can see where it goes in, look how wet she is, it's running down him—"

"Soaked," Vince said. An observation.

Dale lifted her by the hips. Up — the wet sound of her rising off an inch of him, a slick separation — and then down, the full seat again, and the chair creaked and her heels caught the rungs.

"Up," Dale said. And she rose. "Down." And she sank. He said it the way he said everything — stating what was going to happen, his hands guiding her hips, his dark cock working in and out of her with each word — and she obeyed, stiff, doing the job, her breasts shaking in the frame with every stroke.

"He's bouncing her," Wicks said. "Pretty boy, she's riding Dale's cock right in front of you — you hear that? The squelch every time she drops? That's all her."

She could hear herself around him — the slick clutch on the rise, the deeper sound when she sank, a wet slap every time her ass met his thighs. Her wetness had gone past hiding, past denying. The smell of her rose off Dale's lap in the room's heat, sharp and unmistakable, cutting the cigar. The lace frame held her breasts just enough to amplify the bounce, and they swung with every stroke, nipples tight, and the room tracked the movement.

Dale's rhythm was steady. Each rise showed an inch of him glistening — dark, thick, veined — before she dropped again. The chair creaked under them in a steady complaint. She could feel his cock deep in her on every seat, the head pressing a spot high inside that made her thighs shake, and each time she tried to slow the drop his hands brought her down at his pace. The sound of the ride — the wet slap of her ass meeting his thighs, the squelch of her pussy stretching around him, the creak of the chair — filled the room over Wicks's voice.

She gripped the arms of the chair and rode him stiffly, the composed face holding by a thread, and the pleasure kept building against the stiffness — his thickness dragging sensation out of her on every stroke, the treacherous heat between her thighs getting worse with every drop.

"Let me up," she said. Quiet. "I need—"

"I'll tell you when," Dale said.

His hips drove up. She dropped. The chair complained under them. The wet sound carried and Tyler watched her take it across the bare felt and she watched him watching and the chair held him.

"Over the table," Vince said.

She came off Dale with a sound — the thick shaft dragging out, her lips clinging, a wet sucking release as the head pulled free, and she stayed open for a second, swollen and gaping, before her body closed. His cock hung dark and shining with her, a string of her slick stretching from the head to her thigh before it broke. Still hard. Still unfinished. Wicks said "Look at — Vince, look at her, she's—" and she stood on legs that trembled and Vince pointed the phone at the table.

She looked at the felt. At Tyler beyond it. Her hands found the table edge and she stopped.

"I can't—" Quiet. To nobody. To the felt. Her fingers on the wood.

Vince said nothing. Dale's hand settled on the small of her back and pressed, and she bent forward over the end of the table, forearms down, facing Tyler's chair. Her breasts hung in the open cups and swung when she settled. She put her cheek on the old green and Tyler was right there, directly across, a foot away.

Wicks came around behind her. She felt his hands at the lace band of her right thigh-high, the stained bony fingers.

He peeled it down slow.

"Look at these legs," he said. Quiet. Reverent. Rolling the nude nylon down her thigh, her calf, off the pointed heel. "The marks the lace left — little red lines where the band was, like somebody drew on her." Then the other thigh-high, the same, slow, his shaking fingers tracing the marks on her skin as the nylon came away.

He took the two thigh-highs. He looped the first around her right wrist, snug against the bone, and tied it to the front leg of the table — Tyler's side. Then the left. She felt the nylon pull taut and the knots cinch and her arms stretched forward across the felt, bound, her hands inches from Tyler's shoes.

"Don't—" she said. Into the felt. The word died before it finished.

She was tied. Bent over a poker table with her wrists bound to its legs, in a room where the deadbolt had turned behind her an hour ago, with three men who'd done time for things she'd never asked about. She could not get up.

"She can't get up now," Wicks said. Almost tender. "Can you, sweetheart."

She turned her face on the felt and looked at Tyler. He was right there. His eyes on her bound wrists, on the nylon knotted around them, inches from his shoes. She saw him see the fear and she saw it cost him.

Tyler's eyes dropped to her bound wrists. His chair creaked under a shift that went nowhere.

The fear came clean and cold: tied, locked door, ex-cons, her hands lashed to furniture. For a few seconds why she'd

come fell away and she was just a woman bound in a house she couldn't leave. She breathed on the felt. She looked at Tyler's shoes and then at his face and the face was still there.

The fear found nowhere to go. Her hips jerked toward the felt and away from the locked door and her wrists tested the nylon once, a small pull that cinched tighter, and she breathed on the felt and let it.

Wicks dropped to his knees behind her.

Through the open crotch, where the lace parted and left her bare, his mouth found her from behind.

His stubble scraped the inside of her thighs. His lips were chapped and his breath was menthol cigarettes and heat, and his tongue was wet and clumsy and eager, dragging flat up the length of her. He found her clit. She jerked against the knots.

"Wicks—" Muffled by the felt. Something that started as a refusal and came out too breathy to pass as one.

He moaned into her. His mouth sealed on her pussy and the vibration traveled through her and her hips bucked and the nylon bit her wrists. He lapped at her clit in fast sloppy circles and his stubble burned the tender skin and his hands shook on her thighs and he talked into her between licks, the words muffled and wet:

"You taste so good — sweetheart, you taste — God, you're dripping, I can feel it on my chin, I can smell you, you're so — I wanted this, I wanted to taste you since the first time you walked in here—"

She didn't want it to feel good from him. From any of them, but especially from Wicks — the jittery mouth, the stained fingers, the man who'd been turning her into a show since the first night. And it felt good. His tongue was artless

and relentless and he found a rhythm on her clit that made her thighs shake, and she bit the felt and her bound fists clenched and unclenched at Tyler's shoes.

His stubble was everywhere. Rough on the inside of her thighs, rough against her lips where they'd swollen and parted, rough on the hood of her clit when his chin moved and the friction sent a jolt through her that pulled a whimper out before she could swallow it. The sound of his mouth on her was wet and loud and obscene — a sloppy, devoted, continuous licking and sucking — and the room could hear it and she could hear it and she hated him and her hips pushed toward his face anyway.

The locked door, the knots, face-down with a mouth on her she couldn't see — and her hips pushed toward his face anyway, a small roll against the nylon, and the fear and the pleasure sat in the same body and neither was pretending the other wasn't there. His tongue pushed inside her. Short, blunt, curling. She gasped and his hands tightened on her thighs and he ate her — devoted, starving, months of wanting concentrated in his tongue and his shaking fingers.

