

CHAPTER 2

The wine was cheap. Corinne knew it was cheap, but she didn't care. She'd bought it three weeks ago from the corner shop, the kind of place where the cat sleeping on the lottery tickets was probably the cleanest thing in the store. The label had promised notes of black cherry and oak, but what it delivered was something closer to fermented cough syrup. She'd poured herself a generous glass anyway—generous being the operative word, the kind of pour that would have made any self-respecting sommelier weep—and now she was slumped into the corner of her couch, legs tucked beneath her, the glass balanced precariously on the armrest where a ring of condensation was slowly warping the fabric.

Her flat always quiet, but tonight the silence had teeth.

She'd left the club in a daze, walking on legs that still felt like they belonged to someone else, someone who'd just done something unthinkable in public and couldn't quite believe it had happened, and she walked fast with her hands shoved deep in her jacket pockets and her head down, not looking at anyone, not wanting to be seen. Every few steps, her body would remind her of what she'd done—a tremor in her thighs, a tender ache between her legs, the uncomfortable awareness that she was still wet, sensitive.

She'd showered the moment she got home. Not because she felt dirty—she didn't, not really, or at least not in the way she probably should have—but because she needed to pretend that she could scald away the memory of what she'd done. It hadn't worked. Every time she closed her eyes she saw him. Those dark eyes. The way he'd looked at her across the crowded club like she was the only thing in the world worth seeing, even if only for a second, even if that second had been stolen from someone else.

From Ava.

She took another sip of the terrible wine and let it sit on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. She'd been home for almost two hours now. Two hours of sitting on this couch, drinking this wine, trying not to think about what was happening somewhere across the city.

Ava and him. Him and Ava.

The image came the way it had been coming all night, slipping through the cracks in her defenses whenever she let her guard down. She saw them together—Ava’s dark hair spread across a pillow, that black dress she’d been wearing hiked up around her hips, her legs wrapped around his waist. She saw his body, that impossible body, moving above her, into her, and she heard the sounds Ava would be making, sounds she’d never heard her friend make but could imagine with terrible, vivid clarity. Moans and gasps and pleas for more, harder, deeper, all the words Corinne herself would have said if she’d been the one beneath him instead of standing frozen at the edge of a crowd, watching him walk away with someone else.



She’d practically pushed them together. That was the part that kept circling back, the detail her mind couldn’t stop worrying at like a tongue probing a sore tooth. She’d been the one to suggest they leave the bar. She’d been the one to point out the club, to encourage Ava to look around, to let herself want something without needing it to mean anything. She’d

been the one who'd slid out of the booth with that smile, leaving them alone together. And Ava, sweet, cautious, perpetually guarded Ava, had actually *listened*. Had actually taken the advice that Corinne had offered so freely, so generously, so fucking *stupidly*.

Good for her, Corinne thought, and the thought was acid. Good for Ava. Good for her for finally letting go, for finally allowing herself to want something messy and real, for finally finding someone who looked at her like she mattered. Good for her for getting fucked by the most beautiful man Corinne had ever seen, the man who should have been looking at *her* across that booth, the man whose eyes had met hers for one earth-shattering second and unlocked something she hadn't known existed, some deep chamber of desire that was now sitting empty and aching.

She drained the glass and poured another. The bottle was half empty now, which meant she was halfway to somewhere—oblivion, maybe, or at least a numb enough state that she could fall asleep without her own hand wandering between her thighs again.

It wasn't that she resented Ava. She didn't. She *couldn't*. Ava was her friend—or at least, she was becoming her friend, in that slow, tentative way that adult friendships formed, built on months of small interactions and the gradual accumulation of trust. Ava was good people. She was kind and funny in a dry, self-deprecating way that Corinne appreciated, and she tipped well, and she never treated Corinne like she was invisible the way so many customers did. Ava deserved a good night. She deserved to be wanted, to be touched, to be fucked within an inch of her life by a man who looked like he'd been sculpted by gods with very specific and very perverse intentions.

But did it have to be *him*?

The question was petty and small and utterly beneath her, and Corinne asked it anyway, staring at her reflection in the dark window across the room. She looked tired. She looked lonely. She looked like exactly what she was: a thirty-two-year-old waitress who'd just watched the best thing that had never happened to her walk out the door with someone else.

Her phone sat on the coffee table. She'd thought about texting Ava. Just a casual message—*hey, you get home okay?*—the kind of thing a friend would send, the kind of thing that would give her an excuse to know, to confirm what she already knew in her bones. But she hadn't sent it. She couldn't. Because what if Ava answered? What if she sent back some

breathless message about the incredible night she was having, about the man she'd met, about how Corinne had been right, she'd needed this, she'd needed *him*? Corinne didn't think she could survive reading those words, didn't think she could stomach the cheerful confirmation that her own advice had worked perfectly for someone else while leaving her alone with her hand in her jeans and a crowd of strangers watching her fall apart.

And what if Ava didn't answer? That would be worse, somehow. The silence would confirm everything—that Ava was too busy being fucked into oblivion to check her phone, that she was currently experiencing the kind of pleasure Corinne had only ever imagined, that somewhere across the city, in some hotel room or apartment or dark corner, the man with those eyes was doing to Ava everything Corinne had fantasized about him doing to her.

She set the wine glass down and pressed her palms against her eyes until she saw stars. The pressure helped, a little. It gave her something to focus on. Her body hadn't gotten the message. It was still sensitive, still ready for something that wasn't coming. She'd thought the shower would help, thought the wine would dull it, but neither had done more than take the edge off. She was still aware of herself in a way she usually wasn't—aware of the weight of her breasts against her ribcage, the friction of her sweatpants against her thighs. It was like the encounter in the club had awakened something that refused to go back to sleep, some hungry animal that had tasted freedom and was now pacing the cage, demanding more.

She could take care of it. She could go to her bedroom, close the door, reach into the nightstand drawer where her own version of Rosa lived. She could lie back against her pillows, close her eyes, and let her mind go where it wanted. To him. To those eyes. To those hands, that mouth, that body. To the fantasy that had seized her in the club and never fully let go, the one where he crossed the room toward *her*, where he pressed *her* against the wall, where his mouth found *her* throat and his hands found *her* skin and his voice—that low, rough voice—told *her* exactly what he wanted to do.

The rain was falling harder now, drumming against the window in a steady rhythm. Corinne watched it streak down the glass, distorting the city lights into blurred smears of color, and let herself imagine—just for a moment, just to feel something besides this hollow misery—what might be happening right now, at this exact second, in whatever room Ava and the stranger had found.

And then the fantasy shifted.

She was there. In the room with them. Not watching from a distance, not imagining from afar, but *there*—on the bed beside Ava. Ava’s hand found hers, their fingers interlacing, and Ava turned to look at her with those warm eyes, and there was no jealousy in that look, no competition. And then his hand was on Corinne’s thigh, sliding up, and Ava was smiling at her, and—

Corinne’s eyes snapped open.

What the fuck was that?

She sat up straight, her heart pounding, her breath coming faster than it should have been. The fantasy lingered at the edges of her mind, vivid and not entirely unwelcome, which was somehow the most disturbing part. She’d never thought about Ava like that. Never thought about *any* woman like that, not really, not beyond the vague, abstract appreciation of beauty that everyone experienced. But the image of Ava’s hand in hers, of Ava’s eyes meeting hers, of the three of them tangled together—it had felt *right* in a way that made no sense.

She reached for her wine glass and found it empty. Of course it was.

The clock now read 2:03 AM. Sixteen minutes had passed since she’d last looked. This was pathetic. *She* was pathetic. She was a grown woman, for fuck’s sake, not some teenager pining over a boy who’d chosen someone else. She had a life. She had friends, a job, an flat that was small but hers. She had a vibrator in her nightstand and a bottle of wine in her kitchen and a perfectly functional ability to take care of her own needs without falling apart over a man she’d seen for exactly thirty seconds.

And yet.

And yet she couldn’t stop thinking about him.

She stood up, needing to move, needing to do something with her body besides sit here and rot. The wine made her head swim slightly, a pleasant buzz that softened the edges of everything without quite dulling them. She carried her empty glass to the kitchen, rinsed it in the sink, watched the water spiral down the drain.

Ava was probably having the best night of her life right now.

The thought came without bitterness this time, or at least with less bitterness. Maybe it was the wine. Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe it was just the slow, reluctant acceptance that some things were out of her control, that she'd made her choices and Ava had made hers, and the fact that those choices had led Ava into the arms of the most beautiful man Corinne had ever seen was just... what it was. The universe's little joke. The price of giving good advice.

Good for Ava, she thought again, and this time she almost meant it.

The phone buzzed.

Corinne's eyes snapped to the coffee table. The screen glowed with a name that made her stomach clench: AVA. She stared at it for a long moment, her wine-muddled brain struggling to process what she was seeing. Three buzzes. Four. The phone vibrated against the wood like angry bees, demanding she pick up, demanding she listen to whatever Ava had to say about the night Corinne had spent two hours trying not to imagine.

She could ignore it. The thought came immediately, reflexively, like a hand jerking back from a hot stove. She could let it ring, let it go to voicemail, let Ava's beaming, breathless voice be something to deal with tomorrow, or the day after, or never. She could pretend she'd been asleep. She could pretend her phone had died. She could pretend any number of things that would buy her more time to process the jealous, hungry thing that was still pacing in her chest.

Five buzzes now. The phone vibrated with the urgency that whoever was calling wasn't going to give up easily. And Ava wasn't the type to call repeatedly, wasn't the type to push, wasn't the type to demand attention in the middle of the night unless something was wrong. The Ava Corinne knew—the Ava who sat at her bar with her smiles and her guarded eyes and her perfectly reasonable expectations—would have sent a text. A polite text that gave Corinne every opportunity to respond or not respond, to engage or disengage, to maintain the careful distance that adult friendships required.

This wasn't that Ava.

Six buzzes. Seven.

Corinne's hand reached for the phone before her brain had fully committed to the decision. Her thumb hovered over the screen, caught between the green answer button and the red decline, and in that suspended moment her mind conjured a dozen possibilities, each one worse than the last. Ava calling to gush. Ava calling to thank her, breathless and satisfied, her voice still rough from screaming. Ava calling to describe, in detail, the night Corinne had imagined so vividly that it felt like a memory she'd stolen from someone else's life. Ava calling to say she'd found him, she'd kept him, she was bringing him home to meet her mother, and wasn't it funny how these things worked out, wasn't it just the most romantic thing, and Corinne would have to smile and nod and pretend she wasn't bleeding internally from every wound her own advice had opened.



She couldn't do it. She couldn't listen to that. She couldn't sit here in her apartment with her cheap wine and her aching body and her pathetic, jealous heart, and listen to Ava describe the best night of her life.

But she was better than that. Wasn't she? She was better than that. She had to be. Because if she wasn't—if she was the kind of woman who let jealousy poison a friendship, who let her own disappointment curdle into resentment, who couldn't be happy for someone else because she was too busy wallowing in what she didn't have—then what was she? Who was she? Some bitter, lonely creature who'd rather let a friend's call go unanswered than hear about happiness she hadn't earned?

Fuck that.

She pressed the green button and brought the phone to her ear.

“Ava?”

The voice that came through the speaker was not the voice Corinne had been expecting. It was Ava, unmistakably Ava, but something had happened to her—something that made Corinne's wine-dulled senses snap to attention like a dog catching a scent. The pitch was different. There was a roughness there, yes, but not the satisfied, sex-roughened rasp that Corinne had been dreading. This was something else. Something raw and frayed and desperate, like a rope that had been pulled too tight and was starting to unravel.

“—and I don't know what's happening, Corinne, I don't know, I woke up and he was gone and then I felt this fever and then my body started—my body, Corinne, my fucking body—”

The words came in a flood, tumbling over each other, crashing together in ways that made them almost impossible to parse. Ava was talking too fast, her breath hitching between phrases, her voice climbing and falling in erratic patterns that suggested she was pacing, or shaking, or both. Corinne caught fragments—”hotel,” ”mirror,” ”different,” ”not me”—but they slipped through her mental fingers before she could assemble them into meaning.

“Ava.” Corinne sat up straighter, her own discomfort forgotten, pushed aside. “Ava, slow down. You're talking too fast. I can't understand what you're saying.”

But Ava didn't slow down. If anything, she sped up, the words coming faster and more frantic, a dam that had broken and was now flooding everything in its path. Her voice cracked on certain syllables, splintered on others, and beneath the panic Corinne could hear something else—something that made the hair on her arms stand up. Ava's voice had always been pleasant, unremarkable, the kind of voice you heard a hundred times a shift and never thought about twice. But this voice was different. Like someone had reached into her throat and replaced her vocal cords with something richer, more complex. It was the difference between a standard speaker and a high-end sound system, between tap water and aged whiskey.

