

Chapter 1

Ava was trying, oh, so hard to push down the small, hot coal of anger that was re-kindling itself inside her. She was too old for this. Too experienced. She knew the language of modern dating, of digital breadcrumbs that could vanish into thin air. She'd told herself she was past being surprised by it. And yet, here she sat, proving that particular lie to herself.

Her leg, crossed over the other, gave a slight, unconscious bounce. A release of nervous energy she wouldn't allow to travel elsewhere. She was bored, almost. The kind of look that suggested she was exactly where she meant to be, waiting for no one in particular, simply observing the ebb and flow of the bar's nightlife. But her eyes kept cutting to the entrance, hoping yet ever disappointed. Every time the heavy door swung open, a sliver of the street's light would slice through, and for a fraction of a second, her heart would hitch. It was an autonomic response. She hated it.

Fifteen times. She'd counted. Fifteen little deaths of expectation. The faces that emerged from the light were never his, strangers with their own destinations, their own reasons for being here. A gaggle of women in high heels, their laughter already loud and slightly forced. A solitary man in a sharp suit who skimmed right past her. A couple stumbling in from the cold with the specific, insulated joy of people who had found their person for the night.

"Fucking typical."

It wasn't just the being stood up. It was the investment. The stupid, stubborn flicker of hope she'd allowed herself. She'd spent an hour getting ready, a luxury she rarely afforded a first date anymore. She'd chosen the black dress. She'd put it on as an act of self-love, a promise to herself that

she was worth the effort of a nice night out, regardless of who she was meeting. And now, that act felt like a costume for a play that had been cancelled.

She swirled the wine in her glass, watching the legs of the deep crimson liquid crawl slowly back down the crystal. The anger was there, but it was quickly being shouldered aside by a more familiar companion: a cold, precise pragmatism. He'd shown his hand. He was either a coward or an asshole, and the end result was the same. She was alone, in a nice dress, in a decent bar, with a half-full glass of acceptable wine. The situation was what it was. The only variable now was what she chose to do with it.

Her eyes dropped from the door to the small leather-bound menu tucked beside the candle on her table. The prices were reasonable. That was something. She could order the scallops, maybe the small filet. She could have a perfectly pleasant meal for one, savour the wine, and walk out of here with her head high and her dignity intact.

She took another, slower sip of wine. It was decent. Dry, with a faint peppery finish. The kind of wine that had character, even if it wasn't flashy. She could appreciate that. She could appreciate a lot of things, if she let herself. She wasn't going anywhere. Not yet. She was going to finish this glass of wine, and then she was going to decide if the rest of the night was worth salvaging. The ball, as they say, was now firmly in her own court.

A thought settled, and Ava let it sit there, turning it over, examining it with the same pragmatism she applied to everything else. When she was done here—when this glass was empty, when she'd made whatever point it was she was trying to make by staying—she could simply go home. She could walk through her door, kick off these heels that were starting to pinch in that particular way that only became noticeable after an hour of sitting, and let the dress pool on her bedroom floor like shed skin. She could pull on the oversized t-shirt she'd had since uni, the one so soft from a decade of washing that the letters were barely legible, and pour herself into the familiar dent on her couch. Some mindless television would be

first—maybe one of those true crime documentaries she claimed to watch ironically but secretly devoured, or a reality show so vapid it required no brain function whatsoever, just the numbing parade of beautiful people making terrible decisions. She could lose herself in someone else’s drama for an hour, let the manufactured tension of their lives drown out the real, petty disappointment of her own.

And then, when the wine had faded to a pleasant buzz and the television had become background noise, she would handle business.

Handle business. It was so practical, so unromantic. A transaction with herself. Every woman her age did it, after all. Well—every woman her age who wasn’t married, who didn’t have someone to roll toward in the dark, to initiate that familiar, sometimes perfunctory, sometimes genuinely lovely negotiation of bodies. The married ones probably did it too, if the whispered confessions over brunch with her coupled friends were any indication. But that was different. That was supplementation. What Ava did was maintenance. Self-care. A physiological need met with the same efficient, no-nonsense approach she brought to meal-prepping on Sundays or scheduling her quarterly dental cleanings.

Except it wasn’t, not really. And she knew this, even as she constructed the neat little narrative for herself. Because her trusty vibrator—and she hated that she thought of it that way, with that winking, self-deprecation, as if to acknowledge it was to diminish its importance—was anything but perfunctory. It lived in the top drawer of her nightstand, nestled beside a small bottle of lavender oil she never used and a journal she’d stopped writing in three years ago. It had a name, though she’d never speak it aloud. Rosa. She didn’t know why Rosa; it had just come to her one night, in that hazy space between orgasm and sleep, and the name had stuck.

Rosa was patient. Rosa never stood her up. Rosa knew exactly where to find the spots that made her back arch off the mattress and her teeth sink into her own forearm to muffle the sounds that still, at thirty-four, embarrassed her when she thought about them in the harsh light of

morning. There was no performance with Rosa, no wondering if she was taking too long, if her partner was getting bored or tired or self-conscious about their own performance.

She could already imagine it: the walk from the living room to the bedroom, the soft click of her door closing behind her like a seal on the world. She'd turn on the lamp beside her bed, the one that cast everything in a warm, amber glow that made her skin look softer, younger, like she was starring in her own private boudoir photograph. She'd lie back against the pillows, her t-shirt rucked up around her hips, and she'd take her time. There was no rush, after all. No one waiting. No one to disappoint. She could let her mind drift where it wanted, and lately—though she didn't examine this too closely as to why—it had been drifting to women.

She thought of the woman at her gym, the one who squatting three-fifty like it was nothing, the way the muscles in her back would flare and shift beneath her tank top with every rep. She'd caught herself watching once, and the woman had caught her watching, and there had been a moment—just a flicker, just a fraction of a second—where something was there. Curiosity, maybe. Or just the simple, primal acknowledgment of beauty in its most physical form. Ava had looked away first, and they'd never spoken. But the image had stayed. It lived somewhere in the back of her mind now, ready to be summoned on nights like this. She could summon it tonight. She could lie back, close her eyes, and let herself imagine what those hands might feel like. Not soft. Definitely not soft. Calloused maybe, from gripping bars and plates. Strong enough to lift her, to hold her in place, to make her feel for once like she wasn't the one carrying everything. She could imagine the weight of a body like that above her, the way it would feel to be enveloped by someone in a way that no man had ever quite managed.

The thought of Rosa, of the gym woman's back flexing beneath that thin tank top, of strong hands and the particular weight of a muscled body pressing her into the mattress—it had made Ava cross her legs just a little tighter. She could feel the faint pulse of blood there, the awareness of her

own body that always preceded a night with Rosa, that awakening of nerve endings that had been dormant all evening, numbed by disappointment and wine. She was already decorating the fantasy in her mind, adding details: the gym woman's name, which she didn't know, so she invented one—*Dani*, short and strong, like she imagined the woman herself would be—the way Dani's hands might feel sliding up her thighs, calloused palms scraping pleasantly against sensitive skin, the way she could probably lift Ava like she weighed nothing, rearrange her like a doll, take whatever she wanted with that quiet, confident certainty that came from knowing your body was a weapon and a gift all at once.

And then a shadow fell across the table, and the fantasy scattered like smoke.

“You know, I told you he wasn't coming.”

The voice was familiar, a specific kind of knowing amusement that Ava had come to recognize over the past few months of semi-regular patronage at this bar. She looked up, and there was Corinne, pad in hand, hip cocked, that particular expression on her face that was half sympathy and half I told you so, delivered with the easy familiarity of someone who'd earned the right to be blunt.

Ava blinked, dragging herself back from the edge of Dani's imagined hands, from her bedroom and Rosa waiting patiently in the drawer. For a moment, she felt caught—as if Corinne could see the fantasy. But Corinne was just looking at her with that smile, waiting for a response, and Ava forced herself to exhale.

“Yeah,” Ava said, her voice coming out flatter than she intended. “You did.” Corinne had. Three days ago, when Ava had mentioned the date over a solo dinner at the bar, too optimistic and too open about the whole thing, Corinne had listened with one eyebrow slowly climbing her forehead, and when Ava had finished, she'd simply said, “He's not going to show.” No hesitation. No sugar-coating. Just that calm, certain pronouncement,

delivered with the authority of someone who'd spent a decade watching men fail to meet expectations in a hundred different ways.