"Move." Dale. His voice low, coming closer. The scrape of his belt. "When I'm done with her. Not before."

Wicks pulled away with a wet sound. She felt the air find her where his mouth had been, cool on the slick, and heard him stand and heard the jitter of his boots — "I was just — she was right there, she tasted—" — and Dale said nothing and Dale's heat replaced the smaller man behind her.

His hands settled on her hips over the lace. He stepped between her spread thighs. She felt the blunt head of him against her — right where Wicks's mouth had been, slick with spit and

her own wetness — and this was his second time inside her tonight but the angle was different and the power of it was different. Tied. Face-down. Him behind her. The whole table between her and anything that could stop it.

He pushed in.

She was wet from Wicks's mouth and from the ride and from everything the night had been pulling out of her, and Dale slid into her deep — the long heavy seat of him filling her past where familiar ended — and the table rocked forward on the carpet with the first full stroke. Toward Tyler. She slid on the felt and her bound hands jerked toward his shoes and the table scraped and stopped and Dale drew back and drove in and the table rocked again.

"Elevator, you'd stand in the corner and hold your purse," Dale said. Behind her, over her, his dark hands spread on the pale small of her back, his hips working. His voice never changed. "Parking garage, you'd already have your keys out." A stroke, deep, and the table rocked toward Tyler. "Your daddy'd have something to say about me at his dinner table." Another. "And tonight you're tied to a card table with your own stockings, and me in you to the root."

The words landed in her stomach. In the shame and the heat under the shame. The visual she couldn't see but could feel — his dark hands on the pale of her skin, his dark cock feeding into her from behind — and the truth of it, the precise humiliating truth.

He fucked her with the table rocking. Deep strokes that moved furniture. The felt scraped under her cheek. Her breasts hung in the open cups and swung with every drive, nipples dragging the green fabric, and the friction sent a current

through her that met the fullness of him and built. The rhythmic slap of his hips meeting her ass. The wet sound of his cock in her, louder now, shameless. The scrape of table legs on carpet. The smell of cigar musk and her arousal, sharp and unmistakable, filling the room.

"She's soaking," Wicks said from somewhere behind them. "Listen to that. The table's rocking — she's sliding toward him and back. Pretty boy, she's getting pushed right at you."

"She can take more," Vince said, from the head of the table.

Dale gave her more. His hands clamped on her hips and he drove harder, rougher than in the chair, a man who'd been inside her once already tonight and was done being careful. The table rocked forward and she slid toward Tyler and back. Muffled sounds came out of her into the felt, pushed out on every stroke. It was deeper this way, his whole weight behind it, the angle finding the back of her and pressing there. Tyler's shoes were inches from her fingers. Under the cigar and the sex she could smell him, soap and clean cotton.

"You hear her," Dale said, low, to Vince. "That's what she sounds like when she gets fucked right."

Vince's chair pushed back.

She heard him come down the long side of the table, not hurrying. He stopped at the edge of the table right beside Tyler's chair, so close his hip was at Tyler's shoulder. He held the phone out sideways without looking.

"Wicks. Keep it on her face."

Wicks scrambled for it.

She had to roll her eyes up to see Vince. Dale was still moving in her, the table still rocking, and every stroke slid her face across the felt toward Vince's belt. He was already undoing it.

"Wait," she said into the felt. "Not— both of— wait—"

He put his hand in her hair. Not rough. He took a fistful at the back of her head and lifted, so her face came up off the felt, and held it there while Dale fucked her from behind. With his other hand he took himself out.

She knew the size of him. She'd had him in her fist that last night in the basement, and her hand had looked small around him. Up close it was worse. Not long like Dale, but thick, obscenely thick, uncut and dark, the foreskin drawn back off a broad swollen head that was already wet. He held it an inch from her lips. She could smell him, sharp and male and unwashed.

"Six months I watched that mouth," Vince said. Low, conversational, the way he'd tell you what was in his garage. "You on your step every morning with your coffee. Blowing on it." His thumb moved in her hair. "Open."

She pressed her lips together. She was looking past him, sideways, at Tyler. A foot away. His eyes were on her mouth.

Dale drove into her, hard, and the stroke shoved her forward onto the head of Vince's cock. Her lips parted on it before she'd decided anything, and Vince pushed in.

He filled her mouth all at once. The girth of him spread her lips wider than Dale had, so wide the corners stung, and her jaw went open as far as it would go and there was still more of him. Salt and skin and the faint smoke taste of his hands. She made a choked noise around him.

"There. Look at them lips," Vince said, pleased. "I knew they'd stretch like that."

"She can't even close her mouth on it," Wicks said, half out of his chair with the phone held out. "Pretty boy, look. Both of 'em. She's got both of 'em."

Then they found the rhythm between them, and she had no say in it at all.

Dale drew back and drove in, and the stroke pushed her forward down onto Vince's cock. Vince held her there by the hair while Dale drew back, then pushed her back with his hips, back onto Dale. Back and forth between them like that, impaled at both ends, the poker table rocking under her and creaking on the carpet. She couldn't brace. Her wrists were tied. She couldn't pull her head back, she couldn't close her mouth, she couldn't do anything but take it from both sides at once. Spit ran out of the corners of her mouth and down her chin onto the felt. The sounds in the room were obscene: the wet slap of Dale's hips on her ass, the slick choked noises of her mouth on Vince, the table legs knocking, Wicks breathing hard behind the phone.

She'd never been so full of men. She'd never been anything like this.

Her eyes were watering. She looked sideways over the thick dark shaft in her mouth, at Tyler. He was so close she could have touched his knee with her tongue. He was staring at her stretched lips and the spit on her chin, breathing through his teeth, and he didn't stand up.

It started low in her and she couldn't get ahead of it.

Dale's cock dragging deep in her and driving back. Vince's cock filling her mouth to the back of her throat. The felt rubbing her bare nipples raw where she slid on it. The nylon biting her wrists. Tyler's eyes. It gathered in her belly, hot and heavy

and climbing. She tried to breathe through her nose and ride it down and couldn't get the air. Then Vince pushed her all the way down until her nose was in the coarse hair at the root of him, and held her there, and Dale drove in at the same moment and held deep. She was pinned between them, stuffed at both ends, unable to move or breathe.