Did Ethan fuck her throat that much?

The thought surfaced and Corinne shoved it down. This wasn't the time. Whatever was happening to Ava—whatever had her calling at whatever hour this was, her voice shaking and strange and wrong—it wasn't about sex. It wasn't about jealousy. It wasn't even about the man Corinne had watched walk away with someone else. This was something else entirely, something that was making Ava's words tumble out in a cascade of terror and confusion that Corinne couldn't quite follow.

“—and my hair, Corinne, my hair is different, it's blonde now, platinum blonde, and my eyes are purple, fucking purple, and I'm younger, I look like I'm twenty-five, and my body—you should see my body—”

Corinne's grip on the phone tightened. None of this made sense. Ava was talking about her hair, her eyes, her age, her body, and none of it tracked with anything Corinne knew about her friend. Ava had brown hair. Warm brown, the color of good coffee. Ava had green eyes—she'd mentioned them once, months ago, when a customer had complimented them. Ava was thirty-four, the same age as Corinne, give or take, and she'd never expressed any particular desire to be younger. And her body—

Corinne's mind stuttered on that last word. Her body. Ava's body, which Corinne had seen a hundred times across the bar, wrapped in work clothes and casual clothes and the occasional nice dress, always unremarkable in the way that most bodies were, pleasant but not memorable. What could possibly have happened to Ava's body in the space of one night that would make her—

“Ava.” Corinne put every ounce of force she possessed into the name, the same voice she used on drunk customers who were about to make bad decisions, the same voice that had talked more than one crying woman down from a bathroom breakdown. “Ava, stop. Take a breath. I can’t understand you when you’re talking this fast. Whatever’s happening, whatever’s wrong, I need you to slow down and tell me. One thing at a time. Can you do that?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Not silence—Corinne could hear Ava breathing, could hear the rapid, shallow rhythm of someone on the edge of hyperventilation—but a pause in the flood of words. It lasted maybe three seconds, maybe five, and then Ava’s voice came back, slower this time but no less different.

“You don’t understand. I woke up and he was gone, just a note, just a fucking note that said ‘Had to go, last night was incredible,’ and then I felt this fever, and my body started changing, Corinne. My body. My muscles started growing. I watched them grow. I watched my thighs get bigger, and my stomach turned into a six-pack, and my arms—my arms are huge now, Corinne. I look like one of those fitness models. No, more than that. I look like I’ve been bodybuilding for years. And my face is different. And my hair is blonde. And my eyes are purple. And I’m *younger*.”

Corinne found herself shaking her head, as if the physical motion could somehow reject the words she was hearing. It didn’t make sense. None of it made sense. Bodies didn’t just change. Muscles didn’t just grow. Hair didn’t turn blonde overnight. Eyes didn’t become purple. Women didn’t wake up younger than they’d gone to sleep. These were things that happened in movies, in books, in the kind of fantasies that Corinne had never allowed herself to take seriously. They didn’t happen in real life.

“Ava, listen to me. You’re not making sense.”

“You don’t believe me.”

Corinne could hear Ava breathing on the other end of the line—that rapid, shallow rhythm of someone barely holding themselves together—and for a long, terrible moment, neither of them spoke. The rain drummed against Corinne’s window, and somewhere in the building, a neighbor’s television murmured through the walls, the sound too faint to

distinguish words but loud enough to remind her that the world was still turning, still ordinary, still governed by rules that made sense.

This was a prank call. It had to be. Some elaborate joke, some weird performance art, some friend of Ava's who'd gotten her phone and decided to fuck with the waitress Ava was always talking about. Because the alternative—that this was really Ava—was impossible. Was *insane*. But the voice. It was still Ava's voice—the cadence, the particular way she shaped her vowels, the slight upward lilt at the end of certain phrases that made statements sound almost like questions.

If this was a prank, it was the best fucking prank Corinne had ever encountered.

“Ava.” She said the name carefully. “If this is really you—if you're really Ava—then prove it.”

“Are you serious right no—”

“Ask me something only Ava would know. Something about me. Something I've never told anyone else.”

Corinne could almost hear the wheels turning, could almost hear Ava—if it was Ava—struggling to shift gears from panic to proof.

“Okay.” Ava's voice came back quieter now, more controlled, though the new resonance remained, that strange richness that made Corinne think of cellos. “Okay. The first time you waited for me—the very first time, months ago—I ordered a glass of the house red. And you brought it, and I took one sip, and I made a face. I didn't mean to. It just happened. And you noticed. You came back to the table and you said—”

She paused, and Corinne could hear her take a breath, could hear the slight tremor in it, the way she was using this memory as an anchor, something solid to hold onto in a world that had suddenly become liquid and strange.

“You said, ‘Yeah, that wine's shit. Let me get you something that won't make you look like you just sucked a lemon.’ And you brought me a different glass, something off-menu, something you said the bartender kept in back for people who actually knew what they were

doing. And you didn't charge me for it. You just winked and walked away."

Corinne remembered that night. Remembered it with the peculiar clarity of moments that seemed insignificant at the time but had somehow become foundational. Ava had been sitting alone at the corner table, the one with the wobbly leg that everyone complained about but no one ever bothered to fix, and she'd looked so tired, so defeated, so utterly worn down by whatever her day had been. And when she'd made that face—that honest, completely unguarded expression of disgust at the terrible wine—something in Corinne had responded. She'd brought Ava the good wine. The wine she kept for herself, really, hidden behind the cheap bottles and the markup specials, the wine she drank on her breaks when she needed to remember that not everything in life was watered down and marked up and designed to disappoint. And Ava had smiled—a real smile, not the polite, performative smile that customers wore.

No one else knew that story. No one. Corinne had never told it to anyone, had never even thought to tell it, because it was such a small thing, such a minor moment in the vast landscape of her life. But Ava remembered.

It was Ava. It was really Ava.

"Okay." Corinne's voice came out rough, scraped raw by the realization. "I don't understand—I don't understand any of this—but... Now tell me where you are. Exactly where you are."

The relief in Ava's exhale was a release of tension so profound that Corinne could feel it through the phone. "The hotel. The one across from the club. Room 412. I'm still here. I haven't—I couldn't—"

"Stay there." Corinne was already moving, grabbing her keys from the hook by the door, pulling on her jacket with the phone pressed between her ear and shoulder. "Don't leave. Don't let anyone in. I'm coming to you. Just—stay put. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Corinne—"

"I mean it, Ava. Stay in that room. I'm on my way."

She ended the call before Ava could respond, before she could lose her nerve, before the weight of what she was doing could settle in and make her question everything. Her flat door slammed behind her. The hallway was dim, lit only by the flickering light that the landlord kept promising to fix. She didn't have an umbrella. She hadn't thought to grab one. She hadn't thought about anything except Ava's voice—that strange, impossible voice—her friend alone in a hotel room, swearing upon and down that she was transformed into someone she didn't recognize, terrified and desperate and reaching out to the only person she trusted enough to call.

The streets were empty at this hour. Corinne walked fast, her footsteps splashing through puddles she didn't bother to avoid. If Ava was telling the truth—and she *was*, Corinne believed, with a certainty that scared her—Ethan had done this. Somehow, impossibly, the handsome stranger who'd walked out of the club with Ava had changed her, remade her from the inside out, had left her alone in a hotel room with a new body and a new face and a new voice and no explanation for any of it. The man Corinne had fantasized about, had imagined tying her up and taking her apart and doing things to her that she'd never allowed anyone to do—was dangerous.

The thought should have terrified her. It did terrify her, on some level, the part of her brain that was still clinging to the familiar world where such things didn't happen. But there was another part—the part that had awakened in the club, the part that had imagined him crossing the room toward her, pressing her against the wall—that felt something else entirely. Something that looked at what had happened to Ava and thought: *What if it had been me?* She shoved the thought down, deep down, where she wouldn't have to look at it. This wasn't about her. This wasn't about her fantasies, her desires, her jealous, hungry heart. This was about Ava, who was scared and alone. This was about being a friend. About showing up. About being better than the petty, wounded creature who'd spent two hours wallowing in wine and self-pity.

The hotel rose up before Corinne, a nondescript building of beige concrete and dark windows, the kind of place that existed for people who needed a room for the night and nothing more. No grand lobby, no uniformed doorman, just a glass door that slid open with a tired wheeze and a front desk clerk who barely looked up from his phone as Corinne walked past. She didn't stop to explain herself. Didn't sign in, didn't ask permission, didn't

do any of the things a person would do in a normal situation. Normal had abandoned her the moment Ava's voice had come through the phone.

The elevator was slow, ancient, creaking its way upward with the enthusiasm of something being asked to perform a task it had long ago forgotten how to do. Corinne watched the numbers tick by—2, 3, 4—and tried to prepare herself for what she was about to see. Ava's voice had been different. Ava's words had described a body transformed. But words were just words. They couldn't prepare her for the reality of standing face to face with something that shouldn't exist.

The elevator doors opened onto the fourth floor. The hallway was narrow, and the numbers on the doors ticked by as Corinne walked: 408, 410, 412.

She stopped.

Her hand hovered over the door, knuckles poised to knock, and for a moment she couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't do anything except stand there in the hallway with rain dripping from her hair and her heart pounding against her ribs like it was trying to escape. Because once she knocked, once that door opened, everything would change.

She knocked.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. It came through the crack in the door before Corinne had even opened it fully. The smell rolled over her in a wave, so unmistakably *sex* that Corinne's body responded before her mind could catch up. It was the smell of *hours* of fucking.

Corinne stepped inside, and the door clicked shut behind her.

The room was a wreck. Not the casual disarray of normal hotel stays—a suitcase opened, a jacket draped over a chair, the bathroom counter cluttered with toiletries. This was the aftermath of a storm. The sheets were a tangled catastrophe, half-pulled from the mattress and twisted into ropes and knots. One pillow lay flattened near the headboard, visibly dented where a head had pressed into it again and again. Another had been flung across the room and now rested against the far wall beneath the window, as if it had been thrown there in a moment of ecstatic violence and never retrieved.

The bedside lamp was crooked, its shade tilted at an angle that made the light spill across the rumpled bedspread. The generic hotel painting—a mass-produced print of some anonymous flower arrangement, the kind of art that existed only to fill wall space—hung askew, its frame knocked out of alignment by a passing shoulder or a thrown elbow or a body pressed against it in the dark. The curtains were half-drawn, letting in slivers of streetlight that cut across the carpet in pale orange stripes.

And everywhere—*everywhere*—was the cum.

Corinne's eyes moved across the room with the unwilling fascination of someone driving past a car wreck, unable to look away despite the sickness coiling in her stomach. Ava's dress lay in a crumpled heap near the door, the black fabric twisted and abandoned like something shed in desperation, not removed with care. Near the foot of the bed, tangled in the sheets that had spilled onto the floor, were Ava's panties. Black. Lacy. Corinne recognized them—not because she'd seen them before, but because she owned similar ones, had worn similar ones on nights when she'd hoped someone might appreciate the effort. These had been appreciated. These had been pulled aside or torn off or simply pushed out of the way in the urgency of whatever had happened here. And there, draped across the edge of the nightstand like a flag planted in conquered territory, was Ava's bra. It hung from the corner of the lamp, one strap hooked around the shade.

Corinne's eyes continued their inventory, and each new detail was a fresh splinter worked under her skin.

The nightstand held an empty water glass, its sides smeared with fingerprints that could have belonged to either of them. Beside it, the hotel notepad. The note. Ava had mentioned a note. *Had to go. Last night was incredible.* Corinne could see it in her mind without having read it, could imagine the careless scrawl, the deliberate absence of a phone number or a promise or anything that *might* have suggested this night had meant something beyond being a one night stand.

Fucking typical.

But even as she thought it, even as the familiar feminist reflex kicked in—the one that wanted to be angry at men who took and left and never looked back—Corinne knew this

was different. Whatever had happened in this room hadn't been typical. It hadn't been ordinary sex. *Something* had happened here. Something that had left Ava hiding in a bathroom and calling the only person she trusted enough.

The sheets were *soaked*. Corinne could see it now, her eyes picking out the darker patches where liquid had saturated the fabric and dried in stiff, irregular shapes. Some of it was sweat—there must have been so much sweat, hours of it. But some of it was come. Or rather, *most* of it. There was so much of it. More than Corinne had ever seen outside of pornography. More than seemed possible for two human bodies to produce in a single night. It was on the sheets, on the pillows, smeared across the headboard in a long streak. It was on the floor—she noticed it now, a dried puddle near the foot of the bed, and another closer to the door, as if the first round hadn't even made it to the mattress.