And Ava, stupidly, defensively, had argued. You don't know him. He's different. We've been talking for weeks. The whole pathetic litany of justifications that women told themselves when they wanted to believe, just this once, that the pattern would break.

Corinne had just shrugged, and said, "We'll see."

Well. Now they'd seen.

"I know you don't need the reminder," Corinne said, sliding into the booth across from Ava with the ease of someone who'd learned to steal thirty seconds of sitting whenever she could. She set down a small plate—olives, the good ones, the ones marinated in herbs and garlic that Ava had mentioned liking once, weeks ago. "But I'm off in twenty, and I figured you could use some company. And these." She pushed the plate closer. "On the house. Consider it compensation for my being right."

Ava looked at the olives, then at Corinne. In the low light from the bar, with the candle flickering between them, Corinne looked different than she did during her shifts—softer, maybe. Her dark hair was pulled back in the practical ponytail she always wore for work, but a few strands had escaped, curling against her temples. Her arms were bare in the thin-strapped black top that was part of the bar's uniform.

Ava realized she was staring. She looked away, reaching for an olive.

"Thanks," she said, and the word came out softer than she intended, almost vulnerable. She cleared her throat, reached for the wine glass, found it empty. "And for the record, I didn't need the reminder, but I appreciate the olives."

Corinne's smile widened, just slightly. She knew Ava didn't need it. But she also knew you, Ava. She was were sitting there making plans for when she got home. Making the best of it. Telling herself it didn't matter. She leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You don't have to go home yet. Not unless you want to."

Something in the way she said it made Ava's stomach tighten. Not with anxiety—with something else. Something that felt like the edge of the fantasy she'd been building before Corinne interrupted, but different.

Grounded.

“What are you suggesting?” Ava asked.

Corinne shrugged. “I’m suggesting you finish these olives, let me clock out, and then we have a drink together. You and me. Just two friends who’ve known each other for months and have never actually hung out when one of them wasn’t working. Unless you’ve got better plans at home.”

Ava reached for another olive, buying time. It was good. Briny and rich, the garlic blooming on her tongue. She chewed slowly, watching Corinne watch her, and felt the night shifting, re-forming into something she hadn’t anticipated.

“Twenty minutes?” Ava said finally.

Corinne’s smile widened into something genuine, something that made her whole face soften. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Ava had now found herself in a nightclub two blocks over, where the bass felt like it was trying to punch its way through her chest and the lights cut through the smoke in sharp, colored slices. Corinne had suggested it as they’d stepped out of the bar, and Ava had let herself be led, curious despite herself. Now they were wedged into a corner booth here, close enough that their knees almost touched beneath the table, a fresh round of drinks between them—something fruity and dangerous for Ava, a whiskey neat for Corinne, who’d shrugged off her work ponytail the moment they’d walked through the door and let her hair fall loose around her shoulders. The transformation was striking. Without the uniform and stiff work persona, Corinne looked younger.

“You’re doing it again,” Corinne said, and there was amusement in her voice.

Ava blinked. “Doing what?”

“Staring.” Corinne took a slow sip of her whiskey, holding Ava’s gaze over the rim of the glass. “It’s okay. I don’t mind. Just didn’t want you to think I hadn’t noticed.”

“I wasn’t—I mean, I was just—”

“Relax.” Corinne set her glass down and leaned forward, elbows on the table, close enough that Ava could smell her now. “So. Tell me about him. The guy. What was his name again?”

Ava frowned, actually had to think about it for a moment. The name was there, somewhere, but it felt distant, unimportant, like a word she’d learned in a language she no longer spoke. “Marcus,” she said finally, and the name sounded ridiculous. “His name was Marcus.”

“Marcus.” Corinne repeated it like she was tasting something unpleasant. “Marcus stood you up. Marcus couldn’t be bothered to send a text, to call, to show even the basic courtesy of cancelling. Marcus left you sitting in that bar for—how long was it? An hour?”

“Forty-five minutes,” Ava said, and the defensiveness in her voice surprised her. She wasn’t defending Marcus. She didn’t even know why she was defending him. But it wasn’t like she was just sitting there. She was making plans, telling herself it didn’t matter, making a whole night for herself out of the scraps. And that’s... that’s what people do, isn’t it? We take the disappointment and turn it into something we can control. Corinne done it a hundred times. A thousand. Every woman she knew

Corinne leaned in closer, close enough that Ava could see the flecks of gold in her eyes, the tiny scar above her left eyebrow. What she didn’t understand was—Why? Why do they keep doing it? Why do they keep giving men the power to disappoint them, to make them sit in bars alone?

“You don’t need him,” Corinne said, and her voice was firm now, certain. “You don’t need Marcus. Plenty of fish in the sea, as they say.”

Corinne raised a hand, catching the attention of a passing server who’d spent years working in the industry, and ordered them another round—something amber for herself, something tall and cold for Ava that arrived with a slice of orange balanced on the rim. The drinks came quickly, materializing through the pulsing gloom, and Corinne wrapped her fingers around her fresh glass before she leaned back into the booth with an expression that Ava was beginning to recognize: the look of someone about to propose something she found privately amusing.

“So,” Corinne said, raising her glass before taking a sip, her eyes dancing over the rim. “Here’s the thing about this place. It’s not just a place with decent drinks and a terrible taste in music.” She gestured vaguely toward the dance floor. “It’s also full of options. Look around. I guarantee there’s at least a couple of guys in here who might catch your eye.”

Ava followed her gesture, let her gaze drift across the crowd. There were men everywhere, of course—that was the point of places like this. She saw them in clusters near the bar, in pairs, solos nursing drinks and scanning the room with that particular expression that men got when they were looking. Some were handsome enough, she supposed, in that generic way that all moderately attractive men looked. But even as she looked, even as she tried to summon interest, she felt nothing. A vast, hollow nothing where anticipation should have been.

“Oh,” Ava said. “So that’s why you brought me here.”

Of course. This was what friends did, wasn’t it? When one of them got stood up, the others rallied, dragged her out, reminded her that the world was full of other possibilities. It was practically a law written somewhere in the invisible rulebook that governed these things. And Corinne was being a good friend, a good ally, doing exactly what she was supposed to do. So why did it feel like a letdown?

Corinne must have saw something in her face, because her amusement softened into something more careful. “That’s not the only reason. But yeah, part of it. I figured you could use a reminder that Marcus isn’t the only option on the menu.” She shrugged. “What’s wrong with that?”

Ava reached for her drink while she tried to find words for something she hadn’t fully articulated to herself. She wasn’t sure. Even if she did see someone. Even if she caught someone’s eye, and he came over, and they talked, and it seemed like something might happen. It would just fall apart anyway. Probably on the drinks alone.

“You know how these things go. You meet someone, you have a drink, you talk for twenty minutes, and somewhere in there you realize that he’s not actually listening to you, he’s just waiting for his turn to talk. Or he says something that’s supposed to be charming but creeps you out. Or he touches your arm in a way that’s meant to be intimate but just feels... invasive.”

Ava set the glass down, because she knew—even if none of that happens, even if he’s actually decent, actually there—she still had to go through the whole dance. The performance. Pretending she wasn’t as interested as he was, or pretending she was more interested than he was, or pretending she hadn’t done this a hundred times before and knew exactly how it was going to end. “I’m just... tired. Tired of pretending it might be different this time when it never is.”

“Okay,” Corinne said slowly. “I hear you. I do. And you’re not wrong—not about any of it. Men, in general, are exhausting.” A small, wry smile. “But here’s the thing. Who says it has to be a relationship? Who says it has to go anywhere? Who says you have to invest anything at all?”

Ava blinked. “What do you mean?”

Corinne’s smile widened, just slightly. It was obvious, wasn’t it? what if Ava just... let herself have fun? Not find someone. Not meet someone. Not start something. Just... have a night. A real night. Where the only goal was to feel good, and tomorrow didn’t matter because tomorrow was a completely separate problem. She gestured vaguely toward the crowd. There were a lot of men in here. Some of them were probably decent dancers. Some of them are probably decent kissers. And—

“You’re suggesting I find someone to fuck,” Ava said, and the bluntness of it surprised her, but Corinne just laughed.