She broke.

She came with her mouth full of Vince and Dale buried to the root behind her. The cry went into Vince's cock, muffled and high and cracking, and her throat convulsed around him, and her pussy clenched hard on Dale again and again, rhythmic, helpless, the spasms shaking through her thighs and her bound arms. She couldn't make a sound that got out. It all went into him. Her eyes stayed open, streaming, on Tyler. Her brow drew together the way it only ever had for him, in the dark, in their bed, and now it was happening in a lit room with two men inside her and a third filming her face.

"Oh, she's coming," Wicks said. "She's coming on both of 'em. Look at her throat, look at her throat going—"

"Feel that?" Dale said, behind her, to Vince. Low, satisfied. "Squeezing me like a fist."

Vince held her down through it. It went on and on, wave after wave, each one smaller and each one still there, and she whimpered through them around the cock in her mouth, and her fingers opened and closed at Tyler's shoes, and the shaking wouldn't stop.

When it eased, Vince let her up.

She came off him gasping, a string of spit from her lip to the head of him, her face hot and wet. He held her up by the hair a moment and looked at her face like he was checking a

job. Behind her Dale pulled out slow, and she felt the empty, and felt him step back. He was still hard, slick and dark with her. He hadn't finished. He could wait.

"She came," Wicks said, amazed. "In front of pretty boy. Did you see her face? Look at pretty boy's hands."

"Yeah," Vince said. "She did." He let go of her hair and her cheek dropped back to the felt. His cock stood out from him, shining with her spit. "We're gonna want it wet."

She didn't understand what he meant. He walked away toward the kitchen.

Tyler watched his wife come a foot from his face.

He'd watched it through dirty glass that last night — a shape in warm light, a sound muffled through a foundation. That bore no resemblance to this. This was her cheek on the felt and her mouth falling open and the particular way her brow drew together that he knew from the dark, from years of the dark, the one expression that was only ever his — happening now in a lit room with Dale's hands on her and Vince in her mouth and his phone in Wicks's hand and her wrists tied to the table where he'd won money the first night.

He was hard. He'd been hard since the silk hit the carpet. The strain in his jeans was past discomfort into something that pulsed with its own rhythm, and he sat with his hands crushing his own knees and didn't touch himself because touching himself would have been crossing her line, and her line was the only structure still standing in the room.

The photo. The copper. The paper in his desk drawer. Vince's lie — she came to me, she asked for this — and the scripted words Tyler had spoken in their kitchen, words that tasted like someone else's language. He'd told himself the

duress was the reason he was in this chair. Watching his wife's face a foot away, her brow drawing together on another man's cock, he could no longer locate the line between the duress and the wanting. If Vince had torn the photo up in front of him and said go home — if the paper vanished and the charge dissolved — he was not sure he would have stood.

He hated that. He sat with it.

She lay with her cheek on the felt, catching her breath, the taste of him still in her mouth and the last of it still running through her thighs. Across the room she heard a cabinet open in the kitchen. A drawer. His boots came back and she heard a cap flip, the small plastic click.

Something cold touched her. Not where Dale had been. Higher.

She jerked against the nylon. For one second she didn't understand, and then she understood completely, and her whole face went hot. Vince's slick thumb was pressed there. *There.* On the one part of her she had never let anyone look at, let alone touch, the part she washed quickly in the shower with her eyes on the tile.

Tyler had tried once. Years ago, in the first apartment, in the dark, his hand sliding down and his fingertip barely grazing her there. She'd caught his wrist and said "*Tyler*," sharp, and rolled onto her side away from him, and that had been the end of it. He'd never tried again. She'd never even said the word for it out loud.

Now it was under the living-room light with her ass up over a poker table, three men looking at it and a phone filming it, and Vince's thumb circling it slow and cold and wet.

"No," she said into the felt. "Not— no, not *that*—"

His thumb pressed. She locked rigid, every muscle in her clenched at once against him.

She was tied and he was behind her and his thumb circled, patient, working the ring with cold lube, and the sensation was intimate and obscene and nothing in her experience had prepared for it.

"Nobody's ever been in here," Vince said. Low. Close. His other hand on her back, holding her down. "I can tell."

She clenched against him. Involuntary. Her whole body resisting the intrusion. His thumb stayed — circling, pressing — and the lube warmed and the pressure was constant and patient and then the give. His thumb slipped past the ring and she gasped, sharp, her back arching, her wrists pulling the nylon taut.

He held it there. She breathed around the intrusion. The pad of his thumb inside her, the stretch burning in a way that radiated through her hips, a new sensation she had no map for. He circled, slow, working the muscle from the inside, letting her learn the feeling.

"Her face," Wicks said. Close. "That's her ass. Pretty boy — she's never — look at her face, look at her hands—"

Vince replaced his thumb with two slick fingers. Slow. Working her open. The stretch burned deeper — heat radiating through her hips and down into her pussy where the empty pulse still throbbed from Dale. She breathed through it. Short sharp breaths, her cheek grinding the felt. His fingers scissored gently and the burn flared and faded and she opened for him against every instruction she'd ever given herself.

His fingers withdrew. The blunt head of his cock pressed against her.

The girth. The width she'd held in her fist that last night, the cock that had made her hand look small. Hot. Broader than his fingers, broader than his thumb, pressing against the ring. She clenched and he waited.

"Here comes the fat part," Vince said.

She breathed. She tried to let it. The head pressed and the ring stretched — wider, the foreskin sliding against the tight muscle — and then the give, the ridge pushing past, and she cried out into the felt. Low. Broken. A sound she'd never made. His cock entered where nothing had been. Inch by inch. The girth widening her in a way that rewrote every sensation she knew — wide, wider, muscles stretching to accommodate him, the burn fading into a fullness that pressed against nerves she didn't know existed. Deep. Aching. The pressure radiated into her pussy and up through her stomach and the ache pulsed and the pulse was warm.

Another inch. She felt the foreskin drag against the ring on the way in, a wet friction that was different from anything vaginal — tighter, more intimate, a sensation that lived in the nerves and the shame simultaneously. She could feel him in her stomach. She could feel the thickness pressing the wall between her ass and her empty pussy, and the pressure on that wall sent a bloom of heat through her she wasn't ready for and couldn't deny.

