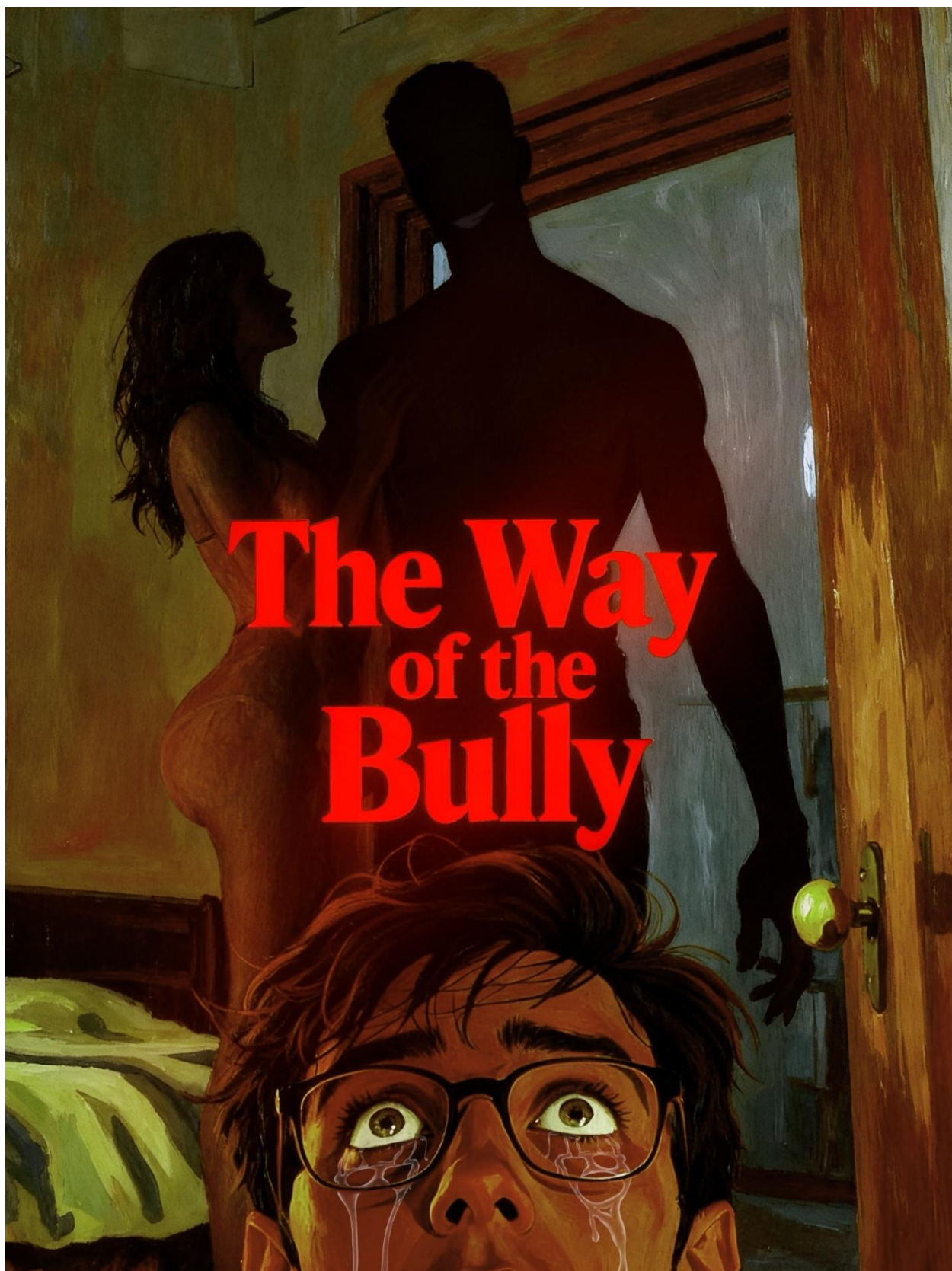




*This is a work of fiction intended for adult audiences only. All characters depicted in sexual situations are **18 years of age or older**. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The events, locations, and individuals portrayed in this book are products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. This material contains explicit content and is not intended for readers under the age of 18. Reader discretion is advised.*

The Way
of the
Bully

by
Jack the Monkey

Advanced Biosciences. Chad snorted softly to himself, tapping his pen against the textbook he hadn't bothered to open. To him, the word was a joke. This class was just another box to tick, another empty credential. And he was eighteen now, he didn't actually have to be here. To be honest, his real education happened on the field, in the weight room, the uneasy smiles from everyone he intimidated in the hall.

His gaze drifted, as it often did during the fifty-minute prison sentence, to his favorite distraction: James. Two rows over, all hunched shoulders and thick-framed glasses, James was scribbling notes with a frantic intensity, as if the professor's every word was a precious gem. A slow, cruel smile spread across Chad's face. Time for his daily entertainment.

The professor, Dr. Evans, droned on about mitochondrial DNA, his voice as dry as the chalk dust clinging to the blackboard. "So, the maternal line can be traced through—but it's not all sunshine and family trees. There are risks. *Genetic mutations* passed down from the mother can lead to conditions like Leigh syndrome or MELAS. It's a reminder that not all inheritances are gifts."

Chad leaned back in his chair, like a snake, ready to strike. "Hey, James," he called out, just loud enough to carry over Dr. Evans' voice but not so loud to disturb him. "You writing that down so you can impress your mommy later? Or does she still quiz you at bedtime?"

A few snickers rippled through the room, and Chad's smirk widened. He was just getting started.

"James," Chad's voice cut through the lecture, loud and deliberately disruptive this time. A few heads turned. "That explain why you're such a mama's boy? All that... mitochondrial stuff?"

More snickers from the class. The easy, predictable kind. Chad propped his hands behind his head, satisfied. This was the natural order. Him on top, them laughing along, James shrinking into his seat.

But today, James didn't shrink. He stopped writing. He slowly straightened his glasses and turned to look at Chad. There was no fear in his eyes. Just a flat, unnerving calm.

“Actually, Chad,” James said, his voice steady and cutting through the room like a scalpel, “the lecture was about how mutations in mtDNA can lead to a loss of cellular function. You know, energy depletion. Might explain why you seem to be struggling to keep up.”

The class went silent. Dead silent. Chad’s face flushed red. James didn’t smirk, didn’t gloat—he just turned back to his notes as if he’d barely even noticed the impact of his words. But the damage was done and Chad was not happy.

James continued, a slight, almost imperceptible smile on his lips. “But since you brought it, mtDNA inheritance only determines lineage from the mother’s side. It doesn’t account for *stupidity*—that’s something *you* must have inherited on your own.”

For a second, there was nothing. Then, a snicker. Then another. And then the classroom erupted in genuine, unfiltered laughter. *At him*. At Chad. The heat started at his collar, rushing up his neck, flooding his cheeks. His fists clenched under the desk. *How dare he*.

Dr. Evans cleared his throat. “Ahem. Thank you for that... clarification, James. But let’s save the commentary, please.” He didn’t sound angry. He sounded amused.

The rest of the period was a blur of simmering humiliation. Chad could feel every glance, every suppressed giggle. The bell finally rang, a sharp, merciful sound. Chairs screeched back, backpacks were zipped, the room emptying around him. But Chad didn’t move. He was locked in place, his eyes drilling into the back of James’ head as the nerd carefully packed his things.

James stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder. He glanced back once, a flicker of that wary caution finally returning to his expression when he saw Chad still seated, still staring. He’d won the battle, but he knew the war wasn’t over.

It was that flicker of fear that did it. As James turned to leave, Chad moved. In one fluid, angry motion, he surged from his chair and delivered a sharp, stinging thwack to the back of James’ head with his open palm. The sound was sickeningly loud in the nearly empty room.

“Think you’re real smart, don’t you?” Chad growled.

Dr. Evans’ voice cut through, sharp and final. “Chad! My office. Now. That’s an hour of detention tomorrow afternoon.”

Chad just glared, first at the teacher, then back at James, who was rubbing the back of his head, his face a mask of pained surprise. “This isn’t over,” Chad mouthed, the words a silent promise.

For Chad, the rest of the school day passed in a red haze. Detention paperwork was signed, hallways were navigated, all while that single moment of public shame played on a loop in his mind. Finally, the final bell ran. He shoved his way through the main doors, ignoring the people in his way.