“I’m suggesting you find someone to enjoy,” Corinne corrected. “The fucking is optional. Or it’s the point. Or it’s somewhere in between. The point is—you don’t have to invest. You just have to let yourself want something without needing it to mean anything.” She reached across the

table, her hand landing on Ava's wrist, warm and solid. "When's the last time you did that? Just wanted something for the sake of wanting it?" Ava stared at her, at the sincerity in her eyes. When was the last time? She couldn't remember. Couldn't remember a single moment in recent history when she'd let herself want without immediately managing it afterward. What would it feel like to just... let go? To want something messy and real? To let someone else take the wheel for once, even just for a night? "I don't know," Ava said quietly. "I don't know if I remember how." Corinne's smile was gentle, almost tender. "Then let tonight be practice. Look around. Really look. Not for the one. Not for someone who might matter. Just for someone who makes you feel something. Anything. A simple 'yes, I would like that body near mine for a few hours.' Take your time. No pressure. Just... look."

And so Ava looked.

She let her eyes drift across the club, trying to see with new eyes—not those of someone hunting for a partner, a boyfriend, a future, but the eyes of someone simply checking possibility. The men at the bar. The men on the dance floor. The men in booths and corners, some with women, some with each other, some alone and scanning just like she was. There was one near the bar, dark-haired, laughing at something his friend said. His smile was nice—genuine,—and when he turned, she could see the way his shirt stretched across his chest, the suggestion of muscle underneath. Not gym-sculpted, not like Dani, but solid.

Beside her, Corinne was quiet, letting her look.

There was another on the edge of the dance floor, tall and lean, moving with a confidence that suggested he didn't care who was watching. He caught someone's eye—not Ava's, someone else's—and smiled, and there was something in that smile that made Ava's stomach tighten, just slightly. She let herself imagine it, just for a moment. What it would feel like to walk up to him. What it would feel like to dance with him. What it would feel like

to leave with him, to find somewhere private, to let him touch her without the weight of a single expectation beyond that moment, tonight.

She looked at another man, and another, itemizing them like food on a menu. This one with kind eyes. This one with strong shoulders. This one with a jaw that could probably do interesting things with his mouth. None of them made her heart race. None of them made her thighs press together. But they were real. They were options. And for the first time all night, Ava let herself consider what it might mean to simply... choose one, if only for a few hours.

She took a long drink, let the cold burn of it settle in her chest, and kept looking.

And then, without warning—

“Hey,” a voice said, low and rough in a way that scraped pleasantly against her nerves, and Ava turned to find a man sliding into the booth beside her with the confidence of someone who’d never been told he wasn’t welcome. “Sorry to interrupt. But I saw you sitting here, and I figured if I didn’t come over, I’d spend the rest of the night wondering what would’ve happened if I had.”

Ava blinked, her brain struggling to catch up with her eyes, because the man was—there was no other word for it—*staggering*. Dark hair, cut short on the sides and longer on top, falling across his forehead. A sharp jaw with just enough stubble to suggest he didn’t try too hard but also didn’t need to. A leather jacket, worn and broken in, stretched across shoulders that were broad and solid in a way that made her think of the gym woman Dani. His eyes were dark, almost black, and they were looking at her in a way that made her stomach flip.

Really, fucking good-looking. The thought crystallized in her mind with embarrassing clarity. Like, I’d fuck you right now if we weren’t in a public spot, hot.

“Hi,” Ava managed, and the word came out breathier than she intended, which only made thing worse. She was thirty-four years old. She did not get flustered by attractive men sliding into her booth. She didn’t. And yet here she was, her hands suddenly unsure what to do with themselves.

“I’m—” she started, but he was already smiling.

“I know who you are,” he said, and there was something in his voice, a warmth, a familiarity that made her frown. “Ava Harding. Right?”

The sound of her full name on his lips was a jolt. She stared at him, really stared now, trying to place him. The eyes—there was something about the eyes. She knew those eyes. She knew them. But attached to that jaw? To those shoulders? To that voice and that impossible, devastating smile?

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she could hear the confusion in her own voice, the way it wavered between embarrassment and genuine bewilderment. “Do I—have we met?”

He laughed. “We used to have chemistry together. Mr. Patterson’s class? I sat behind you.”

Ava’s mind was a blank wall. Chemistry. She remembered the class, remembered the harsh fluorescent lights and the way Mr. Patterson’s voice could put her to sleep standing up. She remembered the girl she’d sat next to, Vanessa something, who’d passed her notes about boys and complained about her hair. But behind her? She tried to summon the face of the boy who’d sat behind her, and all she got was a vague impression of—nothing.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, and she hated how inadequate the word felt. “I—I don’t—”

“Ethan,” he said. “Ethan Park.”
Ethan Park.

Hearing the name was like a key turning in a lock she hadn't touched in nearly two decades. Ethan Park. Ethan Park. The boy who'd sat behind her in chemistry, yes, but also the boy who'd been in her English class, and her history class, and who'd lived three blocks from her and ridden the same bus every morning. The boy with the glasses—thick, black-framed things that always seemed to be sliding down his nose. The boy with the acne, the one who'd been so skinny his clothes hung off him like they were borrowed from someone larger. The boy who'd stammered when he talked to girls, who'd kept his head down in the hallways, who'd been the target of every bully's casual cruelty and every popular girl's dismissive glance.

That Ethan Park?

Ava's mouth fell open. She was aware that she was staring, but she couldn't seem to stop. She looked at him—at the sharp jaw, the full lips, the shoulders that could probably lift her without effort, the chest that stretched the fabric of his henley in ways that made her mouth water—and tried to reconcile this man with the boy in her memory. It was impossible. It was like looking at a before-and-after photo where the “after” wasn't just an improvement but a complete fucking metamorphosis.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, and then immediately wanted to take it back, but Ethan just laughed again.

“Yeah,” he said. “I get that a lot.”

Ava's brain was still struggling to catch up. She remembered him now, remembered him slumped in his seat, always alone, always quiet. Remembered the way the popular kids had talked about him, teenagers who didn't understand that bodies could change. Remembered, with a flush of shame, that she'd never once looked at him twice. Never once considered him as anything other than The Geek. And now here he was. Here this was. Sitting beside her in a leather jacket, looking at her like she was the only woman in the club, with a body that made her think things she hadn't let herself think about a man in months.

“You look...” She trailed off, because every word that came to mind was either inadequate or embarrassing. Different wasn't strong enough. Hot was too simple. Fuckable was accurate but not something you said to someone you hadn't seen in sixteen years.

“Different?” he offered.

“A little,” Ava managed, and then laughed despite herself, because a little was like saying the ocean was a little damp. “Okay, a lot. You’re—I mean, you were—” She stopped, took a breath, tried to gather herself. “You look amazing. I’m sorry, I’m just—this is not what I expected when I woke up this morning.”

“What did you expect when you woke up this morning?”

It was such a simple question, but the way he asked it made it feel like something else. Like he actually wanted to know. Like he had all the time in the world to sit here and listen to her answer. What had she expected? A date with Marcus, maybe. A pleasant evening, a decent meal, the possibility of something that wouldn’t go anywhere but might at least be enjoyable for a few hours. Instead she’d gotten stood up, rescued by a waitress, dragged to a club, and was now sitting next to a high school nerd who’d somehow transformed into the most objectively attractive man she’d seen in years.

“Not this,” she said finally, and the honesty in her own voice surprised her. “Definitely not this.”

Corinne, who’d been watching the exchange with an expression of barely concealed delight, chose that moment to slide out of the booth. “I’m going to grab another round,” she said, and her voice was innocent, but her eyes were dancing. “You two... catch up.”

She was gone before Ava could protest, swallowed by the crowd, leaving her alone in the booth with Ethan Park and the sudden, terrifying awareness of how close they were sitting. His knee was inches from hers beneath the table. And his eyes—those dark, familiar, utterly transformed eyes—were still on her, waiting in a way that made her forget, briefly, how to breathe.