He worked himself into her an inch at a time, his stained hands spread on her hips, the Marlboro smell of him filling her nose — cigarettes and motor oil and the greasy heat of his skin. He gave her three seconds between inches, holding still while her body adjusted. His gut met her ass when he seated, the press of warm stomach, and she dropped her forehead to the

felt and the sound she made was continuous and had no shape and she couldn't stop making it.

"Look at that," Vince said. Seated in her. "Whole thing."

"Pretty boy," Wicks said. "You seeing this? She took it. The whole thing. In her ass. That's Vince in her ass and she took every inch. And pretty boy just sits there." He looked at Tyler. "You seeing her face right now?"

Vince drew back. Slow. The drag of him pulling out lit every nerve ending along the way, a deep wet friction that made her fingers curl against the felt, and then he drove back in and she moaned — loud, a sound that filled the room — and the ache had become heat, and the heat was close to pleasure and getting closer with every stroke. The fullness pressing against the membrane that separated her ass from her empty pussy, and the pressure there was exquisite and terrible and she let the moan come out of her because there was no holding it.

"Listen to her," Wicks said. "She's moaning. She's moaning on it. That's Vince fucking her ass and she's moaning like—"

"Wicks," Vince said. And kept moving.

Wicks crouched by Tyler's chair.

He dropped onto his heels beside the man who didn't speak and he pointed — not at Megan, at Tyler — and his voice went tight with delight:

"Look at pretty boy," Wicks said. "Look at him. He's loving it. Look — he's not gonna say anything. He's just gonna sit there. 'Cause he loves it." He leaned toward her. "Look at pretty boy."

She turned her face on the felt and looked.

Tyler was hard. She could see it — the strain in the denim, thick against his thigh, impossible to hide and he wasn't trying.

His hands were on his knees and his eyes were wet and bright and on hers and he was not standing up. He was not going to stand up.

It was true. What Wicks said, in a way Wicks would never understand. This was the thing she'd read about at two in the morning on a forum with her heart hammering. The thing Tyler wanted and couldn't say and she'd come to do for him. She was looking at the proof — the visible undeniable proof straining against his jeans — and the proof looked back at her with wet eyes and didn't move.

She let go.

She felt it happen. Something that had been braced all night — waiting for him to stand, waiting to be rescued, waiting to be able to say afterward that she'd been willing and he was the one who stopped it — that thing let go. A door falling shut behind her. He wasn't going to rescue her because he didn't want to be rescued from this. Neither did she. The knowing settled through her and her hips softened onto Vince's cock and her mouth opened and the first sound she chose to make — not pulled, not forced — came out of her low and long, and it was aimed at Tyler.

Wicks came around the table to her side and knelt — his face level with her breasts where they hung in the open cups, his bony frame at her ribs. His stained fingers slid down her stomach and between her thighs from the front.

He found her clit. Slick — from Dale, from his own mouth on her earlier, from everything the night had drawn out. His bony fingers circled, fast, shaking, the nicotine-stained tips on the swollen nub. Then two fingers pushed up inside her pussy while Vince's cock filled her ass.

The sound she made was long and formless and she didn't try to shape it.

Vince in her ass. Wicks's fingers in her pussy. She could feel both through the thin wall between them — Vince's girth pressing against Wicks's knuckles, the two of them filling her from opposite sides, and every slow stroke Vince made pressed Wicks's fingers deeper and every curl of Wicks's fingers made her clench tighter around Vince.

"She's squeezing," Wicks said. His face pressed against her hanging breast, his stubble dragging her nipple. "I can feel him through the wall — she's so tight, both of us in her at once — you like that, don't you." He curled his fingers and she moaned into the felt and his grin pressed against her skin. "Both of us. You like both of us."

"Wicks," Vince said. Behind her. His cock stroking slow in her ass while Wicks's fingers worked her pussy. "You feel me in there?"

She moaned. Her forehead on the felt and Tyler watching from a foot away. Vince's girth and Wicks's fingers and the wall between them and the sound she made was continuous and she had stopped bracing, stopped fighting, and she let him watch her make it.

They untied her.

Dale at one wrist, working the nylon knot loose. Vince pulled out of her slow — the drag of his girth reversing through the ring, an inch at a time, and she gasped at the withdrawal, a small punched sound, and then the empty hit and she whimpered into the felt. Vince at the other wrist. Both knots undone. Her arms came free and the blood rushed back into her hands and she lay over the table for a moment, breathing, her

fingers tingling, her legs shaking, the slick of lube and her own arousal cooling on her thighs.

Vince walked to his chair at the head of the table. The best seat. The chair he'd taken the first night and never gotten up from. He sat and spread his knees and his cock was still hard, still slick from her, standing out of his open jeans, and he said one word.

"Here."

She pushed herself off the felt. Her legs didn't work properly — the knees buckled and she caught the table edge and stood there for a moment, breathing, her hair in her face, her own wetness and lube still cooling on the inside of her thigh. The room tilted and righted.

She crossed the room to Vince on feet that didn't belong to her, the pointed heels wobbling on the carpet. Each step she could feel the ache — her pussy swollen and used, her ass stretched and tender, the lube and the wet cooling between her thighs. She stood in front of his chair and waited because she didn't trust herself to lower onto him without falling.

He turned her. His stained hands on her hips, spinning her so her back was to him, facing out into the room. Facing Tyler. He brought her down.

She sank onto him ass-first. The girth re-entering her — the ring stretching open around the head, the foreskin sliding past, the shaft filling her inch by inch — and the re-entry was a long broken sound that came out of her in pieces, high, helpless, because she'd taken him already and the muscle remembered and opened faster this time and the fullness was enormous and immediate. She sank and sank and the sound contin-

ued and his hands guided her hips down and the last inch seated him deep and the gold chain pressed cold against her spine.

"God—" she said. The first word since the turn. Involuntary. Torn free. She sat all the way down onto him and his gut pressed warm against her lower back and his thighs were wide under hers and his cock was deep in her ass and she was seated in his lap, impaled, facing the room, facing Tyler.

"All the way down," Vince said. Low. Into her hair. Pleased.