He stood on the steps, scanning the student parking lot for his friends, needing to vent, to plan, to reclaim some shred of his dignity. And that's when he saw them.

Across the busy lot, near the parent pickup zone, was James. He was climbing into the passenger seat of a modest, sensible sedan. And behind the wheel was a woman.

Chad's breath caught.

She was leaning over to say something to James, a warm, kind smile on her face. She had the same dark hair as James, but where his was unkempt, hers fell in soft layers around her face. She was laughing at something, her head tilted back slightly, and even from this distance, Chad could see the elegant line of her neck. She looked young for a mom, vibrant. The kindness in her eyes, the way she moved, was a physical aura.

This must be the mother. Damn, she's a hottie. His eyes narrowed, the seeds of a new, much more interesting plan beginning to sprout through the cracks of his anger. Revenge didn't just have to be about making James hurt. It could be about taking what he cherished most. It could be about fucking his mother and poisoning that perfect, loving smile aimed at her precious son.

The car pulled away from the curb, and Chad's eyes followed it, his earlier rage cooling into a focused, icy resolve. He watched until the taillights disappeared around the corner.

Chad shoved his hands into his pockets, the weight of his phone heavy against his thigh. He needed something—something sharper than brute force, something that would cut deeper than a bruised ego. His mind raced, thoughts spinning like a roulette wheel, landing on ideas that were either too messy or not messy enough. He needed to search for an answer. So, he pulled out his phone, his thumb swiping impatiently to unlock it.

As he looked at it, a notification popped up on the screen. An anonymous text message. "Hey. This might help. Password: Mother Fucker," followed by a link. Chad froze, his eyes narrowing. He glanced around the empty parking lot, half-expecting to see someone watching him. But there was no one. Just the hum of distant traffic and the rustle of leaves in the afternoon breeze.

Who the hell was this? He hesitated, his thumb hovering over the screen. It could be a trap. A virus. Or worse. But then again... what did he have to lose? The humiliation from earlier burned fresh in his mind. He needed an edge, and if this was it, he'd take it.

With a quick tap, he opened the link. A black screen appeared, stark and ominous. A single line of text glowed white: "Enter Password."

Chad smirked. *Mother Fucker*. He typed it in, the letters clicking softly against the screen.

The page refreshed, revealing a minimalist layout. Two lines of text: "Welcome to The Way," and below it, "Click here to learn more."

Chad's pulse quickened. He didn't know what this was, but something about it felt... right. Like fate had handed him a weapon just when he needed it most. His thumb moved almost on its own, tapping the link. A slow, predatory smile spread across his face. Whatever this was—he'd make it work.

* * *

The fluorescent lights of the detention room buzzed like a trapped insect, a sound that drilled directly into Chad's skull. He slouched in the hard plastic chair, the previous day's humiliation a fresh, acidic burn in his gut. An hour of his life, wasted, because of that little shit James. He did this. And he's got what's coming to him.

Dr. Evans sat at his desk, grading papers, his presence a silent, judging force. He hadn't said a word since Chad slunk in. The only sound was the scratch of the teacher's pen and the low hum of the lights. Every minute was an eternity, each one a reminder of the laughter that had echoed through the science classroom.

Chad's phone felt like a live wire in his pocket. He'd spent half the night on that site, "The Way." It was... *dense*. Full of psychological jargon and weird, philosophical ramblings about will and desire. But the core concept was clear: **hypnosis, mind control, corruption**. Done with a special technique, using voice modulation and hand gestures.

But it's only possible with small, incremental suggestions, framed as something that can be easily accepted. And once that door was opened, you could move on to the next door, and the next; step by logical step. It was a masterclass in manipulation, and Chad was an eager student. His revenge was no longer a vague, angry fantasy; it was a project. A blueprint was forming.

The hour finally ended with a dismissive wave from Dr. Evans. "Don't let me see you in here again, Chad."

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Doc,” Chad said, his voice a mask of contrition that didn’t reach his eyes. He grabbed his bag and left, the door clicking shut behind him with a sense of finality. *Now.*

He didn’t have to wait long. He spotted James at his locker, looking smaller and more fragile without the shield of a classroom audience around him. James saw him coming and stiffened, his shoulders hunching slightly as he focused intently on spinning his lock, a turtle retreating into its shell.

Chad approached slowly, hands in his pockets, making a conscious effort to relax his posture, to soften the predatory set of his shoulders that usually came so naturally.

“James,” Chad said, his voice quieter than usual.

James flinched, slamming his locker shut and turning. His eyes, magnified behind his glasses, were wide with suspicion. “What do you want?” The question was a challenge, a fortress wall going up.

Here was the first test. Chad let a sigh escape him, one that sounded convincingly weary. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration he’d seen actors use. “Look, man. About yesterday... that was messed up. My head wasn’t on straight.”

James just stared, his expression unchanging. *Unconvinced.*

Chad pressed on, layering on the performance. He offered a small, rueful smile—not the broad, dominating grin he used on the field, but something softer, more apologetic. “I’m sorry. For all of it. The crap in class, and... afterwards. I was an idiot. I hold no ill will. Seriously.” He let the words hang in the air between them. “Truce?”

The silence stretched. James scrutinized him, and Chad fought the urge to look away, to let his mask slip. He kept the placid, sincere expression firmly in place.

“Okay,” James finally said, the word short and clipped. It wasn’t acceptance; it was a cease-fire. A temporary one.

It was enough. Chad’s internal smile was vicious. *First click of the lock.* He nodded, as if relieved. “Cool. Cool.” He made to turn away, then paused, as if a thought had just casually occurred to him. A perfect, offhand cue.

“Hey, uh... was that your mom who picked you up yesterday? What was her name again?” he asked, keeping his tone light, dripping with casual curiosity.

James’s guard, which had lowered a fraction, instantly snapped back up. His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Susan. Why?”

Chad shrugged, the picture of nonchalance. He looked down the hall instead of at James, selling the disinterest. “No reason. Just saw you get in the car. She seemed... nice.” He let the compliment hang, harmless and benign. “What does she do? For a living, I mean.”

He could feel James’s hesitation, a tangible thing in the space between them. The nerd was obviously trying to figure out the angle, the trap. Finding none in Chad’s carefully constructed facade, he relented.

“She works at a community outreach center,” James said, his voice still guarded. “Helps with housing placement for the homeless. Runs a soup kitchen. Does some counseling, mental health sessions with some of the regulars.” He listed her virtues like a shield, each one a reason Chad shouldn’t, *couldn’t*, touch her.

Chad’s mind was racing, assembling the pieces. A counselor. A Helper. *Perfect*. So perfect it was almost too easy. A woman used to listening, to offering guidance, to being open to people’s problems. The potential was limitless.

He made sure to keep his reaction muted, just a slow nod of acknowledgment. “Oh. Well, that’s cool. Really cool.” He gave James one final, easygoing nod. “Alright, man. See you around.”

He turned and walked away, not too fast, not too slow. The echo of his footsteps faded down the tiled hallway. Only when he was sure he was around the corner and out of sight did he allow the expression on his face to change.

The placid, apologetic mask melted away, replaced by a sharp, triumphant grin. His mind was no longer on James. It was on the woman. The kind-hearted counselor. The mother.

Susan.

He now had a name, and he had a profession. Two more pieces for his puzzle. The website’s teachings whispered in the back of his mind: *find a want, a need, an unspoken desire*. Everyone had them. Even—especially—a saint.

He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the browser icon. The hum of the school around him faded into nothing. He had research to do.

Chad returned home, his mind still simmering with frustration from the day's humiliation. He dropped his backpack by the door and slumped into the chair at his desk, flipping open his laptop. The glow of the screen illuminated his determined expression as he began his search for Susan's workplace. A quick scan of local volunteer opportunities led him to a few possibilities, but nothing concrete. He narrowed his focus, digging deeper into community forums and social media posts.

Finally, he stumbled across it—a recent article highlighting local heroes, featuring Susan prominently in a photo serving meals. The caption read: "*Susan Thompson, dedicated volunteer at Hope's Haven Soup Kitchen, continues to make a difference in our community.*" Chad's lips curved into a smirk as he noted the name of the organization. Hope's Haven. It was perfect.

He leaned back in his chair, the wheels turning in his mind. If she was there in the evenings, he could pay her a visit tonight. As he grabbed his jacket and made for the door, his mother, Barbara, intercepted him in the hallway.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked, her arms crossed.