“So,” he said, and his voice was low, meant for just her. “Catch up. What’s the last sixteen years looked like for you, Ava?”

Ava opened her mouth to answer—to offer some condensed, palatable version of the last sixteen years, the kind of highlight reel you give to someone you haven’t seen since high school—but the words didn’t come. They got stuck somewhere in her throat, lodged behind the sudden, overwhelming existence of him.

Catch up. The phrase floated through her mind, meaningless, irrelevant. How could she catch him up on her life when she couldn’t even remember her own name? When the only thing her brain seemed capable of producing was a relentless, vivid, completely inappropriate cascade of images involving him and her and various configurations of their bodies that definitely did not belong in a nightclub booth?

His eyes. God, his eyes. She’d never been looked at like this. Not by Marcus, not by any of the men who’d come before him, not by anyone she’d actually fucked, and there had been a few. Those men had looked at her with appreciation, with desire, with the standard-issue hunger that came standard with the male gaze. But this was different. This felt like being devoured. And in response, something in Ava had flipped open. A switch she hadn’t known existed, hadn’t known she possessed, had suddenly been activated, and now her mind was a theater playing an endless loop of increasingly explicit fantasies starring the man beside her.

His cock. She imagined his cock—thick, hard, the kind that would stretch her open in ways that made her scream. She imagined the sounds he’d make when she took him deep. She’d never been particularly invested in blowjobs—they were fine—but the thought of doing it to him, of having him grip her hair and guide her, of looking up and seeing that devastating face contorted with pleasure, made her thighs press together beneath the table.

A titjob. When was the last time she'd even thought about that? High school, maybe, fumbling experiments with boyfriends who didn't know what they were doing. But now she imagined his cock between her breasts, imagined them pressed around him, imagined the way he'd look down at her, watching himself move, watching her watch him. She imagined him coming on her chest, on her throat, on her face, and the thought of it was so intense she had to look away for a moment, afraid he'd see it in her eyes.

Anal. She almost laughed at herself—she'd never been particularly interested in anal, had tried it a few times with varying degrees of enthusiasm, had always found it more awkward than pleasurable. But now she imagined him there, imagined the patience and care in his eyes as he prepared her, opened her, took her somewhere she'd never let anyone take her. She imagined the stretch, the way he'd feel deeper than anyone had ever been. She imagined the sounds she'd make, the way she'd grip the sheets, the way he'd hold her steady and take what he wanted, and the thought—

What the fuck is wrong with me?

But she knew, even as she thought it, that nothing was wrong. This wasn't wrong. This was—this was new. This was a door opening inside her that she hadn't known existed, and on the other side was a version of herself who didn't manage her desires, didn't control them. On the other side was a woman who simply wanted. She imagined him bending her over this very table, right here in the club, not caring who saw. She imagined him pulling her dress up, pushing her panties aside, entering her from behind while the bass thumped and the lights swirled and the world continued around them, oblivious. She imagined the way he'd feel inside her, and the way she'd moan into the leather, biting her own arm to muffle the sounds the way she did with Rosa, except this time it wouldn't be her arm, it would be his hand over her mouth, his voice in her ear telling her she was beautiful, she was good, she was his for this one night.

She imagined him on top of her, that broad chest pressed against her smaller frame. She imagined wrapping her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, feeling every inch of him inside her. She imagined coming around him—not once, not twice, but over and over until she couldn't remember how she even got there in the first place. And through all of it, his eyes watching her, seeing her, wanting her in a way that made everything else fall away.

“—Ava?”

His voice cut through the fantasy, and she blinked, realizing she'd been staring at him in silence for what must have been a full thirty seconds. His expression had shifted—not impatient, not annoyed, but curious. Amused, maybe. Like he knew exactly what had been running through her mind and was waiting to see what she'd do about it.

“I'm sorry.” She cleared her throat, reached for her drink. “I—sorry. You were saying?”

“I asked what you've been up to. Last sixteen years.” He leaned back, just a fraction, but it gave her space to breathe, to think. “But we don't have to do the whole catch-up thing if you don't want to. We could just...see what happens.”

See what happens.

Corinne reached the bar, caught the eye of a bartender she recognized—a tall woman with close-cropped hair and sleeves of tattoos who'd served her before—and held up two fingers, then glanced back toward the booth and amended it to three. The bartender nodded, already reaching for glasses, and Corinne let her eyes drift back to the corner where Ava and the stranger were still sitting, close together now, their heads bent toward each other like they were the only two people in the room.

He was something, that one. Dark hair. The leather jacket was a nice touch. And the way he'd looked at Ava... Corinne had seen that look before, but rarely so pure. Like she was the answer to a question he'd been asking his whole life.

The drinks arrived. He looked like a whiskey guy, she decided. The kind who appreciated things that were complex, aged, worth savoring. Better than nothing, she supposed, sliding a bill across the bar and waving off the change. If nothing else, it would give her an excuse to introduce herself properly, to see up close what had turned Ava's brain to mush in the space of thirty seconds.

She turned, drinks and began the journey back through the crowd. And that's when it happened.

He looked up and his eyes landed directly on Corinne. Their eyes met. And Corinne felt the world drop out from under her.

It was like a switch had been flipped somewhere deep in her nervous system, some circuit she hadn't known existed suddenly flooding with current. Her body responded before her mind could catch up. She stumbled, literally stumbled, catching herself against a nearby table, and the drinks sloshed but didn't spill, and she didn't care, because his eyes were still on her and she couldn't breathe.

What the fuck.

The thought was distant, muffled, like someone else thinking it in another room. Because the rest of her brain was suddenly, violently occupied with images—vivid, explicit, perverse images.

She imagined him crossing the club toward her, not stopping at Ava's booth, coming straight to her. She imagined his hand on her waist, pulling her close, his mouth at her ear, his voice—that low voice—telling her exactly what he wanted to do to her. She imagined him walking her backward, into the bathrooms, into the women's room where the lock would click behind them and the club would become a distant memory. She imagined him pressing her against the wall, his hands everywhere—in her hair, on her hips, sliding under her top, finding skin.

His hands. She imagined them on her breasts, thumbs finding her nipples through her top, rolling them, pinching just hard enough to make her moan. She imagined those hands sliding down her stomach, lower, finding the waistband of her jeans, slipping inside, finding her wet and ready. She imagined his mouth on her throat, her collarbone, her stomach. She imagined it between her thighs, his tongue doing things she'd only ever read about in books she was too embarrassed to buy in person. She imagined the sounds he'd make, the way he'd groan against her.

And then she imagined more. She imagined him inside her, finally, after all that teasing and building. She imagined the way he'd fill her completely, deeper than anyone had ever been. She imagined his rhythm—slow at first, teasing, then faster, harder, until she was clinging to him, nails digging into his shoulders, begging for something. She imagined the way he'd look at her while he fucked her, those dark eyes watching her fall apart, watching her break, and the thought of it was so intense she had to grip the table to stay upright.

But it didn't stop there. The fantasies kept coming, each one more elaborate, more obscene than the last.

She imagined him tying her up. She'd never been tied up, had never trusted anyone enough to give them that kind of control. But with him—with those hands, that mouth, those eyes—she imagined letting him do anything. She imagined him using his belt, or his tie, or maybe just his hands holding her wrists above her head while he took what he wanted. She imagined the helplessness, the way it would feel to finally, finally let go of all the control she held so tightly, to give it to someone who looked at her like she was the most precious thing in the world.

She imagined him fucking her in his car, in an alley. She imagined him taking her home—his home, not hers, someplace neutral where nothing was familiar and everything was possible. She imagined his bedroom, his sheets, his pillow under her head while he moved above her. She imagined waking up next to him, just once, just to see what it would feel like to have someone there when the sun came up. And through all of it, through every fantasy, every dirty, perverse, completely inappropriate thought, his eyes were on her.

Corinne blinked, and the spell broke.

She was still standing at the edge of the crowd, drinks in hand, staring at a man she'd never met like he was the answer to every question she'd ever asked.

What the actual fuck just happened?

And then Corinne turned back toward the booth, drinks in hand, and the world stopped.