Her thighs spread over his. Her head fell back against his shoulder. The blue lace was soaked and twisted, the cups still framing her bare breasts but barely — the lace askew, nipples tight and jutting, the heavy round weight of them sitting above the ruined frame. Through the open crotch her pussy was exposed to the room — swollen, puffy, flushed a deep rose-pink from Dale, from Wicks's mouth, from the whole night. Wet. Slick tracing the inside of her thigh. She could feel the air on herself, the cool on the hot slick skin, and she couldn't close her legs with Vince's thighs under hers and she sat there and let them see her.

"She took the whole thing again," Wicks said. On his feet, circling, his eyes locked between her spread thighs. "Her pussy's right there — look at her, she's so swollen, she's soaking, it's running down her thigh — Vince, she's dripping on your jeans — pretty boy, she's sitting on Vince's cock in front of you and her pussy is just — it's right there—"

Vince moved in her. A slow stroke — lifting her an inch by the hips and pulling her back down — and the girth dragged through the ring and pressed against her empty pussy from behind and she moaned, loud, aimed at the ceiling, and her pussy ached for contact, swollen and wanting, and the ache transmit-

ted through and squeezed Vince and he exhaled through his nose.

He did it again. Slow. Each stroke different: the first was the drag, the ring gripping his shaft on the way up; the second was the drop, the fullness hitting bottom and the chain pressing cold against her spine; the third was his angle shifting, his cock finding the front wall and pressing until a moan tore out of her that was lower than the first two, aimed at nothing, forced out by how good it felt. Her bare tits bounced in the ruined lace and her spread pussy glistened in the light and the smell of her cut the cigar smoke.

"She wants more," Wicks said. "Her face is doing that thing — Vince, look at her face, she's riding you down—"

Vince filmed over her shoulder, the phone steady, his other hand on her hip.

"Bring his chair over," Vince said.

Dale took the back of Tyler's chair in one hand and dragged it — Tyler in it, the scrape of wood on carpet — around the end of the table and set it beside Vince's. Close. Close enough that when her hand went out it landed on the wooden arm of Tyler's chair and gripped. The arm of the chair. Where Vince had set her the first night — courteous, clean-handed, the arm and nothing else. Her fingers closed around the wood and held on.

Tyler was beside her. His arm inches from her hand on the armrest. She could smell him — soap and cotton and the sharp salt of sweat — and she held his chair and looked at him and he looked at her. She was seated on another man's cock with her pussy bare and swollen and exposed through the open crotch and her breasts ruined and displayed, sweat on her face and

stuck hair across her cheek, and she looked at Tyler and his face was a thing she'd carry.

She could feel Vince shift beneath her. A small adjustment of his hips, his cock pressing deeper, and the movement sent a pulse through her that made her gasp and grip the chair arm harder. She was aware of how she must look from Tyler's chair — the spread thighs, the swollen pussy glistening between them, the lace bodysuit darkened with sweat, and Vince's hands on her hips while his cock disappeared into her from behind. She looked at Tyler and she didn't look away.

Dale knelt between her spread thighs. He was still hard. Still unfinished. Patient through the entire night, holding himself back, and now he was kneeling between her legs and his cock was dark and heavy and shining with her from the table. Long. Veined. The head broader than Vince's, dark against the flushed pink of her pussy, and he held himself at the base and put the head against her and looked at Vince over her shoulder.

"Both of us," Dale said. "You feel that."

He pressed the head in.

The sensation of a second cock entering while Vince was still inside her overwhelmed the breath she was trying to take. Dale's head parted the swollen lips of her pussy — she could feel the stretch widening as he pushed, slow, and the pressure between him and Vince doubled and her mouth fell open and no sound came for a second, just the held breath. Then the sound came — a cry, high and raw and continuous, pulled out of her on the slow entry, because Dale kept pushing and the stretch kept widening and she could feel both of them, Vince's girth pressing against Dale's length through the membrane, two cocks filling her from opposite sides.

Dale gave her another inch. Then another. The room was silent except for her — the sound she made, the wet sound of his entry, and the creak of Vince's chair. She gripped the arm of Tyler's chair and watched the edges of the room go white and come back. Two men inside her at once. The fullness redefined everything she'd ever understood about full. Dale's dark hands held her thighs wide and his length slid deeper and each inch made the sound she was making louder and she couldn't stop it.

"Ain't no room left in her," Vince said. Under her. Into her hair. Blunt.

"They're both in her," Wicks said. Close, circling, his watery eyes wide. "Look at her hand on his chair — her fingers, how tight she's holding — they're both in her at once, Vince is in her ass and Dale's in her pussy and she's holding onto pretty boy's chair—"

Dale seated deep. His hips met her thighs and he was all the way in, dark hands on her pale knees holding them wide, and she breathed through the stretch in sharp shallow gasps — two men filling her, the pressure between them enormous.

"There," Dale said. Low. The fit. "That's how she takes two."

"Tight," Vince said. Under her. His voice strained. "I can feel you against me."

Her hand gripped the arm of Tyler's chair until her knuckles ached. Tyler's hand gripped the other arm. An inch between them. Neither crossed it.

"Can you feel them both?" Wicks said. To her. His voice high. "Can you feel — sweetheart, can you—"

Dale and Vince found a rhythm. Offset — never matching, one driving in while the other drew back, so she was never

empty and never settled, the two of them rocking her between them in a syncopation that kept her gasping. Dale's length and Vince's girth working her at once, the wet slap of Dale's thighs against hers and the deeper sound of Vince's slow stroke beneath her, and the room smelled like a room where sex had been happening for an hour — sweat, lube, cigar musk, the sharp wet salt of her arousal cutting through all of it, saturating every breath.

The seesaw did something to her she hadn't expected. Every time Dale pushed in, Vince drew back, and the shift of pressure stroked a place that made her vision white out, and then Vince pushed in and Dale withdrew and the pressure reversed and she was caught in a loop of it, rocking between them, her mouth open, the sounds continuous.

Her breasts shook with every alternating stroke. The ruined lace had given up framing them — the cups shifted, the blue just decoration, her bare tits bouncing free, nipples tight and dark from the night's use, and every stroke from Dale sent a ripple through them that she could feel in the skin and the weight. The sounds from between her legs were obscene and layered — the slick sound of Dale's cock in her pussy and the deeper, wetter sound of Vince in her ass, both audible, both continuous, and underneath them the creak of Vince's chair.

She started talking. To the only name she had.