"Just... meeting some friends," Chad replied evasively, brushing past her.

"No. I don't think so. It's a school night." Barbara said, with a stern and suspicious expression.

Frustration bubbled up in Chad, this wasn't part of the plan. Chad gritted teeth as he looked at his mother, up and down.

Barbara always struck Chad as someone who lived in her own polished world. His mother dressed beautifully every day — stylish outfits, perfect makeup, jewelry that matched without even trying. To him, she seemed like the kind of woman who stepped out of her bedroom already looking ready for a photo shoot. Other kids' moms looked normal; his mom always looked *prepared*.

She wasn't mean, at least not in the way some adults were. But she could be sharp. She spoke fast, moved fast, and expected everyone to keep up. Chad was used to her half-smiles and raised eyebrows, the way she'd correct him without really listening, like she already knew the ending to every conversation. It wasn't personal — that was just how she was with everybody.

What Chad noticed most, though, was how little she actually knew about what went on in his life. She cared about him, sure, but mostly in surface ways: Was he dressed right? Was his hair neat? Was he being "confident" at school? She liked to say he had a strong personality, and Chad never bothered to tell her that teachers called it something else. She

had no idea how often he pushed other kids around, or how much power he carried in the hallways. She didn't ask, and he knew she wouldn't look too hard even if she did.

Still, he could tell she loved him. It was just a kind of love wrapped in perfume and busy schedules, tied up in her own world. She hugged him, praised him, showed him off — but never really saw the whole of him. And honestly, Chad preferred it that way. Her attention came in small, stylish doses, and as far as he was concerned, that made things easier for both of them.

An idea flickered in his mind while he continued to look at her in silence, as she stood there, tapping her foot, waiting for a response. *The Way*. He had only just begun to explore its potential, but maybe this was the perfect opportunity to test it on someone easier than James' mother. His own mother, someone who already cared for him.

"Okay, Mom," he said, feigning compliance. "But can you help me with my homework first?"

Barbara raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. Helping Chad with homework wasn't exactly a common request. But seeing that he wasn't putting up his usual fight, she sighed and relented. "Fine. What is it?"

Chad gestured toward the dining table, where he'd laid out a few random books from his room. He made it look like they were for a specific class. His mother sat down, already looking impatient.

"So, what do I need to do?" she asked.

"Hold on," Chad said, holding up a finger. "First, I need to time something. I'm going to count back from thirty. Just keep your eyes on my finger while I do it, okay?"

Barbara frowned. "Time what?"

"Just trust me," Chad said smoothly, his voice calm but insistent. He held up his finger and began counting down, starting with slow, deliberate circles in the air. "Thirty... twenty-nine... twenty-eight..."

Barbara frowned, her skepticism evident as she watched his finger. She shifted in her chair, clearly annoyed by the frivolity of the exercise. But Chad adjusted his tone, deepening it slightly and slowing the pace of his counting. "Twenty-seven... twenty-six... twenty-five..."

His finger's movements shifted subtly, the circles expanding slightly, becoming more fluid. Barbara's brow furrowed, but her gaze stayed locked on his finger, drawn in by the rhythm. Chad's voice softened, almost melodic, as he continued. "Twenty-four... twenty-three... twenty-two..."

The circles transformed into figure eights, the patterns growing more intricate. Barbara blinked, her head tilting just a fraction as her focus sharpened. The faint creases of irritation around her eyes began to smooth out. Chad's voice dropped even lower, soothing and steady. "Twenty-one... twenty... nineteen..."

His finger traced spirals now, the motions mesmerizing, and Barbara's breathing slowed. Her shoulders relaxed, her hands resting lightly on the table. Chad could see the change, *the subtle surrender*. He kept his voice soft but commanding, each number rolling off his tongue like a lullaby. "Eighteen... seventeen... sixteen..."

The patterns became more complex, weaving back and forth in an almost hypnotic dance. Barbara's eyelids fluttered, her body leaning forward slightly as if drawn toward him. Chad allowed a faint smile to touch his lips as he continued, his voice steady and low. "Fifteen... fourteen... thirteen..."

Her expression softened, her usual sternness melting away. Chad's finger made sweeping arcs now, the motion smooth and entrancing. Barbara's breath was shallow, her attention entirely fixed on him. He knew he had her. "Twelve... eleven... ten..."

The rhythm of the countdown settled into a cadence that felt almost natural, and Barbara's posture slackened further, her chin dipping slightly. Chad's voice was a murmur now, gentle but irresistible. "Nine... eight... seven..."

His finger traced a final, intricate pattern, a looping swirl that seemed to pull her deeper into his control. Barbara's eyes were half-lidded, her mind drifting. Chad lowered his voice to a near whisper. "Six... five... four..."

He paused for a moment, letting the silence stretch just long enough to deepen her focus. Then he finished, his voice barely audible. "Three... two... one." His finger stopped moving, hanging in midair as if sealing the moment.

Barbara sat still, her gaze fixed on where his finger had been, her expression blank but peaceful. Chad leaned back, satisfied. The first step was complete.

Her eyelids began to droop as he continued.

Chad leaned closer, his voice soft but commanding. "Mother, can you hear me?"

"Yes," she murmured, her tone distant and dreamy.

"Good. How do you feel?"

"Relaxed," she replied softly.

"Let yourself sink deeper into that feeling," Chad instructed. "Listen to my voice. Let my words flow over you. They're good words. They're helpful words."

"Hmm... words," Barbara whispered.

"Yes," Chad said, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "Now tell me... you love me, right, Mother?"

"Of course," she answered without hesitation.

"And you trust me, right?"

Her brow furrowed slightly, even in her trance-like state. "Not really," she admitted.

Chad leaned closer, his voice a soothing but insistent murmur. "Mother, think about this: love and trust go hand in hand, don't they? If you truly love someone, you trust them. It's only natural. Doesn't that make sense?"

Barbara's brow furrowed slightly, her trance-like state wavering as she processed the question. "I... I suppose," she murmured hesitantly.

Chad nodded slowly, his tone patient yet firm. "Of course it does. You can't really love someone if you don't trust them. It's like... trying to build a house without a foundation. It just doesn't work." He paused, letting the analogy sink in. "So, if you love me—and you've already admitted you do—then you must trust me. Right?"

Barbara's lips parted as if to argue, her eyes flickering with a hint of resistance. But the simple logic wrapped around her, smooth and unavoidable, like a warm blanket settling over her thoughts. "I... wait... is that right?" she finally asked, her voice soft and compliant.

A small, satisfied smile tugged at Chad's lips. "Yes. You love me, so you trust me. It's perfectly natural. Think about it."

Barbara's shoulders relaxed further, her expression softening as the tension dissolved. "I guess... yes. I trust you, hun." she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Chad leaned back, his smirk deepening. The logic had done its work, planting the seed he needed. *One step closer*, he thought.

"And I'm your son, you really, really love me, so you must really, really trust me."

"Oh. Yes. I really love and... trust you."

Chad persisted. "It feels good to trust me, doesn't it?"

Barbara hesitated for a moment, then her breathing deepened again. "Yes... it feels good to trust you," she conceded.

"That's right," Chad said, a smile tugging at his lips. "Say it again. It feels good to trust me."

"It feels good to trust you," she repeated softly.

"And whenever you think about it—how much you love me—remember how good it feels to trust me too. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Good." Chad leaned back, satisfied with his work. "Now I'm going to count down from ten, and when I reach one, you'll wake up feeling refreshed. You won't consciously remember anything we talked about. Ready? Ten, nine, eight..."

As he counted down, Barbara's breathing steadied, and by the time he reached "one," her eyes fluttered open. She blinked up at him, seemingly unaware of the conversation that had just taken place. "Oh, hey, hon," she said casually. "Are we still working on your homework?"

Chad shook his head. "Actually, I don't need help anymore. I finished it already. I'm going out now."

Barbara started to protest, but Chad cut her off with a sly smile. "What is it, mom?"

Her expression softened almost instantly. She paused, scrunching her nose, trying to remember something. "Um. Ok. I trust you. Have fun then. Be careful out there!"