Jesus Christ.

"Ava? Ava, I'm here."

Silence.

Corinne took a step toward the bathroom, her boots sinking into the cheap carpet.

"Ava." She put force into the name this time, the same voice she'd used on the phone. "I'm not playing games. I came all the way here. I'm standing in your hotel room that smells like—" She stopped herself. Didn't finish the sentence. Didn't need to. "I'm here. I came. Now come out."

The bathroom door didn't open. But Ava's voice came through it—muffled, strange, carrying that new tone that made Corinne, again, think of cellos and things that shouldn't exist in the throat of a thirty-four-year-old woman who'd sounded perfectly ordinary twelve hours ago.

"You shouldn't have come." The words were quiet, almost a whisper, but they carried through the bathroom door with terrible clarity. Corinne heard the tremor in them, the fear that was barely being held in check, the shame that lurked beneath the fear like a deeper, colder current. "I mean it, Corinne. You should go. You should—you should just go home and forget I called—"

"You called *me*. You called *me*, Ava. Not anyone else. Not the front desk, not an ambulance, not even your mother. You called *me*. And I came. So whatever is behind that door—whatever you think is so terrible I can't handle it—I'm not leaving until I see it. Until I see *you*. So you can come out now, or you can stay in there and I'll stand here all night, but one way or another, I'm going to be here when you're ready to open that door."

And then, slowly, so slowly that Corinne almost didn't hear it over the rain—

The bathroom door began to open, swinging inward with a creak that seemed to last forever.

Corinne had *tried* to prepare herself. She had told herself that Ava's words were real, that something impossible had happened, that she was about to see a friend. But preparation was a lie the mind told itself to feel in control. Nothing could have prepared her for this.

Ava stepped out of the bathroom, and the first thing Corinne registered—the thing her eyes seized upon before they could process anything else—was the size. The towel was thin enough that it stretched across her entire body. It was wrapped around her torso, tucked under one arm, and it covered—barely—the essentials. But "covered" was a generous word for what that towel was doing. It was like trying to hide a mountain with a bedsheet.

Corinne's eyes traveled upward from the floor—from bare feet that seemed somehow looked smoother, younger, a—and what she saw made her stomach drop.

The calves came first, each bulging outward in that particular diamond shape bodybuilders chased after through years of dedicated training, except Ava hadn't had years, had only had hours, had only had whatever impossible thing Ethan's body had done to hers.

And then her thighs. The towel ended just above the knee, and what it revealed—what it couldn't hope to conceal—Ava's quadriceps were *enormous*. The word felt inadequate even as it formed in her mind, but it was the only one available. The vastus medialis bulged on the inside of each knee, that signature teardrop shape that bodybuilders spent years trying to develop, and on Ava it looked almost *excessive*, like her body had taken the concept of "defined" and pushed it past any reasonable limit. The rectus femoris ran down the center of each thigh in a thick, rope-like column, separated from the vastus lateralis on the outside.

The towel was losing its battle. Corinne could see the way the fabric strained across Ava's hips—not the narrow hips she remembered from the bar, from months of watching Ava sit in that corner booth with her wine. These hips were wider, yes, but not in the soft way that came from weight gain or age. They were wider because the muscle beneath had expanded, because the gluteus medius and minimus had grown along with everything else, yet still held an hourglass figure—somehow. Every time Ava shifted her weight—and she was shifting constantly, Corinne realized, small unconscious adjustments as if she couldn't quite find her balance in this new body—the muscles in her hips and thighs would bunch and release, bunch and release hypnotically.

She was *Ava*. And Corinne had to keep reminding herself of that because everything her eyes were telling her screamed otherwise.

The towel's upper edge cut across Ava's torso just below her breasts, and what it revealed there—what it couldn't cover, because no towel in the world could have covered this—was an abdomen that made Corinne's own stomach clench with something that was obviously envy. The rectus abdominis was carved into a perfect six-pack, each segment defined by deep horizontal grooves and bisected by the linea alba running down the center. But it wasn't just the six-pack. It was everything around it. The obliques flared on either side, creating that V-taper that Corinne had always found devastatingly attractive on men, the narrowing of the waist that made shoulders look broader and hips look more powerful. And below the obliques—visible even above the towel—were the serratus anterior muscles wrapped around the ribcage like the gills of some predatory fish, each one defined with a clarity that made Corinne want to reach out and touch them, trace them, count them one by one.

The arms. God, the *arms*. The towel left them completely bare, and Corinne's eyes traveled up from the forearms—the brachioradialis creating that distinctive sweep of muscle along the outside, the flexors and extensors visible as distinct cords beneath the skin—to the biceps and triceps that bulged even at rest. Even with Ava's arms hanging at her sides, her hands clutched the towel in a grip that looked like it might tear through the fabric at any moment. The biceps rose in peaks that stretched the skin, and the triceps pushed outward behind them.



But it was Ava's face that finally broke something loose in Corinne.

She looked up—she had to look up now, because Ava was taller, had grown at least two or three inches during whatever impossible transformation had seized her on that bathroom floor—and met eyes that were no longer the warm green she remembered. They were violet. A deep, striking purple, the color of amethysts. The color of something that didn't belong in a human face, that shouldn't have been possible, that made Corinne think of fantasy novels and supernatural romances and all the genres she'd claimed to disdain but secretly devoured when no one was watching.

And her hair. The brown was gone—that familiar, shoulder-length brown that Corinne had watched Ava tuck behind her ears a hundred times. In its place was a cascade of platinum blonde so pale it was almost white, falling in thick waves past shoulders that were now broader, more powerful than any shoulders Corinne had ever seen on a woman outside

of professional athletics.

But she was herself. That was the worst part. That was the part that made Corinne's mind stutter and skip like a record player with a scratched disc. Because beneath the violet eyes and the platinum hair and the face that had shed ten years of aging like a snake shedding skin—because yes, Ava looked *younger*, looked twenty-five or twenty-six instead of thirty-four, her skin smoother and tighter—beneath all of that impossible transformation, it was still *Ava*. The way she held herself. The slight tremor in her lower lip. The way her eyes—those impossible eyes—kept darting to Corinne's face and then away, unable to hold contact, as if she was afraid of what she might see there.

Corinne opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

No words came. What words could possibly come? What did you say to someone who had been your friend—your ordinary, unremarkable, secretly cherished friend—twelve hours ago, and was now standing before you as something that defied every law of biology and physics and basic human possibility? What did you say to someone whose body had been remade from the inside out, whose muscles bulged and shifted with every breath, whose very presence made your own body respond in ways you didn't want to examine too closely?

"Ava?" The name came out as a question, and Corinne hated herself for it. Hated the uncertainty in her own voice, the way it cracked on the single syllable. This was Ava. She knew it in her bones, in whatever part of her recognized people. But knowing and believing were different things, and her eyes kept sending signals to her brain that her brain kept rejecting, and the result was a kind of cognitive paralysis that left her standing frozen in the middle of that sex-soaked hotel room, staring at her transformed friend like she'd never seen her before.

Because she hadn't. Not like *this*. *No one* had ever seen anyone like this.

Corinne could hear the rain still falling outside, could hear the distant rumble of a truck on the street below. And through it all, Ava just stood there, clutching that inadequate towel, her massive shoulders hunched slightly forward in a posture that was so familiar—Ava had always hunched, always made herself smaller than she was. Here was this impossible creature, this vision of muscle and power and supernatural beauty, and she was holding herself like she was still the same ordinary woman who'd sat in Corinne's bar and nursed her

wine and tried so hard not to hope for too much.

"Ava." This time the name came out steadier, firmer.

"It's me," Ava whispered, and her voice—that new voice—trembled on the words. "I know I don't look like me. I know I look like—like *this*. But it's me, Corinne. I swear it's me. I don't know what happened. I don't know *how* this happened. I just woke up and he was gone and then my body started—" She stopped, swallowed hard, and Corinne watched the muscles in her throat move, watched the way her trapezius flared with the motion.

"You're Ava. That's all that matters right now. We'll figure out the rest. We'll figure out what he did to you, and why, and what it means. But right now—" She stopped, took a breath, let her eyes travel once more over that impossible body, those bulging muscles, that flawless face. "Right now, you need to put on some clothes that actually fit, because that towel is doing *nothing* for anyone's peace of mind."

It was the right thing to say. She knew it the moment the words left her mouth, because Ava's terrified expression cracked, just slightly, and something that might have been a smile flickered at the corner of her full lips. It wasn't much. It wasn't enough to dispel the fear that still lurked in those violet eyes. But it was something. It was a *start*.

And as Ava turned—slowly, carefully, still adjusting to the new dimensions of her own body—and made her way toward the crumpled dress on the floor, Corinne let herself look. Really look. Let herself take in Ava's back, the way her lats flared outward from her spine in a dramatic V that narrowed to a waist that seemed impossibly small by comparison. The way her glutes—visible even beneath the towel, because of course they were, because no towel could contain *that*—bunched and released with each step, so perfectly developed that Corinne had to physically restrain herself from reaching out to touch them.

This was wrong. This was impossible. This was the kind of transformation that happened in the stories Corinne had never admitted to reading, the ones she found late at night and devoured with shame and fascination. But this wasn't a story. This was real. This was Ava. And whatever Ethan had done to her—whatever he *was*—it had changed everything.

Corinne watched Ava bend to retrieve her dress that would now struggle to contain even

a fraction of her new musculature—and felt the jealousy she'd been nursing all night shift into something else. Something more complicated. Something that wasn't just about wanting what Ava had experienced, but about wanting *Ava herself*. Her body knew. Her body had known since the moment that bathroom door had opened. And as Ava straightened, clutching the dress against her chest like a shield, and turned to face her with those violet eyes full of fear and hope and desperate need for reassurance—

Corinne's body knew exactly what it wanted.

The gym clothes were a compromise. A failure, really, if Corinne was being honest with herself—and she was trying very hard to be honest with herself about everything else, so why stop now. She'd found a twenty-four-hour sporting goods store six blocks from the hotel, the kind of place that sold protein powder and resistance bands and cheap athletic wear to people who'd decided at two in the morning that tomorrow would be the day they finally got in shape. The selection had been limited. The sizes had been worse. She'd grabbed the largest set of women's athletic wear she could find—an XL sports bra that claimed to offer "maximum support" and a pair of L compression leggings that promised to "sculpt and lift"—and had prayed to whatever gods might be listening that they would be enough.

They weren't. Of course they weren't.

The sports bra stretched across Ava's back like it was fighting a war it knew it was going to lose. The straps dug into her trapezius muscles, creating deep grooves in flesh that seemed to resist the fabric's every attempt at containment. The band beneath her shoulder blades was pulled so tight that the elastic whined softly with every breath she took. And the cups—god, the cups. They were meant to accommodate a C-cup at most, maybe a generous D if the wearer was feeling optimistic, but Ava's pectoral muscles pushed against them from beneath, lifting and separating in ways deemed impossible. The fabric stretched her breasts, and Corinne could see the striations in the muscle beneath, the way the fibers fanned out from her sternum toward her shoulders in a pattern that belonged on an anatomy chart, not a woman she'd once watched nurse a single glass of wine for two hours.

The leggings were worse. They'd been designed to hold everything in place with gentle but firm pressure. Ava's thighs had other ideas. The fabric strained across her quadriceps

with every tiny movement, the compression becoming constriction, the sculpting becoming obscene. The vastus lateralis pushed against the outer seams in a way that made the stitching creak, and the rectus femoris created a visible ridge down the center of each thigh that the fabric couldn't hope to disguise.

Corinne was trying not to look. She was failing.

Ava, for her part, seemed to have moved past the initial terror. Not completely—Corinne could still see it lurking at the edges of her eyes, could still hear it in the slight tremor that occasionally crept into that impossible new voice. But something had shifted in the hour since Corinne had returned with the clothes. Maybe it was the simple act of being covered, of not standing exposed in nothing but a threadbare hotel towel while her friend stared at her like she was a museum exhibit. Maybe it was the passage of time, the slow acceptance that whatever had happened to her wasn't going to un-happen, that this body was hers now whether she wanted it or not. Or maybe—and this was the possibility that made Corinne's stomach tighten in ways she didn't want to examine—maybe Ava was starting to *like* it.

She was standing in front of the mirror again. Not the bathroom mirror this time, but the full-length one mounted on the closet door, the kind that was meant for checking your outfit before you went out for the night. Ava had been staring into it for the past five minutes, her head tilted slightly to one side, her expression shifting through phases that Corinne was trying very hard to read without being obvious about it.

"So," Corinne said, staring at the way Ava's lats flared when she breathed. "Ethan. Tell me what happened. Everything. From the moment you left the club."