The booth was empty. Not just empty—abandoned. Two glasses, one still half-full, the other drained. A napkin crumpled on the table. They were gone. Ava was gone. With him. With that stranger in the leather jacket who'd looked at her like she was the only woman in the world and then, for one earth-shattering moment, had looked at Corinne the same way. The man she'd just spent thirty seconds imagining in ways that would make a pornographer blush was now leaving with someone else.

With her friend.

With Ava.

The realization hit. She didn't care about anything except the sudden, overwhelming, debilitating truth that had just crashed through every wall she'd ever built. She wanted him. She needed him. And he was gone.

The jealousy that flooded her wasn't the polite, manageable kind you could smile through, that you could bury under well-wishes and genuine happiness for a friend. This was something else entirely. This was a savage thing that had no mercy. It burned through her veins like acid, turning her blood to fire, her thoughts to ash. Ava was gone with her man. The man who should have been looking at her across that booth.

And the worst part—the absolute, gutting worst part—was that Corinne had no one to blame but herself. She'd orchestrated this. She'd brought Ava here. She'd encouraged her. She'd practically pushed her into that man's arms with her little speech about having fun, about letting go, about finding someone to enjoy. And Ava, sweet, practical, guarded Ava, had actually listened. Had actually taken the advice. Had actually walked out of this club with a man who looked like he'd been sculpted by gods with very specific, very perverse intentions. While Corinne stood here, holding drinks, her mind bursting with fantasies that would never be fulfilled.

She closed her eyes, and the images came flooding back—worse now, sharper now, poisoned now by the knowledge that she'd never get to live them. She heard his voice telling her exactly what he wanted to do, and the sound of it was so real, so vivid, that she actually whimpered, there in the middle of the club, surrounded by strangers who had no idea she was falling apart.

And then she imagined worse. She imagined them together—all three of them. Herself and Ava and him, tangled in sheets, in a configuration she'd never considered before but now couldn't stop seeing. She imagined Ava's face, flushed with pleasure, her eyes meeting Corinne's across his shoulder. She imagined their hands finding each other while he moved between them, above them, inside them. She imagined the sounds they'd make together, the way they'd share him, the way they'd share each other, and the thought was so obscene, so completely outside anything she'd ever allowed herself to want, that it should have shocked her.

It didn't.

Corinne's body was screaming at her. Every nerve ending, every cell, every atom was vibrating with a need so acute it bordered on pain. Her skin felt sensitive, like she'd been flayed open and left exposed. Her nipples were hard, aching for a touch that wasn't coming. Between her thighs, she was wet—soaking—and knowing that, knowing it was wasted made her want to scream. She needed to act. Now. Immediately. Before this feeling consumed her entirely, before she did something stupid like call Ava and beg for details, before she tracked them down and made a scene that would ruin everything.

But what? What could she do? Go home to her empty apartment and her own version of Rosa? Lie in her bed and imagine what might have been while her fingers did the work his should have been doing? The thought was unbearable—not because there was anything wrong with taking care of herself, but because tonight, of all nights, it would feel like defeat.

She scanned the club, desperate, her eyes raking over the crowd with a hunger she hadn't felt in years. There were men everywhere. Hundreds of them. Some of them were probably attractive. Some of them were probably available. Some of them might even be willing to help her burn off this impossible, unbearable need. But none of them were him. None of them had those eyes, that jaw, that impossible body. None of them had looked at her the way he did, even if only for a second. None of them had unlocked something in her that she hadn't known existed, some deep, dark chamber of desire that was now screaming for release.

And yet—what choice did she have? The need grown beyond reason, beyond any pretense of dignity or self-control. She needed to come. Now. Here. It didn't matter where. It didn't matter who saw. The thought should have shocked her. Should have stopped her, made her reconsider, made her retreat to the bathroom like a normal person. But normal had abandoned her the moment those eyes had locked onto hers across the crowd. Normal had died in two heartbeats, when her body had awakened to possibilities she'd never allowed herself to imagine.

Corinne's hand moved before she'd consciously decided to act. It slid down her stomach, past the waistband of her jeans, into the wetness waiting there. And the contact was so immediate that she actually gasped, her head falling back, her eyes fluttering closed.

Oh god.

The sound that escaped her was thin. But it was enough. Enough to draw attention from the group nearest her—a cluster of women in their twenties. Corinne didn't care. She couldn't care. Her fingers were moving now, finding the rhythm she knew so well from nights alone with her own hand. "Holy shit," a woman breathed, and then, to Corinne's distant surprise, she laughed. "Go off, queen. Get yours."

The encouragement was a match to gasoline. Corinne moaned openly now, her other hand bracing against the pillar she'd stumbled into, her body surrendering completely to the need that consumed her. She didn't care who watched. Didn't care what they thought. Didn't care about anything except the building pressure, the way her fingers were sliding through, the way she could almost—pretend they were his.

More voices joined the first. The cluster of women had grown, or maybe just gotten louder. "Yeah, girl!" "Get it!" "Wish I had her confidence!" Somewhere to her left, a man's voice—slightly disgusted—muttered something about "classy" and "needs to get a room," but his companion shushed him, and Corinne didn't care.

Her fingers found her clit, and she screamed. Not loud—not really, not above the music—but a scream nonetheless, a raw, animal sound. The sensation was overwhelming, too much and not enough all at once. She was so sensitive, so ready that the lightest touch sent shockwaves through her entire body. She pressed harder, circled faster, her hips bucking against her hand like she was fucking it, like it was him, like it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"No," she gasped, pulling back at the last second. Not yet. Not yet. She needed this to last. Needed to draw it out, to savor it, to make it mean something. Because when it was over, she'd be alone again. When it was over, the night would be real again—empty and full of what-ifs. She needed to stay here, in this moment, for as long as possible. Her fingers slowed, teasing, circling, backing off just before the peak. She let her fingers sink inside herself—just one, then two—and the stretch made her sob. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

She fucked herself standing there, braced against the pillar, surrounded by strangers who had become her accidental congregation. Her hips moved in a rhythm, and the sounds she made were sounds she'd never heard herself make—keening, desperate. And somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew this was insane, knew she'd regret it tomorrow, knew she'd probably end up on the internet and have to explain herself to people who wouldn't understand.

She didn't care.

She didn't care.

The pressure built again, faster this time, harder to resist. Her fingers moved inside herself, curling against that spot that always undid her, and her thumb pressed against her clit in tight, furious circles. Her whole body was shaking, trembling, on the verge of something enormous.

And then it happened.

The orgasm crashed through her. She came for what felt like hours, though it was probably seconds. She came until her knees buckled and the stranger beside her had to catch her, hold her up, keep her from crumpling to the floor. She came until the last tremor faded, until her body went limp. When she opened her eyes, the crowd was still there. Some were cheering. Some were staring in disbelief. Some were already losing interest, turning back to their drinks and their conversations. A woman pressed a shot glass into her hand—tequila, something cheap—and Corinne drank it without thinking.

Corinne straightened slowly, adjusting her jeans, running a hand through her hair like she'd just done something as ordinary as ordering a drink.

"Fucking hell," she muttered, and the woman beside her laughed.

"Right? That was... I don't even have words." She was pretty, this woman, with kind eyes and a smile that seemed genuine. "You okay?"

Corinne considered the question. Was she okay? She didn't know. She felt hollowed out. The jealousy was still there, but it had lost its teeth. The need was still there, but it was manageable now. She could think. She could function. She could figure out what came next, whatever that might've been.

The door hadn't even fully closed behind them before Ava's back was against it, the solid wood pressing into her spine through the thin fabric of her dress, and Ethan's mouth was on hers like he'd been waiting sixteen years for this moment. The lock clicked home—someone's hand, his or hers, she couldn't tell and didn't care—and then there was nothing but the crash of bodies, the desperate scramble of mouths and hands. Ava's fingers fisted in his leather jacket, pulling him closer, deeper, as if she could somehow consume him through sheer touch. The kiss was brutal and messy and absolutely perfect. His hands were everywhere at once—in her

hair, on her hips, spanning her waist, pulling her against him so she could feel exactly how much he wanted her.

Oh god oh god oh god.