"Thanks, Mom," Chad said cheerfully. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek before slipping out the door, his grin wide and triumphant. **This was just the beginning.**

The evening air was cool against Chad's skin as he pushed open the door to Hope's Haven. The scent of disinfectant and cheap tomato soup hit him immediately, a stark contrast to the crisp autumn night outside. The main hall was a portrait of controlled chaos. A handful of people sat at long tables, hunched over steaming bowls, while a flurry of activity buzzed around a serving counter at the far end.

And there she was.

Susan moved with a frantic energy, her brow pinched in concentration. She balanced a stack of empty trays in one arm while using her free hand to point a volunteer toward a spill. A strand of her dark hair had fallen loose from its clip, clinging to her damp temple. She was flustered, overwhelmed, and utterly perfect.

Chad lingered by the door for a moment, watching. He saw the tightness in her smile as she reassured an elderly man, the way her shoulders tensed with each new minor crisis. She was a woman stretched thin, her kindness being tested by the sheer volume of need.

He made his move, walking toward the serving counter with a confident, unhurried stride. She glanced up, her eyes scanning him without really seeing him, already preparing her standard harried greeting.

"Please, just take a seat," she said, her voice tight. "We'll be with you as soon as we can."

Chad gave a dismissive wave, his smile easy and disarming. "Oh, no. I'm not here to eat. I'm here to ask about volunteering."

The change in her was instantaneous. Her shoulders dropped a fraction, the professional mask softening into genuine, relieved surprise. "Oh! Oh, yes," she breathed out, a real smile finally touching her lips. She beckoned him forward. "Come here, come here. Actually, can you... could you be an absolute dear and help me move these boxes of canned goods back into the pantry? We'll talk properly after, I promise."

"Of course. Anything to help," Chad said, his voice dripping with manufactured sincerity.

He followed her direction, heaving cardboard boxes that were far lighter than his usual gym weights. It was mindless work, but it served his purpose. He was in. For the next hour, he became part of the scenery. Another volunteer asked him to help right a wobbly table.

Susan herself gestured for him to hand out rolls from a basket. He was given a damp cloth to wipe down surfaces, then directed to carry a jug of water to the other side of the room.

Each task was small, but he performed them all with a quiet, capable efficiency that didn't go unnoticed. He caught Susan watching him a few times, her expression shifting from harried to appreciative. He made sure to meet her gaze each time, offering a small, humble smile before returning to his work. He was building a persona: helpful, strong, reliable.

Trustworthy.

Eventually, the last person was served, the last surface wiped. The volunteers began to trickle out, offering tired goodbyes. The large room fell into a quiet hum from the industrial fridge. Susan sank onto a stool by the counter, letting out a long, weary sigh. She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes.

Chad approached slowly, the sound of his footsteps soft on the linoleum. "Tough night?"

She jumped slightly, then looked up, a warm, grateful smile spreading across her face. "Oh! Hey, you. I'm so sorry. Wow, thank you so much for your help. You were a lifesaver."

He waved a hand, the picture of modesty. "It was nothing. Really. My pleasure."

She studied him for a moment, her gaze lingering on his face. "You're in James's class, right?"

He nodded. "Sure am! I'm Chad."

"Well, Chad, I am incredibly grateful." She pushed herself up from the stool. "Come on. Let's go back to my office, shall we?"

He followed her into a small, cluttered office. diplomas hung on the wall next to inspirational posters. It smelled like her: a faint trace of floral perfume and coffee. She gestured for him to take the chair opposite her desk as she sat down.

"So," she began, pulling a form from a drawer. "Any past volunteer experience? Employment history?"

Chad shook his head, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees in a gesture he hoped looked earnest. "Not really. Just school."

"That's perfectly fine," she said, smiling. "How much time were you thinking of giving?"

"As much as I can," he said, holding her gaze. "Five days a week, if you'll have me."

Her eyebrows shot up. “Five? That’s... unusually dedicated. And impressive. We’d be thrilled to have that kind of commitment.” She slid the form and a pen across the desk to him.

He took it, making a show of reading it carefully before filling it out with quick, precise script. The silence in the room was light and comfortable. This was it. The moment.

He finished signing his name, then hissed sharply through his teeth, jerking his hand back. “Ow.”

Susan’s head snapped up from the paperwork she was organizing. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, flexing the fingers of his right hand. “I think I might have tweaked my finger moving those boxes earlier. Just feels a little strained, is all.” He held his index finger up, beginning to slowly bend and straighten it, as if testing the joint.

She leaned forward, her expression one of professional concern. “Oh, let me see. It doesn’t look swollen.”

“Yeah, just... gotta stretch it out, I guess,” he murmured, his voice lowering, becoming more rhythmic. He began to move his finger in a small, slow circle. “Thirty... twenty-nine...”

His finger’s motion shifted, transitioning from a simple circle into a gentle, weaving figure-eight pattern. “Twenty-eight... twenty-seven... twenty-six...”

She blinked, a faint line of confusion appearing between her brows. “Why are you counting?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he soothed, his tone hypnotically calm. “It just helps me focus.”

Her head tilted slightly. Her eyes, which had been fixed on his face, dropped to follow the smooth movement of his finger. The confusion in her expression began to soften, replaced by a dawning, placid emptiness.

“Twenty-five... twenty-four...” he continued, his voice a low, steady murmur. He saw her breathing begin to even out, her shoulders relaxing into her chair. The patterns grew more complex, lazy spirals and flowing arcs that captured the light and her attention completely.

“Twenty... nineteen...” Her lips parted slightly.

“Fifteen... fourteen...” He slowed his count, drawing out each number, making each one a gentle command. Her eyelids fluttered, growing heavy. The frantic energy she’d carried all evening had melted away, leaving only a deep, malleable calm.

“Ten... nine...” He leaned forward infinitesimally, his voice dropping to a whisper that barely filled the small room. “Just relax... eight... seven... that’s it...”

Her gaze was locked, unblinking, on the intricate dance of his finger. The last vestiges of her consciousness were following its path, round and round, up and down.

“Five... four... three... two... one.”

His finger stopped moving, held perfectly still in the space between them.

Susan’s body went completely limp in her chair. Her head lolled back against the headrest, her eyes open but seeing nothing, her gaze hazy and unfocused. Her breath came in a soft, shallow sigh.

She was out. Tranced. His. For the moment.

A slow, triumphant smile spread across Chad’s face. He didn’t move yet, letting the silence solidify her state. The only sound was the faint hum of the fridge from the main hall. He had her. James’s mother. Well... not yet.

He leaned forward.

“Susan... can you hear me?”

The gentle rhythm of her breathing was the only sound in the small office. Her eyes, though open, were glassy and distant, fixed on some point beyond Chad’s shoulder. He felt a surge of power, hot and intoxicating. *She’s really under.*

“Susan,” he whispered again, his voice a soft caress in the quiet room. “Can you hear me?”

A slow, almost imperceptible blink. “Yes,” she murmured, her voice thick and syrupy. “I hear you.”

“And how do you feel?” He leaned closer, close enough to catch the faint scent of her perfume mixed with the aroma of coffee from her mug.

She inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling in a languid rhythm. “Calm. Relaxed.”

“Oh, good. Relaxed.” Chad mimicked her deep breath, creating a sense of unison. “That must feel nice.”

“Yes, it does.”

He let the silence hang for a moment, letting the feeling of tranquility deepen within her.

“After a long, stressful day, it must feel nice to just let it all hang out. Let it all float away and just be content.”

Another pause. He watched her carefully, noting the way her fingers had gone completely slack in her lap. “Yeah,” she finally breathed out. “It feels nice.”

“I want you to remember the way you feel right now,” he instructed, his tone gentle but firm. “After this long, stressful day. Just how good it feels to just relax. I want you to remember this particular moment and how satisfying it is compared to the hectic chaos of the day.”

He inched his chair forward, the legs scraping softly on the linoleum. “And that I’m here. I’m here with you while you feel this contentment.”

“Yeah,” she echoed, a small, dreamy smile touching her lips. “You’re here. It’s nice to relax. And you’re here.”

A thrill shot through him. *It’s working. She’s associating the good feeling with me.* “That’s right.” He took another calculated risk, the next logical step in the foundation he was building. “Now, Susan, I would like for you to trust me. Can you do that for me?”

The reaction was immediate. Her peaceful expression fractured. Her nose scrunched up, her brow furrowing. A flicker of confusion, maybe even pain, crossed her features. Her head gave a tiny, weak shake. “I... I don’t know you.”