Ava didn't answer. Her hand had drifted up to her shoulder—her left shoulder, the one with the sports bra strap cutting a deep groove into the muscle—and her fingers were tracing the outline of her deltoid. Not consciously, Corinne realized. Not with any particular intent. It was the way someone might touch a scar they'd only just discovered, exploring their own body with a mixture of curiosity and wonder and something that looked, from this angle, dangerously close to appreciation.

"Ava."

"Hmm?" She didn't look away from the mirror. Her fingers had moved from her deltoid to her bicep. The muscle there was enormous—easily larger than Corinne's own, though she was trying not to make that comparison too directly—and it swelled visibly even without flexing. But then Ava *did* flex, just slightly, just a tiny contraction that made the bicep peak rise another inch toward her shoulder, and the sound she made—

It was small. Barely audible. A soft exhalation that might have been surprise, might have been something else entirely. But Corinne heard it.

"The club," Corinne said, forcing her voice steady. "You left with him. What happened after that?"

Ava's hand dropped from her bicep—reluctantly, Corinne thought, though she couldn't have said why she thought that—and moved to her other arm, and she was watching her own reflection with those violet eyes like she'd never seen herself before. Which, Corinne supposed, she hadn't. Not this version of herself. Not this impossible creature with platinum hair and muscles that belonged on a statue carved by someone who'd spent too much time thinking about the female form.

Corinne was trying not to look. She was failing. And Ava—Ava was *posing*. Not consciously, perhaps, but looking at herself way someone might look at a masterpiece they'd only just discovered they'd painted, running their eyes over every brushstroke. Her fingers had moved from her deltoid to her bicep. The muscle there was enormous—easily larger than Corinne's own, though she was trying very hard not to make that comparison too directly—and it swelled visibly even without flexing. The bicep peak rose in a smooth curve that caught the dim hotel light and held it, creating shadows in the groove between the two heads of the muscle that made Corinne want to run her tongue along that exact line.

"Fuck," Ava whispered, and it wasn't fear in her voice anymore. It wasn't terror or confusion or any of those things when Corinne had first arrived. It was wonder. It was appreciation. It was the slow, dawning realization that the body she was inhabiting was not a punishment but a *gift*.

"The hotel," Ava said, and her voice was distant, distracted, the voice of someone only partially following the conversation. Her fingers found the peak of her bicep, pressed into it, watched the way the skin dimpled and then sprang back. "We came here. To this room." She

flexed again—harder this time, a full contraction that made the bicep swell to its full, obscene size—and the smile that curved her lips was nothing like any expression Corinne had ever seen on her face before. "He kissed me against the door. Before it was even closed."

Corinne's throat tightened. She could imagine it. Had imagined it, in fact, during those miserable hours on her couch with her terrible wine. Ethan pressing Ava against the door, his mouth on hers, his hands everywhere. The sounds they would have made. The way Ava must have responded, must have opened for him, must have *wanted* him with the same desperate hunger that Corinne had felt just from a single glance across a crowded club.

"And then?" The words came out strained. Corinne didn't care anymore. She was past pretending this conversation wasn't affecting her.

Ava's hands moved to her shoulders, fingers digging in, kneading the muscle like she was testing its density. She rolled her shoulders back, and the movement made her lats flare outward. On Ava, it was something else entirely. On Ava, it was *obscene*.

"He took off my dress," Ava said, and her voice had dropped half an octave, become something slower. "Right there. Against the door. He didn't even unzip it—he just pulled it up over my head and threw it somewhere. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything except getting his hands on me." She turned slightly, angling her body so she could see her back in the mirror, and she flexed again—her lats this time, spreading them wide like wings. The sports bra's band groaned in protest, and Ava's smile widened. "God, look at that. Look at my *back*."

Corinne looked. She couldn't *not* look. The muscles of Ava's back were visible even through the strained fabric of the sports bra. Her trapezius rose in thick slopes from her neck to her shoulders. Her rhomboids created deep valleys on either side of her spine. Her lats flared like the hood of a cobra, creating a width that seemed impossible given the narrowness of her waist.

"I never had a back before," Ava said, and there was wonder in her voice, genuine wonder, as if she was discovering something miraculous.

She turned to face the mirror again, and this time her hands went to her abdomen. To

the six-pack that was visible even through the sports bra's lower band, carved into perfect, symmetrical segments. She ran her fingers down the center line and the touch seemed to send a shiver through her entire body. She flexed her abdomen properly for the first time. Not just a casual contraction, but a full, deliberate crunch that made every segment stand out. The six-pack became an eight-pack—because of course it did, because Ava's body had decided that mere perfection wasn't enough.

She ran her hand down her stomach again, slower this time, her fingers tracing each groove with deliberate attention. And the sound she made—a soft, appreciative hum—was so openly sexual that Corinne had to look away for a moment, had to stare at the floor and count her breaths and remind herself that this was *Ava*, her *friend*, the woman she'd come here to help. But when she looked back, Ava was watching her in the mirror. Those violet eyes were amused, utterly aware of the effect she was having. And the smile that curved on those full lips was an invitation and a challenge all at once.



"You want to touch them," Ava said. It wasn't a question.

Corinne's mouth opened, but no words came. What words could possibly come when the woman she'd been trying not to fantasize about was standing in front of her, offering

exactly what she'd been trying not to want?

“Uh...”

"It's okay." Ava turned from the mirror, facing Corinne directly for the first time since she'd started posing. And her body—that impossible, magnificent, *obscene* body—was on full display, not hidden behind a towel or hunched in fear, but presented. *Offered*. "I want you to."

"Where?"

Ava reached out, took Corinne's hand and guided it to her stomach. Corinne's fingers spread across the six-pack—the eight-pack—and she felt the muscles contract as Ava flexed.

"Fuck," Corinne breathed.

"Keep going," Ava said.

And Corinne, who had spent the last hour wanting and denying and wanting again, finally stopped pretending. She let her hands explore Ava's abdomen. She touched and touched and *touched*, and with every touch, Ava made sounds that drove her absolutely insane. Corinne hadn't meant to keep touching. But Ava hadn't pulled away, and Corinne hadn't wanted to, and somewhere in the space between one breath and the next, the pretense of this being anything other than what it was had simply dissolved.

"Jesus," Corinne whispered. She wasn't sure if she was talking about the muscles or the sound Ava had made or the entire impossible situation. Maybe all of it. Maybe none of it. Maybe she'd stopped being capable of coherent thought somewhere around the moment Ava had flexed her biceps for the first time and made that small, sound.

Corinne's fingers tightened against Ava's stomach. She couldn't help it. This body was painting pictures in her mind—vivid, explicit pictures that she'd been trying not to imagine for hours now—and *her* body was responding in ways she couldn't control. She pressed her legs together, trying to relieve some of the pressure, and Ava's smile widened like she knew exactly what was happening.

Ava's hand moved lower, tracing her lower abdomen—the Adonis belt, Corinne realized, the iliac furrow that pointed down toward the waistband of those straining leggings like an arrow. Ava's fingers followed the line of her inguinal ligament, tracing the crease where her thigh met her torso. Corinne's fingers had found one of the veins on Ava's abdomen pulsing faintly. She traced it with her fingertip, watching the way it disappeared into the groove between two segments of muscle, and Ava's stomach tightened in response, making the vein stand out even more prominently.

"He was *good*," Ava continued. "Really fucking good. Like he knew exactly where to touch, exactly how much pressure, exactly when to speed up and when to slow down. I came so hard I thought I was going to pass out. I screamed so loud I'm surprised no one called the front desk."

Corinne's eyes were fixed on that vein. She couldn't look away. It was so delicate, so incongruous against the hard ridges of muscle that surrounded it—this thin, little thing. There were others, she realized. Now that she was looking, she could see them—a fine network of veins spreading across Ava's abdomen like rivers on a map. They were visible because her skin was so thin, so tight, stretched to its limits by the muscle beneath. Visible because there was no fat left to hide them, no softness to blur their edges.



Ava's smile widened. She flexed again—deliberately this time, a full contraction of her entire abdomen that made every segment of her eight-pack stand out, that made the veins bulge and pulse, that made the serratus anterior flare like gills. And Corinne *felt it under her hands*—felt the muscles hardening, tightening, becoming something even more impossibly solid than they'd been a moment before.

"He was big. I knew he would be—I'd imagined it, back in the club, when I was sitting there trying not to fantasize about him in front of you. But knowing and feeling are different things. When I felt the head of his cock pressing against me, I thought, *he won't fit. He can't possibly fit.* But he did. And then—"

Something had shifted in Ava's voice—something that made Corinne's attention snap back to her face, to those violet eyes that had suddenly gone distant and focused all at once. Corinne watched her swallow, watched the muscles in her throat move.

"—His cock grew."

Corinne felt her brain stutter, skip, try to process what she'd just heard. "What?"

"His cock," Ava repeated, and there was no uncertainty in her voice now, no hesitation. Just the simple truth. "It grew. It got bigger. While he was inside me."

Corinne's hand had gone still on Ava's stomach. She was staring at her friend—at this impossible creature with platinum hair and violet eyes and muscles that belonged on a Greek statue—and trying to make sense of words that refused to make sense. "That's not—cocks don't just *grow*, Ava. That's not how they work."

"I know." Ava's smile was almost pitying, the smile of someone who'd seen things that couldn't be unseen. "I know that's not how they work. But it happened. I could feel him stretching me open in ways that shouldn't have been possible, reaching places inside me that hadn't existed a moment before. At first I thought I was imagining it. Thought it was just the pleasure. But I *saw* it. And every time he fucked me, every time he made me come, it grew again."

"Every time?"

"Every. Single. Time." Ava's eyes met Corinne's in the mirror. "He just wouldn't stop. Wouldn't stop fucking me, wouldn't stop making me come, wouldn't stop *growing*. It was like—like the more pleasure he gave me, the bigger he got."

Ava had lost count off how many times she came. Of how many times he grew. It all blurred together into one endless wave of pleasure. She'd never felt anything like it. Didn't think anyone had ever felt anything like it. It was like he was made for her—made to fit inside her perfectly, to reach every spot, to fill every empty place she didn't even know she had.

"And then I woke up," Ava said. "And he was gone."

"Cum," Corinne said. The word came out flat, stripped of the embarrassment that might have colored it in any other context.

Ava's eyes met hers in the mirror. There was confusion there, a flicker of the old Ava surfacing through the new, and Corinne watched her process the word, turn it over, examine it from different angles the way she'd once examined her wine before deciding whether it was worth drinking.

"What about it?"

"His cum." Corinne's voice was gaining momentum now, the pieces falling into place with a speed that made her head spin. "You said his cock grew every time you came. Which means every time he got bigger, he was—he must have been—"

She stopped, because saying it out loud felt like stepping off a cliff. But Ava's eyes had widened, and Corinne could see the same realization dawning there, the same impossible conclusion.

"You think—"

"I think whatever he did to you, it's in his cum." Corinne pulled her hand back from Ava's stomach—reluctantly, though she'd never admit it—and began to pace the hotel room. "Think about it. You said you felt the fever after you woke up. After he was gone. After he'd already—after everything he left inside you had time to... absorb. And then your body started changing. Your muscles started growing. Your face, your hair, your eyes—all of it. Everything that happened to you happened *after* he came inside you."

She turned to face Ava, and the sight of her stopped Corinne mid-stride. Ava had turned from the mirror and was now standing with her weight shifted onto one hip—a pose that was both casual and devastating, the kind of stance that made her quadriceps bunch and her glutes tighten. But it wasn't just the muscles that held her attention. It was the way Ava was looking at herself. Not in the mirror anymore—she'd turned away from it—but *down*. At her own body. At her pectorals pushing against the sports bra's inadequate cups. At her abdomen visible even through the fabric. At her own hand, which had drifted up to her shoulder and was now tracing the outline of her deltoid with the same wondering, appreciative touch she'd used earlier.

"You're doing it again," Corinne said.

Ava's eyes flicked up to meet hers, and there was no shame in them. No embarrassment at being caught. Just that same dawning appreciation, that same slow awakening to the reality of what she'd become. "Doing what?"

"Eye-fucking yourself."

"Can you blame me? I mean, look at this."

Ava held her arm out, turning it slightly so the light caught the contours of her triceps, the way the muscle pushed outward behind her arm in a thick horseshoe shape that most men would kill for. Corinne should have said something. Should have redirected the conversation back to Ethan, back to the plan they needed to make, back to the practical realities of what they were going to do about this impossible situation. But the words wouldn't come. They were stuck somewhere in her throat.