This was insane. This was absolutely, completely, utterly insane. She barely knew this man—or rather, she knew a version of him from high school that bore no resemblance to the one currently pinning her to a hotel door. She didn't know what he'd done for the last sixteen years. Didn't know if he was married, or a serial killer, or secretly terrible in bed. Didn't know anything except his name and the way his eyes had looked at her across that club booth and the fact that she wanted him with a desperation that defied all reason.

But none of that mattered. None of it had mattered the moment he'd leaned close in that booth and said, "There's a hotel across the street. We could continue this somewhere... quieter." And she'd known exactly what he meant. Catch up was just language, the polite scaffolding people used to build a bridge toward the thing they actually wanted. And what she wanted—what her entire body was screaming for—was him.

She'd nodded before she could think, before she could talk herself out of it, before the careful, pragmatic part of her brain could assemble its usual arguments about safety and wisdom and the importance of not going to hotels with strange men no matter how good-looking they were. And now here she was, pressed against a door in a room she hadn't even looked at yet, being thoroughly kissed by a man who had somehow, impossibly, become the center of her entire universe in the space of an hour.

His mouth left hers to trail down her throat, and Ava's head fell back against the door with a thud she barely registered. The sounds she was making—small, desperate things that seemed to come from somewhere outside herself—would have embarrassed her if she'd had any brain function left to process them. But thinking was impossible. Thinking required perspective, the ability to form coherent sentences, and she had

none of those things. All she had was sensation: his mouth on her neck, his hands sliding up her thighs, pushing her dress higher.

“Ethan,” she gasped, and the name was a revelation on her tongue. Ethan. The boy who’d sat behind her in chemistry. The nerd with the glasses and the acne and the too-big clothes. The ghost she’d never once looked at twice. And now this—this man—with his body and his mouth and his hands and the way he was making her feel like she’d never been touched before in her entire life.

His hands found the hem of her dress and pushed it higher, higher, until the hotel room’s cool air hit her thighs, and she realized dimly that she should have been self-conscious, should have worried about how she looked, whether her body was good enough for this impossible man. But there was no room in her brain for self-consciousness. There was only the desperate, clawing need to be touched, be taken apart by someone who looked at her like she was the most desirable thing he’d ever seen.

His fingers found the edge of her panties—lacy, black, chosen earlier that evening with a different man in mind, a man who hadn’t even bothered to show up—and hooked under the elastic. “These,” he said, his voice rough, “need to go.”

“Then take them off.” The words came out as a command, surprising her. She wasn’t the type to command. She was the type to make sure everyone was comfortable and consenting and having a good time. But something about Ethan—about this night, this moment, this impossible situation—had cracked something open inside her, and the woman emerging from that crack was different. She was hungry. She was demanding.

Ethan’s smile was slow, visible even in the dim light filtering through the hotel room’s curtains. “Yes, ma’am.”

He dropped to his knees—actually dropped to his knees—and Ava’s heart stopped. The image of him there, on his knees before her, his dark head level with her hips, his hands sliding up her thighs, was so overwhelmingly erotic that she felt a fresh pulse of wetness between her legs. He looked up at her as his fingers found the waistband of her panties. He pulled her panties down slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. The fabric slid over her

hips, down her thighs, past her knees, and she stepped out of them without being asked, kicking them aside. And then he was there, his face inches from the most intimate part of her, and she had to brace her hands on his shoulders to keep from sliding down the door.

His tongue found her clit immediately—immediately, like he'd known exactly where to look—and the first touch of his tongue against that hypersensitive bundle of nerves made her cry out, her hands fisting in his hair, her hips bucking against his face.

“Fuck,” she gasped, the word torn from somewhere deep in her chest.

“Fuck, Ethan, fuck.”

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her steady and open for him, and he devoured her like a man who'd been starving for years. There was nothing tentative about it, nothing exploratory. He knew what he was doing, and what he was doing was making her lose her goddamn mind. The pleasure built with terrifying speed, coiling in her belly like a spring being wound by invisible fingers. She tried to warn him—tried to gasp out that it was too fast, that she needed a moment to breathe—but the words wouldn't come. All that came were sounds, the kinds of noises she'd only ever made alone in her bedroom with Rosa, and even then she'd muffled them in her pillow. When she came, it was with a scream that she felt in every cell of her body. Her back arched off the door, her fingers twisted in his hair, and she rode his face through wave after wave of sensation, each one more intense than the last. He didn't stop, didn't slow, didn't give her a moment to recover. He kept going, drawing it out, wringing every last tremor from her body until she was completely undone. Only then did he pull back, looking up at her with a satisfied smile.

“Good?” he asked, and there was a teasing note in his voice that made her want to hit him and kiss him in equal measure.

“Shut up,” she managed, her voice wrecked. “Just—shut up and fuck me.”

His smile widened, and he rose to his feet, his body pressing her back against the door. “Whatever you say.”

His mouth found hers again, and she tasted herself on his lips—a strange, intimate flavor that should have been off-putting but instead sent another pulse through her. His hands were at his belt, unbuckling, unzipping, and she heard the rustle of fabric as he pushed his jeans down.

He was big. She'd known he would be—had imagined it, in those fevered fantasies in the club—but knowing and feeling were different things. When he positioned himself, when she felt the head of his cock pressing against her, she had a moment of pure fear. He won't fit. He can't possibly fit.

And then he did.

He pushed inside her slowly, giving her body time to adjust, to stretch. Ava's head fell back against the door, her eyes squeezing shut, her mouth open. The sensation was overwhelming: the stretch, the way he seemed to reach places inside her she hadn't known existed. She'd been with men before, plenty of them, but none of them had felt like this. None of them had filled her so, so perfectly, that she couldn't remember a time before he was inside her.

The rhythm he set was deep and slow at first, each hitting some spot inside her that made her see white. He watched her the entire time, watched her face contort with pleasure, watched her eyes roll back.

"Harder," she gasped, surprising herself again. "Fuck me harder."

He obliged.

The pace increased, the strokes becoming faster, deeper, more urgent. The door rattled against its hinges, and Ava wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, taking all of him. Her nails dug into his shoulders through his henley, and she could feel the muscle underneath. She came again without warning, a second orgasm crashing into her while the first was still settling. This one was different—deeper, pulling a scream from her that was half sob. She clung to him as it ripped through her, her body clenching around him, and she felt him falter, felt his control slip.

The dirty talk they exchanged should have been cheesy, should have made her laugh. Instead, it pushed her over the edge again, a third orgasm following so close on the heels of the second that they blurred together into one continuous wave of pleasure.

The world had become a blur, and when Ethan's hands gripped her hips and physically lifted her away from the door, Ava felt a moment of weightlessness that stole the breath from her lungs. He carried her across the hotel room like she weighed nothing—like she was made of

nothing—and then she was flying, actually flying through the room, before she landed on the bed with a bounce that rattled her teeth.

The old Ava—the one who'd sat alone in that bar just hours ago—would have had something to say about being thrown. She would have protested, maybe, or at least asked for a moment to catch her breath, to compose herself, to make sure everything was still consensual and comfortable and safe. But that Ava was gone. That Ava had evaporated the moment Ethan's eyes had met hers across the club.

This Ava—the one now sprawled across a hotel bed—crooned at the impact.

She liked it. She liked being thrown, being handled, being moved like she was nothing more than an object of his pleasure. The realization should have shocked her, should have made her sit up and reconsider everything she thought she knew about herself. Instead, it made her wetter, made her spread her legs wider on the rumpled sheets, made her look up at him. Ethan stood at the foot of the bed, looking down at her like she was a feast he couldn't wait to devour. His henley was gone—she didn't remember him taking it off, but there it was, somewhere on the floor—and his chest was even more magnificent than she'd imagined. Her eyes traveled down, down, past his abdomen, past the V-taper that pointed like an arrow toward—

His cock..

She'd already had it inside her. She'd already felt it stretch her, fill her, take her to places she'd never been. She knew its size, its shape, the way the head flared just enough to hit every perfect spot inside her. But now, looking at it again—looking at him approaching the bed, his cock bobbing with each step, she could have sworn it was different.

Bigger.