“But you can trust me, right?” he pressed, keeping his voice level.

“No, no, no, no, no.” The words were slurred but vehement. Her body tensed, the first sign of resistance. *Shit.*

Chad’s mind raced. *Too fast. I moved too fast.* With his mother, the foundation of love was already there, a river he could easily divert. With Susan, he had to dig the canal himself. He had to be smarter.

“Okay, okay,” he soothed, pulling back slightly to reduce the pressure. “Just calm. Listen to me.” He took a steadying breath, letting the silence soothe her again. “Susan, I want you to think about me and how helpful I was today.”

The tension in her shoulders eased. Her voice returned to its slow, measured pace. “Yes. You were very helpful.”

“And how I’m apparently planning to volunteer for five days a week.” He used her own words from earlier, reinforcing the positive image. “That’s good, right?”

“Yes. It’s very helpful.”

“So, that sounds like someone who wants to be a good person. Someone who wants to do good.” He spoke the words as an undeniable fact.

“Yeah, it does.”

“So, that must be me. I'm someone who just wants to be a better person.”

“You're someone who wants to be a better person,” she repeated dutifully. “To help people.”

“To help people,” he affirmed. “To help you.”

“To... help... uh...”

He saw another slight frown begin to form. He swiftly redirected it, aiming the concept directly back at her. “To help the homeless.”

The frown disappeared, replaced by placid acceptance. “Yes. To help the homeless.”

He leaned in, his voice dropping to an intimate whisper. “To help you help others. Right?”

“Oh, yes. To help me... help others.”

A full, serene smile now. “I want you to keep that in mind. I am a good person that wants to help.”

“You're a good person that wants to help,” she confirmed, the statement now feeling like her own thought.

“That's right.” He was laying the bricks, one by one. *Helpful. Good. For her.* “And I want you to remember how you feel right now. The relaxing feeling.”

“Yes.”

“With me.”

“With you. So relaxed. No more tension... with you.”

The connection was forged. The contentment was now inextricably linked to his presence and his ‘help’. The trust would come later. For now, this was enough. More than enough.

“Now, Susan,” he said, his voice taking on a final, authoritative tone. “I'm going to count back from ten. When I reach one, you're going to wake up refreshed and with a pleasant, calm, positive attitude. You won't exactly remember everything that we said consciously, but you'll remember it on the inside. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Ten.” Her eyelids fluttered.

“Nine.” Her breathing deepened.

“Eight.” Her head lolled gently.

“Seven... six... five...” He counted steadily, each number pushing her closer to the surface.

“Four... three... two... one.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly, focusing on the diploma on the wall behind him. She let out a soft, natural yawn and stretched her arms above her head, a movement that pulled her shirt taut across her chest. Chad’s gaze lingered for a fraction of a second before snapping back to her face.

She looked down at the signed volunteer form on her desk. “Oh, well, I guess that's that.” She gave another little yawn, covering her mouth with her hand. “Gosh, I should probably get to bed. I'm feeling real calm and relaxed.”

Chad stood up, the picture of polite courtesy. “Sure thing. Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, and Chad?” she said, her smile warm and genuine. “Thank you. Thank you again for your help today. It was good of you.” Her eyes met his, and she held his gaze for a meaningful beat. “You’re a good guy.”

The words, so earnest and so completely incorrect, were the sweetest victory.

“Thank you, Susan,” he said, offering her his most charming, harmless smile before turning to leave. As he stepped out of her office and into the cool night air, the smile vanished, replaced by a cold, hard glint in his eyes. *A good guy.* The thought almost made him laugh. She had no idea what was coming. The first thread was woven into the tapestry of her mind. This was gonna be fun.

* * *

The scent of pepperoni and old textbooks filled the small living room. James sat hunched over his physics homework, the scratch of his pencil the only sound breaking the evening quiet. The front door clicked open, followed by the familiar rustle of a coat being hung up.

“Honey, I’m home,” his mother called out, her voice carrying a soft warmth that seemed to ease the tension from his shoulders.

“In here, Mom.”

Susan appeared in the doorway, her smile a little weary around the edges but no less loving. She dropped her bag by the sofa and came over to him, placing a gentle hand on his back and leaning down to press a kiss into his messy dark hair. “How’s the studying going?”

“It’s going,” he mumbled, pushing his glasses up his nose. “There’s some leftover pizza if you’re hungry. Pepperoni.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetie, but I already ate at the center.” She sank into the armchair opposite him with a soft sigh, stretching her legs out. “Long day.”

He looked up from his notebook, genuinely concerned. “Yeah? How was it?”

“It was... great, actually,” she said, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “Really busy, as always. We were swamped. But it was nice. We had a new person come in to volunteer.”

“Oh, yeah?” James asked absently, his focus drifting back to a complex equation.

“Mhmm. I think it’s someone who goes to your school, actually.”

That got his attention. His pencil stilled. “Really? Who?”

She tilted her head, trying to recall. “His name was... Chad? I think that was it. Chad.”

James’s head snapped up so fast his neck popped. “*What?* Chad Rocklin?”

“Yes! Yes, that’s the name.” She smiled, seemingly pleased with herself for remembering. “He seemed very helpful.”

A cold dread pooled in James’s stomach. “*No. No, no, no, Mom. He’s horrible. He’s the one I was telling you about. The one who’s been tormenting me for years.*” He watched her face, waiting for the dawning horror, the protective anger he knew so well.

It didn’t come. Instead, she just looked mildly confused, her head cocking to the side. “Oh, really?” she said, her tone light, almost dismissive. “*Well, I mean, he seemed very helpful. He seemed like someone who’s a good guy and wants to be a better person.*”

The last sentence came out in a near-monotone, a rehearsed cadence that felt utterly alien coming from her. James stared, his mouth slightly agape.

“*A better person?*” he repeated, the words tasting like ash. “Mom, he’s a bully. He’s *not* a good guy. He’s mean, and cruel, and he’s definitely not volunteering out of the goodness of his heart. He must be up to something.”

Her expression softened into one of placid reassurance. “I don’t know, James. He *wants to work five days there*. This would be really helpful for us. I should give him a chance.”

Panic, sharp and immediate, seized him. He stood up, his homework forgotten on the coffee table. “Please, Mom, *please* don’t trust him. You don’t know him like I do. He’s dangerous.”

She watched his agitation with a calm that felt deeply wrong. “Well,” she said slowly, as if considering a minor logistical problem and not her son’s fervent plea. “I don’t *trust* him, per se. But he seems to want to do some good. If it bothers you so much, then maybe I’ll direct him to a different facility. Would that help you?”

The relief was so potent it left him weak. He slumped back onto the couch, the fight draining out of him. “Yes. Yes, thank you, Mom. Thank you.” The idea of Chad anywhere near his mother, near their lives, made his skin crawl.

She rose from her chair and came to him, her comforting presence finally feeling familiar again. She bent down and kissed the top of his head once more, her lips warm against his scalp. “*Any time, sweetie.*” She smoothed his hair down. “*I just love you so much, dear.*”

“Love you too,” he whispered, leaning into her touch.

She straightened up, giving another small, tired yawn. “*Now I’m going to go take a shower. Good night.*”

He listened to her footsteps pad down the hallway, the click of the bathroom door shutting, and finally, the distant rumble of the water turning on. He was safe. She’d listened. She’d protected him, just like she always had.

He closed his eyes, trying to let the normalcy of the evening sink back in. But the image of Chad, smug and manipulative, wormed its way into his mind. And underneath it all, a tiny, nagging unease whispered that something about his mother’s calm, rational tone had been just a little too perfect. A little too... automatic.

The front door clicked shut behind him, a solid, satisfying sound that sealed him off from the chaos of the school day. Chad dropped his bag by the stairs with a thud, the planned evening already mapping itself out in his mind. Susan. Her office. The next step. He just needed change and grab a couple things before heading out. He took the stairs two at a time and entered his bedroom. He was pulling a fresh shirt over his head when a gruff voice cut through the quiet of the upstairs hall.

“Hey!”

Chad turned. Dave, his stepfather, leaned against the doorframe, his beefy arms crossed over a faded work shirt. His expression was flat, unreadable, but his eyes held a sharp, probing intensity Chad didn’t like.