She flexed her abdomen for what had to be tenth time now. "I have an Adonis belt. I didn't even know women could *have* Adonis belts. I thought that was a man thing."

The words should have sounded bitter. Should have carried some note of resentment, of fear, of the terror that had been so evident in her voice when Corinne had first arrived. But there was none of that now. Just wonder. Just appreciation. Just the slow, dawning realization that whatever Ethan had done to her—whatever impossible transformation had been triggered by his ever-growing cock and cum—had given Ava something she'd never known she wanted until she had it.

"Ava." Corinne put force into the name, the same voice she'd used on the phone, the same voice that had talked Ava out of the bathroom. "We need to figure this out. We need to find Ethan."

The name seemed to break whatever spell had held Ava in its grip. She blinked, her eyes refocusing, and for a moment Corinne saw a flash of the old Ava. Then it was gone, replaced by something harder, more determined.

"Right." Ava's voice was steadier now, more controlled, though that new resonance remained. "Ethan. We need to find Ethan. Because—" She paused, and her eyes dropped to

her own body again, traveling over the muscles that had no right to exist, the face that was ten years younger, the hair that was platinum blonde instead of brown. "Because this needs fixing. Doesn't it?"

It was a question, not a statement. And Corinne heard the uncertainty in it, the tiny thread of doubt that suggested Ava wasn't entirely sure she *wanted* this fixed. That maybe, just maybe, the woman who'd spent her whole life being ordinary had discovered she quite liked being extraordinary.

Then, of course, came the question that mattered most: just where the fuck was Ethan anyway?

Her name was Mary. She lived in a nice little place with a garden she tended on weekends, kneeling in the dirt with her hair pulled back and her hands buried in soil like she was trying to grow something that would make her forget why she'd started gardening in the first place. Her husband's name was David, and he worked in finance—something with numbers, something that kept him late at the office three nights a week and sent him on business trips twice a month and left Mary alone with nothing but her garden and her thoughts.

She'd been looking and thinking about him for months. He'd noticed—of course he'd noticed; he noticed everything now, had learned to read the way women's eyes lingered, in the way they touched their hair or their throats or their wine glasses when he was near—but he hadn't acted on it. Not at first. Not because he was above it, not because he had some moral objection to sleeping with a married woman, but because he'd wanted to be sure. Sure that she wanted it badly enough to risk everything. Sure that when she finally came to him, she'd come because she couldn't stay away, because the wanting had become a kind of madness, because she'd spent so many nights lying next to her husband and thinking about Ethan's hands, Ethan's mouth, Ethan's cock, that the thought of not having him had become unbearable.

She'd texted him at 9:47 PM. *David's in Chicago until Thursday. I can't stop thinking about you.*

That had been—she glanced at the clock on the nightstand—four hours ago. Four hours

of her body beneath his, above his, wrapped around his. Four hours of sounds he hadn't known she could make, sounds that started as gasps and became moans and then became something else entirely, something raw and desperate. And she was still here. Still in her bed. Still looking at him like he was the answer to every question she'd been afraid to ask.

"Ethan." Her voice was wrecked, hoarse. She was on her back beneath him, her legs wrapped around his waist, her heels digging into the small of his back. Her hands were everywhere—on his shoulders, his chest, his arms, his face, like she couldn't decide where to touch him because touching him anywhere wasn't enough, would never be enough. "Ethan, I—I can't—I've never—"

She couldn't finish the sentence. Couldn't finish because he'd shifted his angle, found that spot inside her that made her eyes roll back and her mouth fall open and her fingers clench in the sheets like she was holding on for dear life. The sound she made was muffled by the pillow she'd pulled over her face in a futile attempt to contain herself.

He'd made her come seven times already. He'd counted—not out of vanity, not out of some need to keep score, but because each one was different, each one told him something about her, about what she needed, about what she'd been denying herself for years in that house with its perfect garden and its absent husband. The first had been quick, almost surprised, like she hadn't expected him to find her clit so easily, hadn't expected his tongue to know exactly what to do. The second had been slower, deeper, building in her like a wave that started far out at sea and gathered strength as it approached. The third had made her cry—actual tears, streaming down her cheeks while she gasped and bucked against his mouth, apologizing between sobs for whatever reason. The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh had blurred together into a continuous cascade of pleasure that seemed to have no beginning and no end, each orgasm flowing into the next like water finding its level.

And now, as he moved inside her, he could feel her building toward the eighth. She was crying again. He could see the tears glinting. But she wasn't sad—he knew the difference now, had learned to read the subtle distinctions between tears of sorrow and tears of joy, tears of shame and tears of overwhelming sensation. These were the latter.

His hand slid down between their bodies, his thumb finding her clit—swollen, sensitive, so wet that the contact was almost frictionless—and she gasped, her back arching off the mattress, her nails digging into his shoulders hard enough to leave marks. He didn't mind.

He liked the marks. He liked the idea of leaving physical proof that meant she'd wanted him badly enough to lose herself completely.

The eighth orgasm hit her like a freight train. He felt it—felt the way her body clenched around him, rhythmic and involuntary, pulling him deeper, holding him there. Felt the way she shook, her whole body trembling like she was coming apart at the seams. Felt the way she screamed into his shoulder, her teeth sinking into his skin, muffling the sound that would have woken the neighbors if she'd let it out fully. Her heels dug into his back, her legs tightening around his waist, and for a moment, she was nothing but a creature of pure pleasure, stripped of every pretense, every performance, every carefully constructed identity. He kept moving through it, drawing it out, letting her ride the wave until the tremors subsided and her body went limp beneath him. Only then did he slow, did he let himself breathe, did he look down at her face—flushed, tear-streaked, utterly wrecked—and feel something that might have been satisfaction or might have been something else entirely.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, her voice barely audible. “Holy shit, Ethan.”

He smiled—that slow, knowing smile that he'd learned to wear, and pulled out of her carefully, watching her face as he did, watching the way her eyes fluttered and her breath caught at the sudden emptiness. She was still sensitive, still trembling, still riding the aftershocks of an orgasm that had rewritten something fundamental inside her.

And she was still looking at him like he was a god.

“Roll over,” he said, and it wasn't a request.

She obeyed without hesitation, without question, turning onto her stomach with a grace that surprised him given how thoroughly he'd undone her. Her body was beautiful—that of a thirty-eight-year-old woman who took care of herself, who did yoga on Tuesdays and ran on Thursdays. Her ass was round and firm, her back smooth, her shoulders dusted with freckles she'd probably hated as a teenager and learned to accept as an adult.

He positioned himself behind her, his hands sliding up her thighs, parting them, opening her to him. She was still wet—soaking, actually. He could see everything: the pink, swollen folds, the way she clenched around nothing, still hungry, still desperate for more even after eight orgasms had wrung her dry.

He entered her slowly this time, letting her feel every inch. She was tight—still tight, despite everything, despite the hours and the orgasms and the way he'd stretched her open again and again—and the sound she made when he bottomed out was a guttural, animal thing that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than her throat.

“Oh, fuck,” she gasped. “You’re so—you’re so deep like this. I can feel you in my—”

“Your what?”

“My stomach. I can feel you in my fucking stomach.”

He started moving, and the rhythm was different from behind—deeper, more intense, each thrust hitting that spot at the very end of her, the one that made her see stars. She was louder like this, too, her cries muffled by the pillow but still audible, still filling the room. He reached around her, his hand finding her throat—not squeezing, just holding, just letting her feel his palm. She moaned, her head falling back, her body arching into the touch.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, yes, yes—”

He increased his pace, his thrusts becoming harder, faster, more urgent. The headboard knocked against the wall in a steady rhythm—thump, thump, thump—and somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if the neighbors could hear. Wondered if they knew. Wondered if David, across an entire ocean in his Chicago hotel room, could feel some distant echo of what was happening in his bed, to his wife, with the man who lived two houses down.

Probably not. David probably didn't feel anything at all.

Mary turned her head on the pillow to look at him and felt a fresh pulse of desire stir in her belly despite everything, despite the soreness between her legs and the pleasant ache in muscles she hadn't used this vigorously in years. He was beautiful in a way that still shocked her, even after months of watching him from her kitchen window, even after hours of having him inside her. Not just handsome—beautiful, with that dark hair falling across his forehead and those eyes that seemed to see straight through every pretense she'd ever constructed.

And his cock.

Her eyes drifted down his body, past the sculpted chest, past his abdomen, past the dark trail of hair that began below his navel and led her eyes inexorably downward. He was still half-hard, she realized with a mixture of awe and something that might have been alarm. She'd felt him come three times—no, four?—during the night, had felt the hot pulse inside her, had tasted it on her tongue, had watched it paint her stomach and breasts in thick white ropes that he'd later licked clean. And yet there it was, already stirring again, already beginning to swell and lift away from his thigh as if it had a will entirely separate from the man attached to it.

She watched, transfixed, as it grew. Not became erect—grew. She'd seen cocks become erect before; she'd been married to David for sixteen years, had watched his stiffen and rise countless times, had felt it happen against her thigh or in her hand or pressed against the small of her back in the morning before he left for work. This was different. This was the cock she'd spent four hours impaled upon—the cock that had stretched her open, filled her completely, reached places inside her she hadn't known existed—increasing in size. The shaft lengthened visibly, each pulse adding another fraction of an inch, the skin stretching to accommodate the new growth. The head swelled, becoming more pronounced, flaring in a way that made her remember exactly how it felt when it dragged against her inner walls. The veins that wrapped around the shaft—veins she'd traced with her tongue, with her fingertips—became more prominent, thicker.

“Oh my god,” she breathed, and the words came out before she could stop them.

Ethan turned his head on the pillow, following her gaze to where his cock was now fully erect and undeniably, impossibly larger than it had been moments before. His expression didn't change—that same half-lidded satisfaction, that same quiet confidence—but something flickered in his eyes. Awareness, maybe. Or amusement. Or something deeper, something that suggested this was not a surprise to him, that he knew exactly what was happening and had been waiting to see when she would notice.

“It does that,” he said, and his voice was casual.

Mary's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. Words failed her. She had a

master's degree in landscape architecture. She'd designed gardens for three of the wealthiest families in the county. She could identify over two hundred plant species by their Latin names and had once delivered a presentation on sustainable urban green spaces to a room of forty skeptical city planners. And yet, looking at Ethan's cock—at the way it had grown, actually grown, between one breath and the next—she found herself reduced to the verbal capabilities of a particularly stunned teenager.

“It... grows?”

“Sometimes.” He reached down, wrapping his hand around the shaft, and Mary watched his fingers barely close around the new thickness.

She nodded anyway, unable to look away from where his hand moved slowly up and down the length of him, the motion lazy, like he had all the time in the world and no particular urgency about what came next. The sight of it—of him touching himself, of that impossible cock sliding through his grip—sent a fresh wave of arousal through her exhausted body. But beneath the heat was a thread of genuine fear. She was sore. She was beyond sore. The thought of taking that inside her again, now that it was even larger than before, made her inner muscles clench with genuine apprehension.

“Ethan.” She pushed herself up on one elbow, her other hand coming to rest on his chest. “I can't. I want to, god knows I want to, but I can't. I'm too sore. I need—I'm not twenty-five anymore.”

The admission cost her something. She saw the flicker in his eyes change, softening from that amusement to something more attentive. He stopped moving his hand, though he didn't release himself, and his other hand came up to cover hers where it rested on his chest. His palm was warm, his touch gentle in a way that surprised her after hours of being handled with such intensity.

“I understand,” he said, and his voice was different now—lower, more careful. “We don't have to—”

“But you're not finished.” She glanced down at his erection, still standing proud and insistent against his belly, still leaking a clear bead of fluid from the tip. “You're not even close to finished.”

He didn't deny it. Didn't offer the polite fiction that he was satisfied, that she'd done enough, that he could take care of it himself later.

The solution came to her not as a fully formed thought but as an image. It was obscene. It was also, she realized with a clarity that surprised her, exactly what she wanted.

"Give me my phone," she said.

Ethan's eyebrow rose, but he reached for the nightstand without question, handing her the device. There was no hesitation in him, no anxiety about what she might do or see. He trusted her, she realized. Or perhaps he was simply so confident in himself that nothing she could do would threaten him.

Mary took the phone and sat up fully, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

The first call was to her mother. Not because her mother was the most obvious choice—far from it—but because if she didn't start with the stubborn one, she'd lose her nerve entirely. Her mother was sixty-three years old, a widow of eight years, a woman who'd spent the years since her husband's death becoming progressively more rigid, more judgmental, more convinced that the world had gone wrong in ways she alone could identify and condemn. She attended church every Sunday and Bible study every Wednesday. She'd once refused to speak to Mary for three weeks because Mary had worn a dress that showed "too much collarbone" to a family dinner. The idea of calling her mother at 3:30 in the morning to invite her to participate in what could only be described as an orgy was so absurd, so completely outside the realm of anything her mother would ever consider, that Mary almost laughed aloud.