"Is this what you wanted to see," she said. Her fingers bloodless on the arm of his chair. Her voice cracking on the third word. "Pretty boy. Is this it. You wanted to watch me get fucked by two men, Dale in my pussy and Vince in my ass, and I'm so wet I can hear it. Look at me." A gasp broke the sentence open and she held it together. "Pretty boy. Don't you dare. I can

feel them both through the" — Dale drove in and the word dissolved — "it's so much, I've never been this full in my"

"Somebody ought to send this to your daddy," Dale said, his dark hands spreading her pale thighs wider while he drove up into her. "Show him where his girl ended up." His dark fingers dug into the pale of her hips, holding her open while he fucked into her alongside Vince. "Two of us in her, and pretty boy over there taking notes."

"She's doing it for him," Vince said. Under her. His cock slow in her ass, his voice low. "Every word."

"She's telling pretty boy to watch," Wicks said. Marveling. "Telling him to look at her while they're both—"

The sentences gave way. The two rhythms rocking her broke them apart: "Pretty boy — look — Dale in my — both — oh God" and then single words, and then the words stopped and only sounds came out of her, high and broken and aimed at Tyler, her hand locked on his chair, her bare tits shaking with every stroke.

Both men kept moving. Dale's slap and Vince's deeper stroke beneath her, and her cunt cutting the cigar smoke, her own musk sharp at Tyler's elbow. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes stayed on him. She moaned and the moan was aimed at the man in the chair and he watched her face and his hand gripped the other armrest an inch from hers.

Wicks leaned over the arm of Vince's chair.

His face found her breasts. His mouth closed on a nipple — the tight pink point, swollen from the felt and the air and the night — and he sucked, hard, his bony hands bracing on the chair arm, his stubble scraping the pale skin around the puffy areola. She cried out. The suction pulled her nipple long,

the sensitive flesh stretching between his chapped lips, and the sensation shot through her and met the fullness of the two cocks inside her and compounded it. He released and took the other one — lapping, sucking, his yellow teeth grazing the puffed edge — and he talked into her skin between mouthfuls, the words vibrating against her wet nipple:

"You're shaking — sweetheart, you're shaking all over, your tits are shaking, your nipples are so hard in my mouth — God, they're so swollen, they're puffy, I can feel them tighten on my tongue while they're both in you—"

His mouth pulled the nipple again — a long suck, his cheeks hollowing — and she felt the pull radiate down through her stomach to where Dale and Vince met through the wall, and the three points of contact overwhelmed her: Vince's cock in her ass, Dale's cock in her pussy, Wicks's mouth on her breast. Three men on her at once. Her hand gripping Tyler's chair. The overload went through her and her "pretty boy" lines broke apart entirely:

"Pretty — I can't — all of them, all three, pretty boy, I—"

Sounds. The rest was sounds.

Wicks lifted his mouth from her breast. Spit shining on her nipple, the pink tip reddened from his stubble. He straightened and stepped around to the other side of Vince's chair, where her face was turned. He had himself in his hand, the flared crown shiny, leaking. He held it at her lips.

"Open up, sweetheart," he said. His voice shaking. "All three of us. Open up and take all three."

She looked at the crown an inch from her mouth — the bulbous head, the slit beading — and she opened.

The mushroom head pushed past her lips — the ridge catching her lower lip, the blunt width stretching her mouth wider than the shaft would — and the taste of him spread over her tongue: menthol and salt and the bitter of precome. Her throat was full of sound, the moans vibrating around his shaft and making his hips jerk. Dale and Vince were still in her, still rocking her between them, and she was full everywhere. Every opening. Three men in her at once — the thing she'd imagined beside her sleeping husband and been horrified she'd imagined.

She couldn't breathe through her mouth. She breathed through her nose in sharp bursts timed to Wicks's thrusts. The ridge of his crown dragged the roof of her mouth on every pull and the blunt head bumped the back of her throat and she gagged — a thick gluck — and the gag vibrated through Wicks and he groaned and pushed deeper. The taste thickened. Spit ran from the corners of her mouth, down her chin, mixing with sweat and precome. Dale and Vince kept rocking her and every thrust from below sent her forward onto Wicks and every stroke from Wicks pushed her back onto the two men filling her. She was being moved by all three of them, pinned.

Three sounds layered over each other — the slap of Dale's thighs, Vince's deeper stroke beneath her, the sloppy suck of her mouth on Wicks — and underneath it all the creak of Vince's chair. Her eyes opened on Tyler. He sat in his chair with his hand gripping the arm an inch from hers.

"All three," Dale said. Below her. Driving up.

Wicks went first. Because Wicks always went first.

He pulled out of her mouth with a wet pop, a string of spit stretching from her lower lip to the crown, and he finished on her face and her framed breasts. The first rope hit her cheek

— warm, thick, landing across the bridge of her nose and the cheekbone — and she flinched and the second caught her chin and ran down into the hollow of her throat. He aimed lower, his bony hand working the shaft fast, and striped her left breast — a white line across the bare nipple and the pale skin — then her right, cum hitting the lace and the swell of flesh above the cup, and he crowed the whole time, high and delighted, his hips jerking, the sound of a man who'd been waiting for this since the silk hit the carpet.

She could feel it on her. Warm, then cooling. The weight of it on her cheek. The wet of it on her nipple, running into the lace. The smell — salt and menthol and musk — joining everything else the room held. She kept her eyes open. She looked at Tyler with another man's cum on her face and two men's cocks inside her and she didn't wipe it off.

Dale was still in her pussy. Vince still in her ass. Both working. The rhythm unbroken. Holding her between them while Wicks's cum dried on her. She could feel the rhythm rocking her, the wet sounds from below, and the cum sliding down her cheek toward her mouth and she let it.

The faucet opened. Wicks stood there with his spent cock in his hand and his cum on her face and the stream poured out:

"That's my girl — you came on Dale, I saw it, that was me, I saw it first — Vince, she came on the table, what if — what if she's pregnant, a girl takes it like that, no rubber, that's a wife, that's a girl you — I'd marry her, I would, I said it before and I meant it, you came on me last time, remember, you came on me first before any of—"

And then the line shifted and the words came out of him the way they always came out of him, the mouth that couldn't

hold anything, pointing at her cum-streaked face with his stained finger:

"I been wanting you since winter," Wicks said. "Since winter. Since Vince showed us them pictures — you in that sports bra, remember, Vince, from his garage, the one where she's bending over — since winter I been—"

"Wicks." Vince. One word. Flat. From under her. And it stopped Wicks's mouth like a hand over it.