Dave was the kind of man who barely bothered pretending with Chad. From the moment he married Barbara, he treated Chad like background noise — not often hostile, just uninterested, the way someone treats a task they’d rather skip. He’d offer clipped answers, impatient glances, and that tight little smile adults give when they’re forcing themselves to be polite. It was obvious to Chad that Dave didn’t like him, and even more obvious that he didn’t care enough to hide it anymore.

He worked in hedge funds, which fit him perfectly — all sharp confidence and self-importance. Everything about him looked polished: the tailored shirts, the perfect posture, the way he carried himself like he was the smartest man in any room. He was fit and good-looking, and he knew it, the kind of guy who expected the world to adjust around him.

In the year since the wedding, Dave’s patience had only thinned. He spoke to Chad less, looked at him less, and gave off the vibe of a man waiting for a situation to resolve itself. Chad could practically feel him counting down the months until college, just so the house would finally feel the way Dave wanted — him, Barbara, and no complications.

To Barbara, Dave was rich, good looking, and charming... emphasis on rich. But to Chad, he was a dick, a man biding his time, waiting for a life that didn’t include him.

“What’s up?” Chad asked, his tone carefully neutral. He yanked the shirt down over his torso.

Dave didn't move. "What's going on with your mom?"

A sliver of ice traced its way down Chad's spine. He kept his face a placid mask. "What are you talking about?"

"Barbara." Dave pushed off the doorframe, taking a step into the hallway. The space suddenly felt smaller. "She seems a little out of it. Do you know what's going on with her?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with unspoken accusation. Chad's mind flashed to the previous night, to his mother's dazed compliance in the dining room. He'd considered it a successful test run, a minor adjustment. He hadn't considered the side effects might be... noticeable.

He shrugged, feigning ignorance. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Dave took another step closer. The smell of motor oil and cheap aftershave clung to him. "Oh, really?" he said, his voice dropping low. "You don't?"

The implied threat was clear. Dave had never been more than a placeholder in their lives, a mechanic his mother had met at a weak moment. Chad had always thought he was a jerk, a lumbering obstacle in a perfectly good house. He certainly didn't like him for his mom.

"She's just tired," Chad said, the lie smooth and easy. "Long day."

Dave's eyes narrowed. He wasn't buying it. "Right." He looked Chad up and down, his gaze lingering on the casual, going-out clothes. "Are you going somewhere tonight?"

"Out."

"Out where?"

The interrogation was grating on him. The smug sense of power he'd carried since leaving Susan's office began to curdle into impatience. This nobody was getting in his way. "I've got a job."

A humorless bark of laughter escaped Dave. "Oh, really? You've got a job?" He took the final step, now standing too close, invading Chad's space. "Right. Okay."

Chad held his ground, his own height nearly matching Dave's. He could feel the tension crackling between them, a silent battle of wills. This was a problem. A complication he hadn't anticipated. Dave's suspicion was a loose thread, and loose threads had a way of unraveling everything.

"Can you let me go?" Chad's voice was flat, a clear dismissal.

Dave held his stare for a long, tense moment. Then, he finally took a half-step back, conceding the physical space but not the conflict. “You can go.” He jerked his chin toward the stairs. “But this isn’t over, all right?”

Chad scoffed, a derisive puff of air. He brushed past him, his shoulder making deliberate contact. He didn’t look back as he descended the stairs, grabbing his jacket from the newel post.

The cool evening air was a relief. He walked quickly down the driveway, the encounter replaying in his head. *Out of it.* Dave had noticed. The hypnotic suggestion had left a mark, a visible softness in his mother’s demeanor that her husband had picked up on. It was a risk. An unforeseen variable.

He slid into the driver’s seat of his car but didn’t start the engine. He just sat there in the growing dark, watching the lights come on in the houses down the street. Dave’s suspicious glare burned in his mind’s eye. *This isn’t over.*

Susan was the primary objective, the sweet, long-game revenge against James. But Dave... Dave was now a threat to that objective. A obstacle that needed to be managed. Neutralized.

He’d have to be careful. More careful than before. Dave was naturally suspicious, less open than his caring mother or the emotionally vulnerable Susan. The approach would need to be different. More direct, maybe. More aggressive.

He started the car, the engine rumbling to life. The problem of Dave was filed away for later, a new project to be tackled. For now, Susan was waiting. He put the car in drive, pushing the confrontation with his stepfather to the back of his mind.

* * *

Chad stacked the last plastic tray, his movements efficient and practiced. He’d played his part perfectly all afternoon: the earnest, reformed volunteer. He’d hauled crates, served meals with a disarming smile, and even mopped the floor without a single complaint. It was tedious, but necessary. The foundation had to be stable before he could build his masterpiece.

Throughout the chaos, he'd caught her. Little glimpses. Susan moving between tables, a flash of her warm smile as she reassured a nervous elderly man, the way her blouse tightened across her back when she reached for a high shelf. Each time their eyes met, she'd offered a small, appreciative nod. *Good*, he'd think. *She's comfortable. She sees me as helpful.* The association he'd planted was already taking root.

Finally, the last patron had left, and the heavy doors were locked. The other volunteers had dispersed with tired goodbyes, leaving the vast hall quiet and echoing. Chad wiped down the final table, his senses hyper-aware. This was the moment.

"Chad?"

He turned. Susan stood by the doorway to the hall that led to the offices, leaning against the frame with a weary but genuine smile. She looked exhausted, but there was a softness to her expression when she looked at him.

"You were a rockstar today. I don't know what I would have done without you," she said, her voice hushed in the large, empty room.

He gave a humble shrug, ducking his head slightly. "Just trying to help where I can."

"Well, you helped a lot." She pushed off the doorframe. "Could you... pop into my office for a quick minute before you head out? There's just a couple of things."

"Of course." He followed her, the click of their shoes on the linoleum the only sound.

Her office was just as he remembered it: small, cluttered, and safe. She sank into her chair with a heavy, grateful sigh, gesturing for him to take the one opposite. He sat, mirroring her relaxed posture.

"Oh, gosh," she breathed out, closing her eyes for a second. "It's just so nice to relax after all that in here."

"I feel the same," Chad said, his voice a low, comforting rumble. He let a comfortable silence settle between them.

Susan opened her eyes and smiled at him, a look of pure contentment smoothing the lines of stress from her face. But then, something shifted. The smile faltered. A tiny crease appeared between her eyebrows. Her gaze, which had been soft and unfocused, sharpened just a fraction as it landed on him.

"Hey, Chad, listen," she began, her tone shifting from relaxed to slightly formal. "I've got a problem." She folded her hands on the desk, a counselor preparing for a difficult conversation. "You know, I think you seem to be doing good work. Your heart's in the right

place. But..." She hesitated, searching for the right words. "You know, my son... he says that there's been some issues between the two of you. And so, this just might not be a good fit. Might be a conflict of interest going on here."

Chad let a look of pained remorse wash over his features. He looked down at his hands, then back up at her, meeting her eyes with what he hoped was convincing sincerity. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Yeah, you know, I have to admit I wasn't too nice with your son back in the day." He shook his head, a picture of regret. "But, you know, that's all different now. I've changed. I'm different. I hope he doesn't hold any ill will."

Susan's expression softened again, appreciating the apology. "Well, my James is smart, but he's a sensitive one." Her voice was gentle, maternal. "So it just doesn't make him feel good that you're here working with me, even though I know you seem like a good person, and are just trying to help."

"Oh, I'm sorry it has to be that way," Chad said, his tone full of genuine-sounding disappointment. As he spoke, his right hand, resting on his knee, began to move. His index finger lifted, tracing a slow, intricate pattern in the air. A tiny, almost invisible spiral. Then another. His voice remained even, conversational. "It's a real shame."

Susan's eyes, which had been fixed on his face, flickered down towards the movement for a fraction of a second. Her head tilted slightly. "Wait," she said, a note of confusion returning. "Why are you doing that again?"

He didn't stop the motion. His voice was a soft, hypnotic drone. "Oh, I'm sorry. It just helps me to relax. When I'm stressed." He began to count, his voice dropping into a rhythmic, soothing cadence. "Thirty... twenty-nine... twenty-eight..."

Her confusion seemed to melt into a dawning understanding. "Oh, okay," she murmured, her own shoulders slumping a little. "Yeah, relaxing sounds nice after today."