The phone rang twice before her mother's sleep-roughened voice answered. "Mary? Do you have any idea what time—"

Mary didn't let her finish. She spoke in a low, urgent voice, her words tumbling out in a rush of persuasion, implication and promises she wasn't sure she could keep. She didn't explain everything—couldn't, not over the phone, not to her mother—but she said enough. Enough to make her mother's breathing change. Enough to make the silence on the other end of the line stretch from seconds into almost a full minute. Enough that when her

mother finally spoke again, her voice was different.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” her mother said, and hung up.

Mary stared at the phone for a moment, processing what she’d just done. Then she scrolled to the next contact and dialed again.

Her sister Claire was easier. Claire had always been the wild one, the one who’d gotten a tattoo at eighteen and a divorce at twenty-four and had spent the years since cycling through a series of boyfriends who were uniformly inappropriate and gorgeous. Claire answered on the first ring, her voice alert despite the hour—she’d always been a light sleeper, a trait she’d developed during her brief and ill-advised stint as a night shift nurse. Mary spoke faster this time, more confident, the words coming easier now that she’d broken through the initial barrier of impossibility. Claire listened without interrupting, and when Mary finished, there was a long pause.

“You’re serious,” Claire said. It wasn’t a question.

“Completely.”

Another pause. Then: “I’m getting in the car now.”

The third call was to her younger sister, Diane. Diane was the baby of the family, the one who’d been sheltered and protected and had grown into a woman who was perpetually unsure of herself. She was thirty-one years old and had never been in a serious relationship, had never seemed comfortable in her own skin, had never—as far as Mary knew—experienced anything approaching genuine sexual confidence. And yet Mary dialed her number without hesitation. Diane took longer to convince, and Mary had to repeat herself twice before the words seemed to penetrate. But when they did—when Diane understood what was being offered, what was possible—her breathing changed.

“I don’t... I’ve never...” Diane’s voice was small, uncertain.

“I know,” Mary said gently. “That’s okay. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. Just come. Just be here. See what happens.”

A long silence. Then: “Okay. Okay, I’m coming.”

The fourth call was to her daughter.

This one was harder. Not because Sarah was young—she was twenty-three, a grown woman with her own apartment and her own job and her own life—but because she was Mary’s daughter. To call her daughter and invite her to this—to share this with her—felt like crossing a line that couldn’t be uncrossed.

She dialed.

Sarah’s voice was immediately alert—she’d always been a night owl, probably still awake even at this hour. “Mom? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Mary took a breath, steadying herself. “Everything’s right. I need you to listen to me very carefully.”

She spoke. Sarah listened. The silence that followed was the longest yet, stretching so far that Mary began to wonder if the call had dropped. Then Sarah’s voice came back, different now—lower, rougher, stripped of the careful politeness she usually wore.

“I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

The fifth and final call was to Jenna, her colleague from the landscape architecture firm. Jenna was forty-two, married to a man who’d long since stopped looking at her with anything resembling love, and possessed of a sharp, cynical wit that Mary had always admired. They’d worked together for seven years, had shared countless lunches and coffee breaks and commiserating sessions about clients and deadlines and the particular frustrations of being women in a male-dominated field. They’d never discussed sex—not really, not beyond the broad strokes of marital complaint—but Mary had noticed things. The way Jenna’s eyes lingered on certain women at conferences. The way she’d once described a female client’s voice as “distracting” in a tone that suggested she meant something quite specific. The way she’d looked at Ethan the one time she’d seen him, when he’d stopped by the office to drop off Mary’s forgotten lunch.

Jenna didn’t ask questions. She didn’t hesitate. She listened to Mary’s words, absorbed

them like sponge would water, and then said simply: “Condoms?”

Mary set the phone down on the nightstand and turned back to Ethan. He was still lying on the bed watching her with those dark eyes, still slowly stroking himself. His expression had shifted during her calls—not to surprise, exactly, but to something like appreciation. Like he was seeing her clearly for the first time, understanding something about her that she’d only just discovered herself.

“They’re coming,” she said, and the words felt momentous, felt like a declaration of something she couldn’t name. “All of them.”

Ethan’s smile was slow and warm and devastating.

“Good.”

Mary watched it all from her position on the bed, her back against the headboard, her legs stretched out and still trembling faintly from everything that had already happened. She was naked—they were all naked now, all six of them, their bodies arranged across the room in configurations that would have seemed impossible just hours ago. The sight of it, kept washing over her in waves: disbelief, then acceptance, then a kind of awed surrender to the fact that this was happening, that she had made it happen, that the women she loved most in the world were here in this room with her, doing things she had never imagined she would witness, let alone participate in. Her mother. Her sisters. Her daughter. Her colleague. All of them here, all of them naked, all of them orbiting around the man who lay at the center of the room like a dark star, pulling them into his gravity one by one.

And what a man he was.

Mary's eyes traced the length of Ethan's body for what must have been the hundredth time that night, and still the sight of him sent a fresh pulse of lust through her exhausted, aching core. He was watching everything. Taking in every detail. Cataloguing every sound, every touch, every tremble of every woman in this room.

And his cock.

Mary's breath caught, as it always did, when her gaze reached it. It rose from the dark thatch of hair at his groin like something monumental, something that belonged on a statue rather than a living man. The shaft was thicker than it had been when she'd first taken him inside her, thicker than it had been even an hour ago—and the veins that wrapped around it stood out, pulsing faintly with each beat of his heart. The head was a deep, flushed purple. And it was still growing. She could see it happening even now, in small increments, in the way the skin stretched to accommodate some internal expansion that defied every law of biology she'd ever learned. It was longer than it had been when she'd made her phone calls. Longer than it had been when her mother had arrived, when Claire had walked through the door, when Diane had hesitantly entered and frozen at the sight of it.

It was magnificent.

It was terrifying.

Mary's mother was on her knees on Ethan's right side. Her mother, Patricia, sixty-three years old, a woman who had spent the last eight years of widowhood building walls around herself so high and so thick that Mary had assumed no one would ever scale them again. Patricia who had arrived at this hotel twenty minutes after Mary's call, her hair still in the loose braid she wore to bed, her face bare of makeup, her eyes holding something that Mary had never seen in them before: a desperate, hungry curiosity that had apparently been waiting decades for permission to surface.

And now here she was. Naked. On her knees. Her silver-streaked hair—usually pinned up in a severe bun that made her look every inch the disapproving matron—hung loose around her shoulders, brushing against the small, soft breasts that had nursed three daughters and now swayed gently as she moved. Her body was that of a woman who had lived six decades and borne three children: the softness at her belly, the lines on her face, the way her skin had loosened with age. But there was something beautiful in it, something that Mary had never allowed herself to see before—the beauty of a body that had lived, that had endured, that was now, impossibly, being given something it had been denied for far too long.

Patricia's lips were wrapped around the head of Ethan's cock.

Mary watched her mother's mouth stretch to accommodate him, watched the way her cheeks hollowed with suction, watched her eyes—those familiar green eyes that had looked at Mary with disappointment and judgment and, occasionally, fierce love—flutter closed in an expression of pure, concentrated pleasure. Patricia's hand was wrapped around the base of the shaft where her mouth couldn't reach, her fingers barely meeting around the thickness, and she moved it in slow, twisting strokes that matched the rhythm of her mouth. She made small sounds as she worked—wet, hungry things that Mary had never heard her mother make, sounds that seemed to come from some deep, primal place that had been buried under decades of propriety and restraint.

And she wasn't alone.

Sarah was on Ethan's left side, mirroring her grandmother's position, and the sight of them together—mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, separated by two generations but united in this single, impossible act—made Mary's breath come faster, made her hand drift unconsciously to her own thigh, her fingers pressing into the tender flesh there.

Sarah. Her Sarah. Her baby girl, the child she had carried inside her body, had nursed at her breast, had watched take her first steps and speak her first words and grow into a woman Mary barely recognized sometimes, with her own flat and her own job and her own life that Mary was no longer the center of. Sarah, who had always been so careful, so guarded, so determined to be nothing like her mother's generation with their compromises and their disappointments and their quiet, suffocating resentments. Sarah, who had arrived at this house clearly expecting to talk her mother out of whatever madness had seized her.

And now Sarah was on her knees, her lips pressed to the side of Ethan's shaft, her tongue tracing the prominent vein that ran from base to tip. Her eyes were open—unlike her grandmother's—and they were fixed on Ethan's face with an intensity that made Mary's stomach clench. Sarah's expression was not the dreamy, transported look that Patricia wore. It was sharper, more analytical, as if she were studying him, cataloguing his reactions, learning his body the way she might learn a new skill. But beneath that analytical surface, Mary could see the way Sarah's nipples had tightened into hard peaks, the way her thighs pressed together even as she knelt, the way her breath came in short, uneven bursts between each lick.

They made quite the pairing, her mother and her daughter. The contrast was almost too much to process: Patricia's silver hair and soft, aging body beside Sarah's dark waves and firm, youthful curves. Patricia's closed eyes and sounds of abandoned pleasure beside Sarah's open gaze and careful movements. The grandmother who had spent decades denying herself any pleasure that couldn't be sanctioned by church and society, and the granddaughter who had spent her young adulthood building walls of a different kind—walls of control, of self-sufficiency, of never needing anyone enough to be disappointed by them.

And now here they were, both of them, on their knees for the same man.

"Like that," Ethan said, and his voice was low and rough, the first words he'd spoken in several minutes. "Both of you. Just like that."

Patricia moaned around him, the sound vibrating against his flesh, and Mary saw his stomach muscles tighten in response. His hand came up to rest on the back of Patricia's head—not pushing, not guiding, just resting there. His other hand found Sarah's hair, his fingers threading through the dark waves, and Sarah's eyes flickered at the contact. Her tongue slowed, became more deliberate, tracing the ridge of the head, dipping into the slit at the tip, collecting the clear fluid that beaded there.

Then Patricia pressed her lips to the base of his shaft, where it emerged from the dark hair, and began to kiss her way downward. Her tongue traced the skin of his balls, and Mary watched her mother's mouth open to take one of them inside—gently, carefully.

Sarah watched, too. Her eyes tracked her grandmother's movements, and the analytical edge softened. Her lips parted slightly. Her tongue darted out to wet them. Then she lowered her own head.

Her mouth found the other side of Ethan's shaft, mirroring her grandmother, and together they worked him from both sides. Patricia's mouth was on his balls, her tongue laving the sensitive skin, her lips forming a gentle suction that made Ethan's hips shift, a low sound escaping his throat. Sarah's tongue traced up the length of him, from base to tip, and when she reached the head, she took it into her mouth with a hunger that hadn't been there before. Her eyes fell closed. Her cheeks hollowed. And the sound she made—a small, desperate whimper—was the most honest thing Mary had ever heard from her daughter.

Patricia pulled back just enough to watch, her hand still wrapped around the base of Ethan's cock, her other hand cupping his balls gently. Her eyes met Sarah's over the length of him, and she realized they were in this together. They were sharing something that neither of them had ever shared with anyone else.

The sight of them—her mother and her daughter, their mouths working in tandem, their bodies pressed close on either side of Ethan's hips—sent a fresh wave of lust through Mary's exhausted body. She was sore, so sore from the hours of attention Ethan had already given her. But watching this before her eyes, she felt her own arousal building again, felt her clit begin to throb with a need that seemed to have no bottom, no limit, no point of satiation.

Patricia's mouth was still wrapped around the base of him when Ethan's hand tightened in her silver hair—not painfully, but with a pressure that made her eyes flutter open, made her release him with a soft, wet plop. Sarah, on the other side, felt the matching pressure in her own dark waves and lifted her head as well, her lips swollen and glistening, her breath coming in shallow, uneven pulls. They looked up at him together, grandmother and granddaughter, their faces inches apart on either side of that monumental cock, and the sight of them—the silver hair and the dark, the aged softness and the youthful firmness, the decades that separated them collapsed into this single, impossible moment—made something turn in Ethan. Something that was not quite hunger and not quite tenderness, but a third thing that contained elements of both.

"Kiss each other," he said.