She heard none of it. Full of two men and past words and the sentence washed through her — *since winter, pictures, garage, sports bra* — syllables in the stream, nothing to catch on.

Tyler heard it. *Since winter. Them pictures. His garage.* It went past him into the noise and was gone. He had no winter to put it against.

Her second orgasm started deep and climbed.

It came up through both of them — through Vince's girth in her ass and Dale's length in her pussy, through the place where they pressed against each other, through the rhythm that kept rocking her — and it was harder than the first. Deeper. She felt it building from a place below her stomach, a gathering heat that pulsed in time with both cocks, and when it broke it broke everywhere. She arched off Vince, her spine curving, her thighs locking on Dale's hips, and a squeal tore out of her that cracked into a whimper and the whimper kept going.

"Here it comes," Dale said. Flat. His dark hands holding her thighs open while his cock stayed buried. "I can feel it."

Her pussy clenched around Dale — rhythmic, involuntary, hard enough that she could feel the grip and release, grip and release — and the clenching squeezed Vince through the membrane and Vince pushed deeper and the deeper push made her

clench harder and the loop had her, both men in her while she came on them. Her fingers dug into the arm of Tyler's chair hard enough to creak the wood. Her eyes found his and held. A rush of her wet around Dale, visible, running down between them, the smell of her coming sharpening through the cigar and the cum and the sweat, and the sounds she made were high and helpless and continuous and she kept making them.

"Both of us," Vince said. Under her. His voice strained for the first time all night. "She's squeezing both of us."

The orgasm rolled through her in long waves. Her thighs trembled against Dale's ribs. Her tits shook in the ruined lace. Her mouth stayed open and the whimpers came in pulses, one for each clench, and Wicks pointed at the mess between her legs — "Look at her, look at what's coming out of her, she's soaking both of them" — and she shook between the two men and her eyes stayed on Tyler and the shaking went on.

Tyler's cock pulsed against denim.

No decision. No touch. He came the way she had — seized, overwhelmed, a response that bypassed every part of him that made choices. His cock throbbed hard against the inside of his jeans, three pulses, four, and the heat spread and the wet spot bloomed dark on the denim and he sat perfectly still. His teeth stayed shut. His face stayed still. His hands stayed on the arms of the chair. The wet spot was the only evidence.

Wicks saw it.

"Oh, no way. Pretty boy just blew in his jeans. Look at him. Didn't even touch it. Sat there and went off." He was nearly crying. "Dale. *Dale.* Look at the spot on him."

The room laughed. Dale's low rumble, Wicks's high cackle, Vince's short exhale under her, his gut shaking against her back.

Tyler sat in it with the dark wet patch spreading across the front of his jeans and the laughter going over him, his hands trembling on the arms of the chair, and he didn't look away from her.

She heard them laughing at her husband, and something in her gave way.

All night she'd held herself still under it, being done to, being looked at, a woman things happened to. It went out of her now like a held breath. What was left was hungry. It was greedy and wet and shameless, and she didn't know it, and it was her.

She took hold of the arm of Tyler's chair with her right hand, put her left flat on Dale's broad sweating shoulder, and pushed.

She lifted herself an inch off Vince, and felt both of them drag inside her at once: Dale's long shaft sliding back through her pussy, Vince's thick root pulling at the stretched ring of her ass. Then she dropped back down. The cry that came out of her rang off the paneling. She did it again, harder. She ground down until Vince was buried to the hilt in her ass and his coarse hair scratched her, and rocked her hips forward onto Dale until the head of him pressed somewhere deep that made her eyes roll, and back, and forward. She was working herself on both of them, using her husband's chair to do it.

The laughter stopped.

Dale went still where he knelt between her thighs. He looked up at her from under his heavy lids, sweat standing on his broad dark forehead, and the corner of his mouth moved.

"Well," he said. "Go on, then."

She went.

She rode them. Her hair was stuck to her wet face and neck. Wicks's cum was drying tacky on her cheek and the corner of her mouth, and when she licked her lips she tasted it, salt and bitter, and moaned. Her tits bounced out of the open lace with every drop, heavy and flushed pink across the top, the freckles on her chest standing out dark against the flush, her nipples puffed and swollen and hard as knuckles. Her thighs were spread wide around Dale's hips, the nude stockings long gone, her bare pale knees shaking.

The sounds were filthy. The slap of her ass coming down on Vince's lap. The wet sucking pull every time she lifted off Dale. Her own breath, high and fast, catching into little cries she didn't try to hold. The chair creaking under all three of them. The room stank of it, cigar and sweat and spilled gin and sex, and her own scent cutting through all of it, sharp and sweet, the smell of a woman so wet she was dripping.

She looked down at herself and saw it.

Dale's cock, black and slick and enormous, sliding out of her and back in. Her pussy stretched pink and swollen around him, the lips thick and flushed dark, clinging to his shaft on every upstroke as if they didn't want to let go. A ring of white froth where he went in and out. And just below it, Vince's root, thick as a can, disappearing into her ass, the tight pink ring of her stretched shiny around it. Both of them inside her, one above the other, so close together that every time she bore down she could feel them rub against each other through the thin wall of her. They pressed together on a place in her that made the room go white at the edges.

She had never seen anything like it. It was her.

"She's doing it herself," Wicks breathed. He'd come around close with the phone, crouched by the chair, so close she could smell the menthol on him. "Look at her go. She's fucking 'em. She's *fucking* 'em, Vince." His stained fingers came out shaking and found her nipple and pinched it, rolled it, and she gasped and ground down harder. "Oh, you're so pretty. You're so pretty like this, honey, you're the prettiest thing I ever saw, look at you, look at your tits bounce—"

"Pretty boy." She was staring straight at Tyler. At his white face, his wet eyes, the stain on his lap. The words came up out of her before she knew they were there. "You see me? Do you see what I'm—" She dropped onto them and lost it in a moan, and found it again. "Look. Look at them in me. Both of them. They're so big, pretty boy, they're so much bigger than—" She cut it off with a cry. It was true and she'd said it and she couldn't take it back. "I want them to come in me. Both of them. I want you to sit there and watch them fill me up—"

Tyler made a sound. Small, in his throat. His hands came off the chair arms and closed into fists on his knees, and he stayed in the chair.