She blinked, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. It was longer, surely. Thicker. The veins stood out more prominently, wrapping around the shaft like ropes, and the head was more engorged, practically pulsing. She watched it as he moved closer, watched it grow, actually grow, lengthening

and thickening with each step until it was unmistakably larger than it had been just minutes ago. That couldn't be right. That was impossible. Cocks didn't just grow like that, didn't expand and thicken between one moment and the next. But as Ethan reached the bed, as he climbed onto the mattress and positioned himself above her, Ava looked at his cock—really looked, with all the attention she could muster—and she knew, with absolute, bone-deep certainty, that it was bigger. Longer by at least an inch. “What are you looking at?” he asked, and there was something in his eyes that suggested he knew exactly what she was seeing.

Ava opened her mouth to answer, to ask the question, but they got lost somewhere between her brain and her lips.

Oh, who the fuck cared? Who cared if it was bigger? Who cared if it had grown, if that was even possible, if she was hallucinating or dreaming or losing her mind? It was here. It was his. And it was about to be inside her again, and that was the only thing that mattered.

“I don't know what you did,” she heard herself say, her voice coming out in a breathless rush, “but I need it inside me. Now.”

“Whatever you say.”

He positioned himself, and Ava felt the head of his cock pressing against her, and it was wider, more stretching, more everything than it had been before. She should have been scared. She should have been worried about whether she could take it, whether her body could accommodate this new, larger version of him. Instead, she moaned and pushed her hips forward, trying to impale herself on him, trying to take him deeper before he'd even begun.

He entered her slowly, giving her time to adjust, and the stretch was exquisite. It burned in the best possible way, a delicious ache. She felt herself opening for him, accommodating him, welcoming him, and when he was finally fully inside her—

“Fuck,” she gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders. “Fuck, you're so big.”

His laugh was low. “You like it?”

“I love it. Don't stop. Don't ever stop.”

The rhythm he set was different now, slower and deeper, each thrust hitting that new place inside her that hadn't existed before he'd grown. Ava's mind

was blank, wiped of everything. She felt everything—every inch of him, every ridge and vein, every moment of withdrawal and thrust. She felt her own body responding, clenching around him, trying to pull him deeper, keep him there forever.

She came again—she'd lost count, didn't know if it was the fourth or fifth or tenth time—and this one was different. This one started in her toes and traveled upward, building and building until it exploded through every nerve ending in her body. She screamed, actually screamed, and she didn't care who heard, didn't care that the walls were thin, didn't care about anything except the way he kept moving through it, drawing it out, making it last. "More," she whispered, and she didn't know where the word came from, didn't know how her body could possibly take more, but she meant it with every fiber of her being. "Give me more."

His answer was to flip them over, to pull her on top of him, to let her set the pace. Ava straddled him, looking down at his beautiful face, his dark eyes, his smile. She rose up on her knees, letting him slide nearly out of her, and then she sank back down, taking all of him, feeling that stretch again.

His hands found her hips, guiding her, helping her find a rhythm that worked for both of them. And as she rode him, as she watched his face contort with pleasure, as she felt that cock hitting her, Ava let go of the last vestiges of control. She was his. For this night, for this moment, she was completely and utterly his. And tomorrow, when she woke up alone in her own bed, she would have memories that would last a lifetime.

But that was tomorrow.

The first thing Ava became aware of was the smell. It hit her before she even opened her eyes, before her brain had fully booted up. It was a thick, musky odor, the unmistakable scent of sex. She inhaled it without meaning to, and her body responded before her mind could catch up. Then she opened her eyes, and the full scope of the wreckage came into view.

The hotel room was destroyed. The sheets were a tangled mess, twisted and bunched and half-pulled off the mattress, one corner dragging on the floor. The pillows had been scattered—one on the floor near the bathroom door, another crushed and flattened somewhere beneath her, a third nowhere to be seen. The bedside lamp was knocked askew, its shade tilted

at a drunken angle, and the cheap painting on the wall was hanging crooked, as if it had tried to escape and failed.

Clothes were everywhere. Her dress was crumpled in a heap near the door, looking more like a rag than anything else. Her panties, the lacy black ones she'd worn for Marcus, the man who never showed, were tangled in a pile near the foot of the bed. And there, on the nightstand, her bra hung from the edge of the lamp.

But it was the cum that really told the story.

It was everywhere. On her stomach, dried in a tacky sheen, on her thighs, on the sheets beneath her, great white patches that had soaked into the fabric and stiffened overnight. On her hand, where it rested on the pillow beside her, a smear across her knuckles that made her realize she must have fallen asleep still touching herself, still riding the aftershocks. And between her legs—god, between her legs. She was soaked with it, leaking it.

The memories came flooding back.

She remembered the door, the way he'd pressed her against it. She remembered dropping to her knees—no, that was later, that was after the bed, after the first three times, when she'd crawled across the sheets to take him in her mouth. She remembered him lifting her, actually lifting her off the bed and holding her against the wall while he fucked her, her legs wrapped around his waist, her back scraping against the cheap wallpaper, not caring, not caring about anything except the way he filled her.

She remembered the sounds he made. Sounds that had driven her absolutely insane. She remembered coming. God, she remembered coming not once, not twice, but so many times she'd lost count. She'd come on his face, on his cock, on his fingers, on nothing at all.

And through it all, his cock had **grown**.

She still didn't understand it. Didn't know if it was real or some fever dream, some trick of the light or her own overwrought imagination. But she remembered it clearly: the way it had been magnificent from the start, thick and long and perfectly shaped, and then, somehow—she remembered taking it in her mouth and feeling it grow as she sucked, as if her touch alone could make it expand. She remembered the moment she'd realized

it, the moment she'd looked down and seen that it was different, bigger, and instead of being scared, instead of questioning—

The thought of it now, lying here, sent a fresh pulse of arousal through her. Her hand drifted down, sliding over her stomach, past the dried cum, toward the wetness between her thighs. She was still aroused. After everything, after more orgasms than she could count, after being fucked within an inch of her life. Her fingers found her clit, swollen and sensitive, and she gasped at the contact.

“Fuck,” she whispered.

Maybe Corinne was right. Maybe this was what she'd needed all along—not a relationship, not a future, not the careful dance of dating and expectation. Just this. Just a night. Just the simple, animal pleasure of being wanted, being taken, being completely and utterly used by someone who looked at her like she was the answer to every question he'd ever asked.

She remembered thinking, with her last conscious thought, that she'd never felt this good in her entire life.

Never.

Ava's eyes snapped open. She turned her head slowly.

He was gone.

He fucking dipped.

The realization hit Ava. She sat up too fast, her head spinning, her body screaming. Her eyes scanned the room desperately, as if he might be hiding somewhere, as if this was some kind of joke, as if he'd just stepped out for coffee and would be back any minute with a smile and that voice. But she knew. Even as she looked, even as she hoped, she knew.

And then she saw it. A piece of hotel notepaper on the nightstand, torn from the little pad beside the phone. Just one sentence, scrawled in messy handwriting: Had to go. Last night was incredible. - E

That was it. No phone number. No last name. No promise to call, no suggestion of a future, no acknowledgment that he'd just spent the night turning her inside out and was now vanishing like smoke.

The anger came first. How dare he. How dare he fuck her like that, make her feel things she'd never felt, open doors inside her she hadn't known

existed, and then just leave? How dare he look at her like she was the only woman in the world and then disappear without even a fucking phone number?

But beneath the anger, buried deep where she didn't want to look, was something worse. Despair. Because he was right to leave. This was what she'd wanted, wasn't it? A night. No strings. No expectations. No future. She'd agreed to it, embraced it, reveled in it. She'd told herself this was what she needed, what she'd been missing, what would finally break the cycle of disappointment and hope and disappointment again.

And it had been what she needed. It had been incredible. It had been the best night of her fucking life.

But now it was over. And he was gone. And she would never feel that good again.

The thought was so absolute, so devastating, that she actually whimpered. She'd never feel that good again because she'd never find someone like him again. Someone who looked at her like that. Someone who touched her like that. Someone whose cock grew inside her. Someone who fucked her into oblivion and then held her like she mattered, even if only for a few hours. And even if she did find someone else—even if by some miracle she stumbled across another man with that same intensity, that same skill—it wouldn't be the same. Because it wouldn't be him. It wouldn't be Ethan Park, the nerdy boy from high school who'd transformed into something beyond her wildest dreams. It wouldn't be the man who'd looked at her across a crowded club and made her forget her own name just by looking at her.