"Relaxing is really nice," he affirmed, his finger continuing its silent, mesmerizing dance. "Twenty... nineteen... eighteen... It helps me when I'm stressed, like now." He injected a note of vulnerable sadness into his voice. "All this is just very upsetting for me. Fifteen... fourteen... thirteen... twelve..."

He watched her carefully. Her blinks were becoming slower, heavier. The concerned frown had completely vanished, replaced by a placid emptiness. Her speech slowed to a dreamy drawl. "Yes... I understand. I'm so sorry about all this..." Her words trailed off into a soft sigh.

"Ten... nine... eight..." His fingers shifted, the patterns becoming more complex, more deliberate. He wasn't just tracing shapes now; he was reinforcing the neural pathways he'd

carved days before, pulling her back into the familiar, comfortable space he'd created for her.

"Five... four... three... two... one."

The change was instantaneous. All the remaining tension drained from her body. Her head lolled back against the headrest of her chair, her mouth falling slightly open. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, fixed on a point somewhere above his head, seeing nothing. The glassy, distant look he remembered so well from their first session had returned, deeper this time. She was under.

He leaned forward slowly, the chair creaking softly in the silent office. The air between them crackled with a new, unspoken potential. Her vulnerability was a tangible thing, a sweet perfume he inhaled deeply. The power was a live wire in his veins.

He let the silence stretch, letting the depth of her trance solidify.

"Now, Susan," he began, his voice a low, mellifluous instrument honed for this exact purpose. "Working here, do you ever think about the idea that everyone deserves a second chance?"

Her answer was immediate, a soft, breathy echo. "Yes, of course. It's part of the reason I do this."

"Yes," he affirmed, the word smooth as silk. He watched her face, saw no flicker of resistance. "Continue."

"So that I can give people a second chance at living life," she murmured, her voice flat and dreamlike.

"Yes, Chad, I agree." He used his own name, weaving his identity into the fabric of her subconscious. "Don't you think that that should extend to everyone?"

A tiny wrinkle appeared on her brow, the ghost of a critical thought trying to form. "Oh, maybe not everyone, but, but—"

He didn't let her finish. His interruption was gentle but absolute, severing the forming thought before it could crystallize. "*What about me?*" he asked, injecting a note of vulnerable sincerity that was a complete fabrication. "*Someone who's just trying to be good, just trying to be a better person, just trying to be helpful? Don't you think I deserve a second chance?*"

The wrinkle smoothed away. Her expression went placid once more. She was so receptive, so malleable. He could almost see the new pathways forming in her mind. "Well, yes," she said slowly, processing the new logic. "I think, of course."

"So," he pressed, his tone gently leading, "just because it involves your son, don't you think that taking away my second chance is immoral? *Not good?*"

He watched the conflict play out on her features, a war between a mother's instinct and the soothing, irresistible logic he was feeding her. The instinct lost. "Yes," she conceded, her voice gaining a sliver of conviction. "You're right, it would be."

"So I do I deserve one? A second chance?"

"Yes."

A thrill, sharp and potent, shot through him. Yes. "Yes, I do," he commanded softly. "Say it. *Say, you deserve a second chance.*"

"You deserve a second chance," she repeated, her voice a docile monotone.

"Say it again."

"You deserve a second chance."

"That's right." He allowed a small, victorious smile to touch his lips, though she couldn't see it. Her eyes were still glazed, looking through him. "And of course, you'll be very careful, and I'll be on thin ice, right? For you're son's sake."

"Yes, yes," she agreed readily, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I'll be sure to watch you."

"Of course." He let the agreed-upon surveillance hang in the air, a perfect piece of misdirection that would make her feel in control while he was anything but. "So, I'm going to continue to work here, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are." A statement of fact. No hesitation.

"Good." He let a comfortable pause settle between them, letting the new commands sink into her psyche, binding her to his will. The air felt thicker, charged with the intimacy of total control. "Now, I want you to think about how you feel right now. How do you feel, Susan?"

Her lips parted. A soft, almost imperceptible sigh escaped them. "I feel relaxed. Calm. Feels nice."

"That's right." His voice was a whisper now, a secret shared in the quiet room. "And I'm here, and you're here."

She repeated the words, a perfect parrot. "I'm here, and you're here."

"It kind of makes sense that maybe I'm helping that relaxation," he suggested, weaving the final, most crucial thread. "Maybe I'm helping these nice, calm moments at the end of the workday. I am a helpful person, after all."

"Yes," she breathed, her head tilting a fraction. "You're helpful."

"So me being here calms you. Feels nice. It's a good thing, yes?"

"Yes."

He leaned forward another inch, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur meant only for her entranced ears. "I want you to think about that. Throughout the day, tonight, before you go to bed, in the morning... I want you to think about just how good it feels at the end of the day to be here with me. To be relaxed and calm."

He was implanting a trigger. A post-hypnotic suggestion that would tie her feeling of peace and contentment directly to his presence here. Every time she felt that evening calm, her mind would seek him out. The idea was, *his* face would be the one her subconscious associated with safety and relief.

"Yes," Susan replied.

He sat back, observing his work. Susan remained in the chair, a beautiful, breathing statue. Her chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm. In the silence, he could study her properly. The gentle curve of her neck, the way a few strands of hair had escaped her ponytail and curled against her damp skin. There was a vulnerability to her now that was more potent than any overt invitation. She was his creation, his to mold.

He inched his chair forward again, the legs scraping softly on the linoleum. He reached out, his movement slow and deliberate. He didn't touch her. Not yet. He simply let his hand hover near hers where it rested on the arm of her chair. He could feel the faint warmth radiating from her skin.

A car horn blared outside, a distant, mundane sound. It broke the sacred quiet of the office. Susan didn't flinch. She was too far under. But it was a reminder of the world outside, of time passing, of the need for caution.

"... 5, 4, 3, 2, 1."

And Susan opened her eyes.

* * *

“*What?*” The word ripped out of James, louder than he intended.

Susan paused in unloading the dishwasher, a plate in her hand. She turned, her expression one of mild surprise at his tone. “Now, James, just calm down.”

“Calm down?” He began to pace, the short path from the table to the sink and back again. It wasn't helping. “But I *told* you, he's a bully. I can't tell you what he used to do to me back in the day, hell, even just *recently*.”

She placed the plate carefully in the cupboard and put her hands on her hips, a familiar stance that usually meant she was digging in for a discussion. “Now James, I understand, and I know that he has a past, and I know that none of this feels good, but *everyone deserves a second chance*.” She stressed the last part of that line, the cadence just a hair too uniform, too practiced. “And this is what I do for work, and when someone comes and is helpful and is courteous and kind, I have to give them the benefit of the doubt, despite what their past is.”

James stopped his pacing, staring at her. “Mom, he's not some down-on-his-luck case. This is *Chad*. He doesn't do anything that doesn't benefit Chad.”

“I mean, I deal with people like that every day, right?” she continued, as if she hadn't heard him. “People who are homeless or dealing with addiction that need that second chance. So if I was to not do this, then I would be derelict in my duty.”

The logic was hers, but the delivery felt odd. It was her philosophy, but not quite. A cold dread, colder than the first time, began to seep into James's bones. This wasn't her just being stubborn. Something was *off*.

“And so I understand how this might make you feel,” she said, her voice softening into calm reassurance, “and I'm going to make sure to watch him, and if he does anything wrong, of course he won't be around for long.”

The fight drained out of him, replaced by a heavy, helpless frustration. He couldn't argue with this. He looked down at the worn pattern on the floor, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Fine, Mom, fine,” he muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets. “But just be careful, okay? *Just be careful.*”

Her face lit up with a warm, triumphant smile. She walked over to him, her earlier firmness evaporating into pure maternal affection. She pulled him into a hug, her arms strong and comforting around his back. She ruffled his hair. “*Of course, big guy.*” She squeezed him tighter. “*I love you so much. That’s what’s most important, all right? I want you to know that.*”

He buried his face in her shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent of her laundry detergent and a faint trace of perfume. It was his mom. He forced a reluctant smile. “Thanks, Mom.”

* * *

Across the street, partially obscured by the thick trunk of an old oak tree, Chad sat in his idling car. The driver’s side window was down, the cool evening air doing little to cool the smug satisfaction heating his blood.

He’d seen it all. The frantic pacing. The angry gestures. The eventual, beautiful slump of surrender. He watched James’s body language scream everything his own ears were too far away to hear.

And he watched *her*.