She found a muscle low in her that she'd never used in her life and clenched it on the downstroke. She held it and squeezed, and felt Dale's thick shaft swell inside her.

Dale grunted. His big hands clamped on her thighs.

"She's milking me," he said. Not to her. To Vince, low, almost wondering. "Doing it on purpose."

She did it again, and again. Bore down and squeezed and lifted and dropped, and Dale's hips came up off his heels, and his head went back on his thick neck, and the gold chain swung against his chest.

He drove up into her once, deep, all the way, and held, and came.

She felt it. Every bit of it. A long low groan rolled up out of his chest and into her, his cock thickened and jerked hard against her walls, and then the heat. The flood of him deep inside her, pulse after pulse, so much of it, so hot she could feel it spreading. She ground down on him through every throb with her mouth hanging open, wanting it, milking it out of him, a high helpless sound for each surge. Dale's fingers dug into her pale thighs so hard she'd have the marks for days.

"There," Dale said when he could talk, spent and low. "That's mine. All of it. You'll be walking it home tonight."

He pulled out slow. She felt the fat head of him drag free of her swollen lips with a thick wet sound, and then his cum came after it. A heavy warm rope of it slid out of her and ran down over Vince's root and onto the chair, white against her pink.

"Oh my God, look at that," Wicks said. "It's pouring out of you, honey. Look at it all. That's so much, raw like that, that deep, you're gonna, I'm telling you, Vince, that's how she gets a—"

"Wicks."

Vince lifted her off his lap.

She whimpered at the loss of him, the sudden empty ache in her ass. His stained hands turned her by the hips and bent her forward over the arm of his own chair: her stomach on the worn padded arm, her ass high in the air, her face turned toward Tyler's chair beside it. He stood. She heard his jeans shift and felt the heat of his gut behind her. She reached out without thinking, caught the arm of Tyler's chair, and held on.

Tyler was a foot from her face. She could smell him under everything, the soap on his skin and the wet of what he'd done in his jeans.

Vince pushed into her ass again.

Her ring was so raw that every inch of his girth came in separate. She cried out with the first inch and pushed back against him before he was halfway in.

He stopped.

She didn't. She shoved herself back onto him with her hand braced on her husband's chair and took the rest of him herself, the whole fat length, until his gut pressed flat against her ass and his balls were wet against her pussy. Then she pulled forward off him, almost to the head, and shoved back again. And again. Faster. She fucked herself on him. Her ass slapped back against his belly, the soft heavy sound of it filling the room, Dale's cum dripping out of her pussy onto the carpet between Vince's boots, her breasts swinging under her in the ruined lace a foot from Tyler's knee.

"Look at this," Vince said behind her. His voice had gone rough for the first time all night, ragged, his breath coming hard. "Look at her. Look at the clean girl from across the street."

She pushed back harder.

"Cuts that grass in them little shorts. Gets the mail." His hands found her hips, his thumbs pressing into the dimples above her ass. "Won't look at me in the driveway. Six months. Look at her now." He watched himself vanish into her. "Slamming that ass back on me."

"She's slamming it," Wicks said, crouched with the phone almost under her. "Dale, she's slamming back on him. Look at her ass, look at it bounce, look at her *face*—"

She was past hearing any of them. There was only Vince's thickness dragging through the raw stretched ring of her, in and out, the deep heavy ache of it turned to something so much better than an ache. And Tyler's face. His open mouth and his wet eyes and the arm of his chair under her hand, the wood warm and smooth from his grip.

"Pretty boy," she gasped at him. "Pretty boy, I'm gonna— watch me, I'm— *oh*—"

She came again. It was sharp and sudden and it ripped through her. Her ass clamped down hard on Vince's girth, her pussy clenched hard and squeezed more of Dale's cum out of her, and she cried out right in Tyler's face, her fingers digging into the arm of his chair. She kept fucking back onto Vince through it because she couldn't stop. Every thrust dragged the orgasm out longer, and it went on and on.

That was what broke him.

Vince's fingers dug into her hips and he dragged her back onto him, all the way, as deep as he could go, and held her there. He came in her with a long rough groan, deep and shuddering, his cock throbbing thick and hot in her ass. He filled her where nobody had ever been. She felt every pulse of it, the heat of it spreading deep inside, his whole heavy body shaking behind her. He held her pinned down onto himself until there was nothing left in him.

"There," he said during it, quiet, still pulsing. "That's where it goes."

His palm pressed her ass once. Brief, firm, a seal.

He pulled out, slow, the last drag, her whimper at the loss, and sat back in the chair. His heavy hands found her under the arms and lifted her off the chair arm, and she came like something without bones. He settled her back against his chest, her head tipped onto his shoulder, her thighs across his, and she let him, because nothing in her would move.

Decorated. Wicks drying white on her cheek and her chin and the top of her left breast. Dale's cum still seeping out of her, warm, running down the inside of her knee onto Vince's jeans. Vince's cum deep inside her, where she'd feel him tomorrow and the day after. The blue lace was soaked dark and twisted, the open cups shoved aside, the color of her eyes gone to a wet rag. Her perfume was somewhere under the cigar and the sweat and the sex, very faint. A fine tremor ran through her thighs and her hands and wouldn't stop.

Her right hand was still on the arm of Tyler's chair.

She held it while the room came back around her: the paneling, the felt, the woman smiling in the frame over the couch. Wicks zipped. Dale ashed his cigar into an empty glass. Behind her Vince's breathing slowed.

She let go of it last. After her knees would hold her. Her fingers came off the wood one at a time.

She found the cream silk on the carpet and tied it closed over the ruined lace. Tyler found her shoes.

They walked the ninety seconds home with his hand at the small of her back, the same spot as always, and neither of them said a word.

Across the street, in the garage, Vince played it back.

The silk coming off. The blue. Her hand on the arm of the husband's chair. Both their faces in the frame at the end. He

watched all of it, and then Wicks's voice came out of the little speaker over her sounds, *since winter, since Vince showed us them pictures,* and his own voice, flat: *Wicks.*

He stopped it. Dragged it back ten seconds. Played it again.

He sat with his thumb on the Zippo a long time, not lighting it.

THE HUSTLE



Part 5: Last Call

Sire Rickenbach

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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