Fucking typical.

The note was still in her hand when Ava felt it—a fever rushing into her system like a tide, starting somewhere deep in her stomach and radiating outward in concentric waves that made her skin prickle and her vision swim at the edges. For a moment she thought it might be panic, the belated arrival of the adrenaline that should have hit her when she'd first realized he was gone. But panic didn't feel like this. This was as if someone had lit a fire in her marrow and was slowly, deliberately turning up the flame. Her hand went to her forehead, but it was cool to the touch—normal, even—which made no sense, made absolutely no goddamn sense,

because she felt like she was on fire from the inside out. The contradiction was almost funny in its absurdity.

Water. She needed water.

Ava stumbled out of bed, and the movement made everything worse. By the time she reached the bathroom sink she was gripping the edge just to keep herself upright. The porcelain was cool at least, grounding her long enough to fumble with the tap and get it running and drank. The water was blessedly cool, and for one fleeting moment she thought it might help, might quell whatever this was.

The fever continued to build, unimpressed by her measly attempt at intervention. And now something else was joining it. A cramp. Faint at first, barely noticeable, but there in her shoulder. A small, tight knot of pain that made her roll her arm, trying to work it out. And then another in her thigh. And another in her back. Small warnings, like the first drops of rain before a storm.

The cramps built, all at once this time, a symphony of pain that made her double over the sink. Her shoulder seized, the muscle bunching and twisting in a way that made her cry out—a sharp, startled sound that seemed to come from someone else. Her thigh followed, a violent spasm that nearly buckled her knee, forcing her to grip the sink even tighter to stay upright. And her back—god, her back. Deep, in the muscles along her spine, a pulling and stretching and tearing that made no sense.

The pain was everywhere now, no longer localized but spreading, connecting, becoming a single, unified agony. She could feel her muscles moving under her skin. The sensation was so wrong that her mind tried to reject it, tried to tell her this wasn't real, wasn't happening, couldn't be happening.

The sounds started. Ava heard them before she could fully process the pain—a low, deep creaking, like old wood, and for a terrifying moment she thought her ribs were breaking, thought her sternum was splitting apart, thought she was dying right here on this bathroom floor. But then the creaking was joined by something else—a pop from her left shoulder, like a knuckle cracking but magnified a hundred times. Then another, from her right hip. Then a cascade of them, a chorus of cracks and snaps and grinding that seemed to come from every joint in her body simultaneously.

Ava looked down at her arm, and through the haze of pain she saw her skin shifting as if something was crawling beneath it, as if her flesh had become a sack full of writhing serpents. The muscle there was pushing against her skin in a way that made no anatomical sense, that defied everything she knew about how bodies worked. And it hurt. God, it hurt. It hurt like her muscles were being torn apart, like her bones were being broken and reset, like every cell in her body was screaming.

The creaking sound came again, louder this time, and Ava realized with dawning, soul-crushing horror that it was her bones. And she could hear it happening, could hear the protest of her own body as it was reshaped into something. The pressure built in her joints, in her spine, in her pelvis—an intolerable pressure that made her feel like she might burst through her own skin, like she was a balloon being inflated past its limits. And then a loud, sickening crack from somewhere in her pelvis, and Ava screamed. Her back arched as if something punched her straight in the spine—that was the only way she could describe it, a physical blow from the inside—and she heard her vertebrae realign with a series of pops that made her gag, made her stomach heave even though there was nothing in it. Her entire skeleton seemed to be rearranging itself from the inside out, and through it all the cramps continued, the muscles growing and swelling.

Ava fell. She didn't remember her legs giving out—but suddenly she was on the bathroom floor. From this angle, with her face pressed against the grout lines and her vision blurry with tears she hadn't realized she was crying, she could see her legs. Her thighs, which had been normal—average, unremarkable, those of a woman who worked out occasionally but never pushed herself—were now... growing. The word was inadequate, laughably so, but it was the only one her pain-addled brain could supply. They were expanding, pushing against her skin. She watched, through the haze of agony, as the developing quadriceps emerged from the soft tissue. The vastus medialis swelled into prominence. The rectus femoris, running down the center of her thigh, thickened. The hamstrings behind—she couldn't see them but she could feel them, could

feel them bunching and growing, pulling and stretching. And then, just when she thought it couldn't get worse, when she was certain she would die here on this bathroom floor, her body being torn apart, came a fresh wave of growth—faster now, more intense, as if whatever was happening had found its rhythm and was racing toward completion.

What the fuck was happening to her?

And through it all, the sounds continued. The creaking of bones settling.

The popping of joints adjusting to new angles. The wet, organic sounds of muscle fibers multiplying, expanding.

Ava's hand drifted down her body, over her new stomach—and yes, it was a six-pack, the rectus abdominis carved into a grid of perfect, symmetrical muscle that she could see even from this absurd angle. Her obliques emerged, creating that V-taper that she'd always found so attractive on men, never imagining she'd possess it herself. The serratus anterior—she didn't know its name until she felt it grow, somehow, added the finishing touch to a torso that looked like it belonged in a fitness magazine.

Her hand drifted lower, toward the wetness that had been there since Ethan, since the club, since this whole impossible night began. She was still aroused. Of course she was. How could she not be, with every nerve ending firing in ways they never had before? Her fingers found her clit, swollen and sensitive, and she gasped at the contact. The sensation was amplified, magnified. Her abdomen continued to define even as she touched herself, the rectus abdominis carving deeper, the obliques becoming more pronounced. She could see the muscle fibers now, could see the way they arranged themselves. Her hand moved in small, desperate circles, and the pleasure built alongside the growth, each feeding the other in a feedback loop that threatened to consume her entirely.

And then, the pain stopped.

Slowly, carefully, Ava pushed herself up.

The movement was different. Ava felt that immediately, in the way her muscles engaged like they hadn't before.

And the mirror... waited. Ava's feet carried her toward it without conscious decision. She didn't want to look. Some part of her, some deep and primal instinct that had kept her alive for thirty-four years, screamed at her to keep her eyes closed, to turn away, to preserve whatever fragile sanity she had left by refusing to look at whatever horror awaited. That part of her knew—knew—that looking would break something irreparable.. But another part—the part that had just experienced something beyond comprehension. That part needed to see.

Ava raised her hands to her face—and those hands were different too.—bone structure more prominent beneath skin that seemed somehow smoother. Her new cheekbones gave her face an appearance that belonged on magazine covers. Her nose was the same, but everything around it had changed. Her lips were fuller, perhaps, or maybe that was just the new proportion of her face.

But it was her hair and her eyes that—

Her hair—her familiar, shoulder-length brown hair that she'd had since college, that she'd complained about and dyed and cut and grown out again over the years—was gone. In its place was a cascade of platinum blonde so pale it was almost white, falling in thick, luxurious waves past her shoulders and brushing against the tops of her newly massive arms.

And her eyes.

Ava stared into the mirror, into eyes that were no longer the warm green she'd known for thirty-four years, the eyes her mother had called her best feature, the eyes that had looked back at her from countless photographs and reflections. These eyes were violet. A deep, striking purple.

But there was more than that.

She looked younger. The woman in the mirror wasn't thirty-four. She wasn't even thirty. She was mid-twenties, maybe even late twenties, fresh and vibrant in a way she hadn't felt for years. The signs of aging that Ava had accepted—the faint lines around her eyes, the slight loss of elasticity, the small reminders that she wasn't a girl anymore—were simply gone. Erased. Ava looked and looked, and the woman in the mirror looked back at her with those violet eyes, that platinum hair, that young and flawless face perched atop an impossibly muscular body. This wasn't her. This couldn't be her. This was some nightmare, some fever dream, some hallucination

brought on by stress, by Ethan's abandonment, by the impossible things she'd felt and done over the course of this endless night. Any moment now she would wake up. Any moment now she would open her eyes in her own bed, in her own apartment, in her own body, and this would all be a terrible, vivid dream.

But the woman in the mirror kept staring back at her, and Ava, her mind struggling to process the impossible, did the only thing she could do. She screamed.