Patricia's eyes went wide—not with shock, exactly, but with the sudden, vertiginous awareness of standing at the edge of something from which there would be no return. Sarah's reaction was more immediate: a sharp intake of breath that might've resembled fear, the part of her that had always known, somehow, that this moment existed somewhere in her future, waiting. Mary, still propped against the headboard with her legs spread and her fingers pressing into her thighs, felt her heart stutter and then resume at a faster rhythm. Her mother. Her daughter. The two women she had come from and the woman who had come from her. And Ethan, this impossible man who had already rewritten everything she thought she knew about her own body, was asking them to—

Patricia moved first. It was a small movement, barely more than a tilt of her head, a slight parting of her lips. But it was enough. Sarah saw it and leaned forward. Patricia leaned

forward. And their mouths met across the bridge of Ethan's body, just above the dark thatch of hair at his groin, with his cock rising between them.

The kiss was tentative at first—the kiss of two women who had never done this, had never imagined doing this, had never allowed themselves to want this. Their lips brushed, parted, brushed again. Patricia's hand came up to cup Sarah's cheek, her thumb tracing her granddaughter's jaw with a tenderness that made Mary's throat bob. Sarah's eyes fell closed, and a small sound escaped her—a whimper, really, high and thin and utterly vulnerable—and that sound seemed to break something open in Patricia. Her other hand found the back of Sarah's head, fingers threading through those dark waves, and she deepened the kiss.

Their tongues met. Mary could see it happening—could see the way their mouths opened against each other, the way Sarah's tongue slipped past her grandmother's lips, the way Patricia received it. They kissed like they were trying to consume each other, like they were trying to crawl inside each other's skin, like the decades between them were nothing more than a cruel joke the universe had played and they were determined to prove it wrong. Sarah's hand found Patricia's breast—that soft, aging breast that had nursed Mary and her sisters, that had known the mouths of infants and the hands of a husband long dead and nothing else, nothing like this—and Patricia gasped into the kiss, her back arching, her nipple hardening against Sarah's palm.

Ethan watched. His hand still rested on the back of Patricia's head, but he wasn't guiding anymore. He was simply observing, his dark eyes moving between them with an expression that Mary couldn't quite read—satisfaction, yes, but something else beneath it. Something that looked almost like reverence. His cock looked like it was watching too, like it was a separate creature with its own desires, its own appetites.

Patricia pulled back from the kiss just enough to look at Sarah—really look at her, her green eyes searching her granddaughter's face for something. Permission, maybe. Or confirmation that this was real, that this was happening, that the world had truly become a place where a sixty-three-year-old widow could kiss her twenty-three-year-old granddaughter and feel not shame but something that felt terrifyingly like grace. Whatever she found in Sarah's face seemed to satisfy her. She lowered her head again, but not to Sarah's mouth this time. Her lips found Sarah's throat, pressing kisses to the column of her neck, and Sarah's head fell back with a moan that seemed to fill the entire room.

"Grandma," Sarah breathed, and the word—that impossible word, spoken in this impossible context—made Patricia moan against her skin. "Grandma, please—"

"Please what?" Patricia's voice was rough, rougher than Mary had ever heard it, stripped of every pretense. Her mouth was moving lower now, trailing down Sarah's throat to her collarbone, her tongue tracing the ridge of bone beneath the skin. "Tell me what you want, baby. Tell me."

Sarah's eyes opened, and they found Mary's across the room. Mother and daughter looked at each other for one long, suspended moment, and Mary saw everything in that look: fear, desire, confusion, a desperate plea for permission or understanding or simply witness. Mary nodded—and something in Sarah's face relaxed. Her eyes closed again, and when she spoke, her voice was different. Lower. Surer. The voice of a woman who had finally stopped pretending she didn't know exactly what she wanted.

"I want you to make me come."

Patricia made a sound that was almost a sob. Her hands found Sarah's hips, gripping the firm, youthful flesh there, and she lowered her mouth to Sarah's breast. Her tongue found the nipple—dark and tight and already pebbled with arousal—and Sarah cried out, her back arching, her fingers twisting in her grandmother's silver hair. Patricia suckled her like she was nursing, like she was drawing sustenance from her granddaughter's body, and the sight of it—the silver head bent to the young breast, the sounds of suction and Sarah's gasping pleasure—made Mary's hand move between her own thighs without conscious thought. Her fingers found her clit, and she began to touch herself with slow, deliberate circles that matched the rhythm of her mother's mouth on her daughter's breast.

Beside her on the bed, she was dimly aware of movement. Claire and Diane, her sisters, had been watching from the edges of the room—Claire with her characteristic bold curiosity, Diane with the wide-eyed, trembling uncertainty that had defined her entire life. But now they were moving closer, drawn by what was happening, by the impossible sight of their mother and their niece tangled together beside Ethan's cock. Claire's hand had found her own breast, her thumb circling her nipple. Diane was slower to touch herself, her hands hovering at her sides, her eyes fixed on Patricia and Sarah with an expression of such desperate longing that Mary felt her heart crack open a little wider. She reached out with her

free hand—the one not working between her own thighs—and took Diane's hand, drawing it to Diane's own body, pressing it against the soft curve of her younger sister's belly.

Diane's eyes met hers, and for a moment she looked like she might cry. Then her hand moved lower, sliding past her belly, finding the dark curls between her thighs. Her fingers parted her own folds, and the sound she made—a small, surprised gasp—told Mary that she was wet, that her body had known what she wanted even before her mind had caught up. Claire, on Mary's other side, was already moving with more confidence, her fingers working in tight circles around her clit, her eyes fixed on the scene before them with an intensity that bordered on predatory. The sisters sat together on the edge of the bed—Mary in the center, Claire on her right, Diane on her left—all three of them touching themselves, all three of them watching their mother and their daughter and their niece become something none of them had words for.

Patricia's mouth had left Sarah's breast and was moving lower now, trailing kisses down her granddaughter's stomach. Sarah was trembling—Mary could see it even from across the room, the fine tremor that ran through her daughter's entire body like an electrical current. Her hands were still in Patricia's hair, gripping the silver strands like they were the only solid thing in a world that had suddenly become liquid and strange. When Patricia's mouth reached the dark curls at Sarah's thighs, Sarah made a sound that Mary had never heard her daughter make—a keening, desperate thing like a kitten's purr.

"Please," Sarah gasped. "Please, Grandma, please—"

Patricia's tongue found her clit, and Sarah screamed.

It wasn't a loud scream—they were still aware on some level of the neighbors, of the world outside this room that continued to spin in its ordinary, rule-bound way—but it was a scream nonetheless. A raw, animal sound that seemed to tear its way out of Sarah's throat against her will. Her hips bucked against her grandmother's mouth, and Patricia's hands gripped her thighs, holding her open, holding her steady, while her tongue worked in tight, expert circles that made Mary wonder—with a flash of something that might have been jealousy or might have been awe—where her mother had learned to do this. Had she always known? Had those decades of widowhood, of Bible study and judgment and carefully maintained propriety, been hiding this woman all along? A woman who knew exactly how to use her tongue, exactly how to find the rhythm that would make her granddaughter come

apart?

Sarah was babbling now, a stream of words that Mary couldn't quite make out over the sound of her own pulse pounding in her ears. Her fingers moved faster between her own thighs, matching the rhythm of her mother's tongue on her daughter's clit, and beside her she could hear Claire's breath coming in short, sharp gasps, could hear the wet sounds of Diane's fingers moving inside herself for what might have been the first time in her life with anything approaching genuine desire. The room was full of sounds now: Sarah's cries, Patricia's hungry noises, the slick rhythm of four women touching themselves, and beneath it all the low, rough sound of Ethan's breath as he watched, as he stroked himself.

Sarah's first orgasm hit her like a wave. Mary watched it happen—watched her daughter's back arch off the bed, watched her mouth fall open, watched her fingers twist so tightly in Patricia's silver hair that it must have hurt—and felt her own climax building in response. But she held back, biting her lip, forcing herself to wait. She didn't want to miss a single second of this. Didn't want to look away from the sight of her mother's tongue working through her daughter's orgasm, drawing it out, wringing every last tremor from Sarah's young body.

When Sarah finally went limp, Patricia lifted her head. Her face was wet with what might have been tears—and her expression was one of such raw, naked wonder that Mary felt her own eyes sting in response. She looked at her granddaughter like she was seeing her for the first time. Like she was seeing herself for the first time. Like the sixty-three years she had spent being someone else—someone proper, someone restrained, someone who denied herself every pleasure that couldn't be sanctioned—had been a kind of sleep, and she was only now, in this impossible room with this impossible man and these impossible women, waking up.

"Again," Sarah whispered, and her voice was wrecked, barely audible. "I want—I need—again."

Patricia smiled—a slow, wondering smile that transformed her face, made her look younger, made her look like the woman she might have been if she'd allowed herself to want things. She lowered her head again, but this time she didn't go to Sarah's clit. Her tongue found Sarah's opening instead, and she entered her granddaughter. Sarah's hips rose to meet her, and Patricia's tongue moved inside her—slowly at first, then with more confidence,

fucking her granddaughter with her mouth while her thumb found Sarah's clit and began to circle.

Sarah's second orgasm built faster than the first. Mary could see it happening—could see the tension coiling in her daughter's thighs, in her stomach, in the way her hands fisted in the sheets. Beside her, Claire's breathing had become ragged, her fingers moving with desperate urgency. Diane had two fingers inside herself now, her other hand gripping Mary's thigh like she needed an anchor, like she was afraid she might float away if she didn't hold onto something solid. And Ethan—Ethan was watching all of them.

"I'm going to come," Sarah gasped, and Patricia made a sound against her—a sound of encouragement, of hunger, of something that might have been love—and redoubled her efforts. Her tongue moved faster, deeper, and her thumb pressed harder against Sarah's clit, and Sarah's second orgasm crashed through her with a force that made her entire body convulse. She screamed—actually screamed this time, loud enough that Mary wondered distantly if the neighbors would call the police—and her hips bucked against her grandmother's face while Patricia held on, while Patricia's tongue continued to move inside her.

Ethan's hand moved faster. His eyes were fixed on Patricia and Sarah, on the silver head bent between the young thighs, on the way Sarah's body still trembled with aftershocks. And then his gaze lifted, found Mary, found Claire, found Diane on the bed with their hands between their legs, and something in his expression shifted. It became more intense, more focused, like he was making a decision.

His hand moved faster on his cock—that impossible, magnificent cock that had grown beyond anything Mary had ever seen, beyond anything she had ever imagined possible. The head was a deep, angry purple now, swollen and leaking, and the shaft was so thick that his fingers could barely close around it. The veins stood out like cords, pulsing with each beat of his heart, and Mary could see the tension building in him, could see the way his whole body was coiling toward something enormous.

Patricia lifted her head from between Sarah's thighs. Sarah pushed herself up on her elbows, her dark hair tangled, her young body still trembling. They looked at Ethan together, and Mary saw the moment they understood what was about to happen. Patricia's hand found Sarah's, their fingers interlacing, and they knelt together on the bed—grandmother and

granddaughter, silver hair and dark, aging body and young body, united in this impossible moment—and waited.

The first rope of cum hit Patricia across the face.

It was thick and white and seemed to go on forever, painting a stripe across her cheek, her nose, her parted lips. She gasped—a sound of pure, shocked pleasure—and her tongue darted out to taste it, to catch the fluid that had landed on her mouth. The second rope caught Sarah across her breasts, splashing against her nipples, dripping down her stomach. Sarah moaned, her back arching, her free hand coming up to spread the cum across her skin like she was applying cream. The third rope landed between them, splashing across their joined hands, dripping down their interlaced fingers. And still Ethan kept coming—rope after rope, more than should have been possible, more than any man should have been able to produce. It painted Patricia's silver hair, dripped down Sarah's throat, pooled in Patricia's collarbone.

Mary watched it all, her fingers moving frantically between her own thighs, and felt her own orgasm building—not the gentle, rolling waves she was used to, but something enormous, something that felt like it might tear her apart. Beside her, Claire came with a sharp cry, her body jerking, her fingers buried deep inside herself. Diane followed a moment later, her orgasm silent but no less intense, her eyes squeezed shut, her mouth open in a wordless gasp.

And still Ethan kept coming.

The final rope caught Patricia and Sarah together—a thick, white stripe that bridged between them, that connected grandmother to granddaughter in a way that was both obscene and beautiful. It landed across Patricia's shoulder and Sarah's breast, dripping down between them, and when it was finally over, when Ethan's hand finally stilled on his still-hard, still-impossible cock, the two women knelt there covered in him.

Sarah looked at Patricia. Patricia looked at Sarah. And then, slowly, deliberately, Sarah leaned forward and licked a stripe of cum from her grandmother's cheek.

Ethan then stepped forward...

Ethan hadn't meant to sleep. Hadn't planned to stay long enough for sleep to become necessary. But the night had stretched and become something larger than he'd anticipated, and somewhere in the small hours—after Patricia had screamed herself hoarse, after Claire had begged for more until her voice cracked, after Diane had finally, tremblingly, let herself be touched—his body had demanded rest, and he'd surrendered to it.

Mary was pressed against his left side, her face tucked into his shoulder, her breath slow and even. One of her hands rested on his chest, her fingers curled loosely, and even in sleep she seemed reluctant to let him go. Her leg was thrown over his thigh, and he could feel the cum that dried on her skin, that had soaked into the sheets and the pillows.

On his right, Claire had somehow ended up with her head on his stomach, her dark hair fanned across his abdomen like spilled ink. She was sleeping the sleep of the thoroughly used, her mouth slightly open, a thin line of drool connecting her lower lip to his skin. One of her hands was still curled around the base of his cock—even unconscious, even after everything, she hadn't completely released him. The possessiveness of the gesture would have amused him if he'd had room for amusement. As it was, he simply noted it, filed it away with all the other details he'd gathered over the course of the night.

Patricia was at the foot of the bed, curled on her side like a child, her silver hair spread across the tangled sheets. She'd pulled a pillow down at some point and was clutching it to her chest, her face peaceful in a way it probably hadn't been in decades. The lines of judgment and disapproval that Mary had described—the ones that had carved themselves into Patricia's features over years of widowhood and Bible study and carefully maintained propriety—seemed to have softened in sleep. She looked younger. Softer. Like a woman who had finally been given something she'd stopped letting herself want.

Diane was on the floor.

Ethan turned his head, careful not to disturb Mary or Claire, and found her there—curled on the rug beside the bed, wrapped in a sheet she must have pulled down at some point during the night. She'd been the last to let go, the last to stop trembling, the last to stop crying. He remembered the way she'd looked at him when he'd finally entered her—not with fear, exactly, but with something that resembled awe, like she couldn't quite

believe this was happening to her, that she was allowed to want this, that her body was capable of feeling these things. She'd come three times, each one more shattering than the last, and after the third she'd buried her face in his chest and sobbed like something had broken loose inside her.

And Sarah—

Sarah was on the other side of the bed, sprawled on her back with one arm flung above her head and the other resting on her stomach. Her dark hair was a wild tangle, her lips still slightly swollen. Ethan's eyes traveled down her breasts, her belly, the dark thatch of hair between her thighs—and he felt a familiar stirring in his groin, a pulse that reminded him he wasn't finished, would never be finished, that whatever had been done to him had made satiation a temporary state at best.

But he didn't have time for that now. The light was growing stronger, and with it came the awareness that he needed to leave. Not because he wanted to—a part of him, the part that had been shaped by whatever transformation had remade him from the inside out, wanted to stay, wanted to wake each of these women and begin again, wanted to see how many more times he could break them open before they had nothing left to give. But the other part—the part that remembered being Ethan Park, the boy with the glasses and the acne and the stammer, the boy who'd learned that wanting things only led to disappointment—knew better. Knew that staying meant questions. Meant expectations. Meant the slow, inevitable collapse of whatever magic had made this night possible into the ordinary disappointments of morning.

He didn't do mornings. He didn't do breakfast. He didn't do the awkward dance of phone numbers and promises to call and the careful negotiation of what last night had meant. He did the night and then he left. That was the arrangement he'd made with himself, the only arrangement that made sense in a world where he could do what he could do, be what he could be.

Carefully, slowly, he began to extract himself.

Mary stirred as he shifted, her fingers tightening on his chest, a small sound of protest escaping her throat. He paused, letting her settle back into sleep, watching her face soften as the dream—whatever it was—reclaimed her. Then he lifted her hand, gentle as he could

manage, and placed it on the pillow beside her head. She turned into the pillow, her lips moving silently, and didn't wake.

Claire was harder. Her grip on his cock was surprisingly firm, and when he tried to ease her fingers loose, she made a sound—not quite awake, but not quite asleep either—and tightened her hold. Her thumb moved in a slow, unconscious stroke along the shaft, and Ethan felt his body respond, felt the familiar surge of blood. He closed his eyes, forced himself to breathe, forced himself to remember that he was leaving, that he needed to leave, that staying would only complicate everything.

He took her wrist—firm but gentle—and peeled her fingers away one by one. She whimpered in her sleep, her brow furrowing, but didn't wake. Her hand fell to the mattress, empty now, and curled into a loose fist like it was still searching for him.

Free at last, Ethan swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood.

The room was a disaster. He saw it clearly now in the growing light—the clothes scattered everywhere, the overturned lamp, the sheets twisted and bunched and half-pulled from the mattress. The smell was overwhelming: sex and sweat and the particular musk of his own cum, which seemed to have soaked into every surface. It was on the sheets, on the pillows, on the women themselves. It had dried in white streaks across thighs and stomachs and faces.

Ethan reached for the small notepad on the nightstand—the same one Mary had used to write down something earlier in the night, though he couldn't remember what—and tore off a sheet. He wrote: Had to go. Last night was incredible. - E. The same words he'd left for Ava. They were true enough, in their way. Last night had been incredible. He had to go. The rest—the explanations, the promises—belonged to a version of himself that no longer existed.

He set the note on the nightstand, taking the pen with him as he left, heading downstairs.

Ethan crossed the living room without looking back. He'd learned not to look back. Looking back created the illusion that something was being left behind, that a choice was being made, that there was a version of events where he stayed and made coffee and asked

about their days and pretended that what had happened between them could survive the transition from night to morning. But there was no such version.

His leather jacket was draped over the back of a kitchen chair where he'd left it. The kitchen itself was tidy—Mary must have cleaned before he came over. The counters were wiped. The dishes were put away. The small window above the sink looked out onto a garden that was just beginning to stir in the light.

He pulled the jacket on. It still carried Ava's perfume. That felt like days ago now, though it had been barely twelve hours. Time had become strange since the change—elastic and unreliable, stretching and compressing in ways that didn't match the clock on his phone or the movement of the sun across the sky. A single night could contain more than some people experienced in years. A single hour could rewrite everything a woman thought she knew about her own body, her own desires, her own capacity for pleasure.

And then he was outside in the hotel parking area. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. His fingers found the paper immediately—it was always there, always in the same place. He pulled it out and unfolded it with the care of someone handling something both precious and ordinary. The paper was worn soft at the creases, the way paper gets when it's been folded and unfolded hundreds of times. It was ordinary notebook paper, the kind with the faint blue lines and the red margin, torn from a spiral-bound pad he'd bought at a pharmacist. The edges were slightly ragged where he'd pulled it free, and one corner had a small brown stain—coffee, probably, from a morning when he'd spread the list out on his kitchen table and studied it while the light changed and his coffee grew cold.

The list was written in his own handwriting, a cramped and careful script that belonged to the boy he'd been rather than the man he'd become. He'd always had terrible handwriting—the kind that teachers commented on in report cards, that made his mother shake her head and say he'd be a doctor someday. But this list was different. This list he'd written slowly. This list mattered.

It contained names. Women's names. Some he'd known intimately and otherwise. Some he'd known only from a distance, from the back of a classroom or the other side of a hallway or a single exchanged glance. Some were names he'd carried with him for years, women he'd watched and wanted and never touched, women who had looked through him like he was made of glass.

Ava's name was on the list. He saw it immediately—it was near the top, written in the same careful script as all the others. Ava Harding. The girl from chemistry who'd sat in front of him for an entire year and never once turned around, never once looked at him with anything other than the vague, unfocused politeness that popular girls reserved for people who didn't matter. He remembered the way she'd laughed at something Vanessa had whispered, her head tilted back, her throat exposed, and how he'd felt something twist in his chest that he hadn't had words for at sixteen. He remembered watching her—the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the way she tapped her fingers against her textbook when she was thinking—and constructing elaborate fantasies around those small, unconscious gestures, fantasies that had made him hate himself even as he returned to them night after night. Her name was scratched out now. A single line of black ink drawn through the letters. He'd done it this morning, standing in that hotel bathroom while Ava slept in the tangled sheets. He'd taken out the list and the pen he always carried and drawn that line with satisfaction.

His eyes moved down the list, tracing the names. Some were familiar in ways that made his chest tighten. Some he'd almost forgotten, their significance faded to the faintest impression, like a footprint in sand that the tide was slowly erasing.

Jennifer Walsh. His English teacher. She'd been young—twenty-four, maybe twenty-five—and had worn her brown hair in a French braid that made her look younger than she was. She'd been the first woman to look at him like he might have something worth seeing. She'd written comments on his essays that went beyond the required feedback, asking questions about his ideas, pushing him to go deeper. Once, she'd kept him after class to tell him he had a gift for language, that he saw things other students didn't, that he shouldn't let anyone make him feel small for being different. He'd carried those words for years, had pulled them out on bad nights when the accumulated weight of being invisible threatened to crush him. He'd added her name to the list not because he wanted to fuck her—though he did, had imagined it more times than he could count, had constructed elaborate scenarios in which she saw him as a man rather than a student—but because he wanted to thank her. Wanted to show her what he'd become. Wanted her to see that she'd been right about him, that he hadn't let them make him small.

Michelle Okonkwo. She'd sat two rows over in chemistry, a quiet girl with glasses that were always slipping down her nose. She'd been one of the invisible ones too—not picked

on, just overlooked, the kind of girl who existed in the margins of other people's stories. They'd been lab partners once, for a unit on acids and bases, and she'd been patient with him when he'd stammered through explanations, had smiled at his jokes, had treated him like a person rather than a collection of deficiencies. He'd thought about asking her out, had rehearsed the words a hundred times in front of his bathroom mirror, but he'd never done it. Fear, mostly. Fear of ruining the one good thing he had, the one person who seemed to see him without requiring him to be different than he was. Her name remained uncrossed.

Vanessa Chen. Ava's friend from chemistry, the one who'd passed notes and whispered about boys and complained about her hair. She'd been one of the popular ones, though not at the very top of the hierarchy—a satellite orbiting the real suns, close enough to bask in their warmth but never quite one of them. She'd been cruel to him once, not intentionally, but cruelly nonetheless. He'd asked her a question—something about the homework, he couldn't even remember what—and she'd looked at him with an expression of such complete, unthinking dismissal that he'd felt himself shrivel. Like he wasn't even worth the effort of cruelty. He wanted her to see him now. Wanted to watch her face as she understood what she'd dismissed, what she'd looked through, what she'd treated as invisible. It was a petty desire, and he knew it was petty, but knowing didn't make it go away.

Some names were scratched out the same as Ava's. Rachel Kim. His first kiss, at seventeen, in the basement of a house party he'd only been invited to because the host's parents had made him invite everyone. She'd been drunk, and he'd been desperate, and the kiss had been clumsy and wet and over too fast. She'd pulled back with a laugh that wasn't quite cruel but wasn't quite kind either, and said something he'd pretended not to hear. He'd found her last week and she hadn't recognized him—had looked at him the way women looked at him now, with that particular combination of hunger and wonder—and he'd taken her apart in a hotel room very similar to the one where he'd left Ava. She'd cried afterward, not from sadness but from the overwhelming intensity of feeling things she hadn't known her body could feel. He'd crossed her name out the next morning, sitting in his car in the hotel parking lot, watching the sun rise through a windshield.

Lauren Williams. A girl from college, one of the few who'd shown him kindness before the change. They'd been friends, or something like friends—study partners in a literature seminar, bound by their shared inability to understand what the professor wanted from them. She'd had a boyfriend, a tall, handsome guy who'd treated her with the casual negligence of someone who knew he could do better but hadn't bothered to look yet. Ethan

had listened to her complain about him for hours, had offered sympathy and support and all the things a good friend was supposed to offer, all while secretly hoping she'd realize what was right in front of her. She never had.

The list went on. Names in neat rows, some crossed out, some still waiting. Each one represented a wound or a hope or a debt he was still trying to settle. Each one was a thread connecting the boy he'd been to the man he'd become, a map of all the ways women had shaped him without ever knowing they were doing it.

He reached the bottom of the list. Mary's name was there, near the end, added after she'd brought over that mug of tea and sat on his couch with her eyes saying everything her mouth couldn't. He'd known, even then, what would happen. Known it with the certainty that had become second nature since the change. Mary had been hungry for something her husband hadn't given her in years. And he'd known, with that same certainty, that he could give it to her.

He pulled the pen from his jacket pocket and drew a single line through her name. But she wasn't just crossed out. That would have been true for any other night. Mary was different. Mary had done something none of the others had done. She'd called her mother. Her sisters. Her daughter. Her colleague. She'd brought them all together. She'd taken what he offered and multiplied it, expanded it, made it into something that would ripple outward through all those women's lives in ways neither of them could predict. She deserved recognition.

Beside her crossed-out name, he wrote: +5.