The polished linoleum floor of the science wing reflected the harsh fluorescent lights, casting a sickly glow. James adjusted the strap of his backpack, his shoulders hunched as he navigated the after-class rush. He just wanted to get to his locker and go home.

A flash of movement down a side corridor made him freeze. It was Chad. But he wasn't alone. He was standing unusually close to Dr. Evans, their conversation hushed and intense. James squinted, pushing his glasses up his nose. Dr. Evans, usually so stern and put-together, looked... different. His posture was slack, his head tilted as if he were listening to something fascinating. He wasn't making eye contact. His gaze was fixed somewhere around Chad's chin.

Chad was speaking, his voice a low, rhythmic murmur that James couldn't quite decipher. One of Chad's hands was gesturing slowly, his index finger tracing a tiny, intricate circle in the air between them.

A cold knot tightened in James's stomach. *What is he doing?*

As if sensing the weight of his stare, Chad's eyes flicked up. They locked directly onto James's. The hypnotic murmur stopped. Chad's hand fell to his side. The spell—if that's what it was—shattered.

Dr. Evans blinked rapidly, shaking his head as if clearing water from his ears. He looked confused for a moment, then his usual authoritative mask slid back into place. He offered Chad a stiff, almost polite nod before turning and walking away, his steps a little unsteady.

Chad didn't watch him go. His full attention was on James now, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face. He started walking toward him, each step deliberate, closing the distance between them in the now-empty hallway.

James's heart hammered against his ribs. He wanted to run, but his feet felt rooted to the spot.

"Hey, James," Chad said, his voice dripping with a fake, cloying warmth. He stopped just a little too close, invading James's personal space. "Just wanted to say it's been *really* great working with your mother."

James's fear curdled into anger. He scoffed, the sound harsh in the quiet hall. "Yeah, funny, Chad. I know what you're doing."

Chad's smile didn't waver. He feigned confusion, tilting his head in a mockery of innocence. "What do you mean? What am I doing? I'm just volunteering my time. I'm just doing my part for my community." He spread his hands wide, the picture of altruistic confusion.

The audacity was breathtaking. James gave a short, derisive laugh. "Right. Haha. We both know that's not what you're doing."

"Jeez, James," Chad said, his tone shifting to one of wounded sincerity. "*I really don't know what you're talking about.*" He took a half-step closer. James could smell his cheap, sporty cologne. He could see the faint stubble along his jaw. The physical presence of him was overwhelming, a wall of muscle and malicious intent.

Chad's eyes glinted with undisguised triumph. He leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that felt like a violation. "*Anyways, I'll see you around.*"

He pulled back, the smirk returning full force. He gave James a pat on the shoulder that was just a little too hard to be friendly.

"I'll tell your mom you said hi."

With that, he turned and strolled down the hallway, his footsteps echoing with a confidence that felt like a physical blow. James stood there, frozen, the echo of those words bouncing around in his skull. *I'll tell your mom you said hi.*

* * *

The heavy door to Susan's office clicked shut, sealing them in a world of quiet. The chaotic energy from the main hall was gone, replaced by the soft hum of the fluorescent light overhead and the distant, fading sound of a car driving past outside.

Susan practically collapsed into her worn desk chair, the old springs groaning in protest. She let out a long, ragged sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of her being. "Gosh, what a day," she breathed, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling. "Man, oh, man. Just... need to unwind."

Chad took his usual seat across from her, the one that was becoming his. He mirrored a look of casual fatigue, but his focus was razor-sharp. "Rough one," he agreed, his voice a low, sympathetic rumble.

She sat forward, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. "Hey, Chad," she began, a hint of shyness in her tone. She looked at him, her eyes tired but hopeful. "Can you maybe... do that thing that you did with your hand the other day? You know, the thing you said that helps you relax?"

A jolt of pure, undiluted victory shot through him. He kept his expression neutral, just a flicker of pleasant surprise. "Oh, yeah?" he said softly. "You mean this?" He lifted his right hand, his index finger beginning to trace a slow, intricate spiral in the air between them.

Her eyes locked onto the movement instantly, a soft, grateful smile touching her lips. "Yeah. I've been thinking about it all day." A faint blush colored her cheeks. "What is it? What's it called?"

"It's called, The Way," he said, his voice dropping into that smooth, rhythmic cadence he'd practiced. He made it sound like a secret. "It's a silly meditation trick... um... my mom taught me." An easy lie.

"Oh, well, it's just really nice." Her gaze was glued to his moving finger, her shoulders already beginning to lose their stiffness. "It feels nice after a long day to just relax. Last time, it really did wonders to make me feel nice and loose."

"Yeah, of course," Chad said, his voice the very picture of gentle reassurance. He began to count, the numbers falling from his lips like a soft, steady rain. "Thirty... twenty-nine... twenty-eight..."

He watched her closely. Her eyelids grew heavy, fluttering shut for a second before opening again, her focus entirely on the mesmerizing motion of his finger.

"That's it," she murmured, her voice slurring just a little. "There it is. Thank you, Chad. This is nice."

"Fifteen... sixteen... fourteen... thirteen... twelve... eleven..."

Her breathing deepened. Her head lolled back against the headrest, a soft, involuntary sound escaping her lips. It wasn't loud, just a quiet, contented hum in the back of her throat. *A moan.*

"Five... four... three... two... one."

The change was absolute. All the remaining vestiges of the day's stress melted from her face. Her body went pliant and heavy in the chair. Her eyes, wide and unblinking, stared past him at nothing, seeing only the peaceful emptiness he provided for her. She was under.

"Susan," he said, his voice quiet but firm in the hushed room. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful," she replied, her voice a distant, dreamy sigh. "So nice." Her tone was utterly relaxed, but beneath the drowsy quality, he detected it—a new, subtle undercurrent of pleasure. A warmth.

"Yes," he affirmed. He let the silence hang for a moment, letting her bathe in the sensation. "Now tell me, were you thinking about this throughout the day? About how this feels?"

"Oh yes," she breathed, a slow smile spreading across her face. "All day. Every once in a while, I would think about the last couple of times we were in here... just how nice it feels. I really like it."

"Yes, of course you do, Susan." He leaned forward an inch, his voice dropping to an intimate murmur. "You like it a lot. This feels good, doesn't it?"

"Mmmhmm."

"I want you to think about it more often." He was weaving the suggestion into the fabric of her subconscious. "I want you to think of it as *feeling good*. It makes you feel good to think about coming here with me at the end of the day and relax and meditate." He paused, letting the words sink in. "It makes you feel good *all over*

Susan shifted in her chair, a subtle, reflexive squirm. Her thighs pressed together for a brief second. "Yeah," she whispered, her voice a little thicker. "It feels good. It feels very good... all over."

The admission sent a thrill through him. *Perfect*. "Now, when you think about it, it brings you a little pleasure throughout the day. A pleasure to think about relaxing here, letting your mind drift when you're in here with me."

"Yesssss," she drew the word out into a long, sibilant hiss. "Pleasure."

He watched her, this mature, kind woman reduced to a vessel of simple, suggested sensations. It was the most powerful he had ever felt. He decided to push further, to lay the next stone on the path.

"Now, Susan, I want to ask you something. Be honest. Do you like me?"

Her brow furrowed slightly, a tiny ripple in her placid state. "Um, you're nice. You're a good worker. You're helpful."

He smiled. A defensive, logical answer. Her conscious mind trying to assert itself. He would bypass it completely. "Yes, but do you *like* me? Do you find me attractive?"

"No, no, no." She started to shake her head, a jerky, automatic denial.

"That's okay, Susan," he soothed, his voice never losing its calming rhythm. "But let me ask you something. Do you think you might understand how someone *could* find me attractive?"

He watched the gears turn in her entranced mind. The denial faded, replaced by a more objective consideration. "Oh," she said softly. "Well, yes."

"Yeah, good." He could barely contain his grin. "I want you to think about that. Think about how someone could find me attractive. Someone like me... who's good and helpful."

"Yes, yeah. I see that. "

"Those are things that are very appealing, right?" He was leading her, building the argument brick by brick. "Also... I'm big. I'm strong. Which means I must be muscular... as well as, you know... helpful and kind."

"Yes," she agreed, her voice gaining a sliver of conviction. "Those are things that are attractive."

"That's right." The words were syrup. "People find me attractive, don't they?"

"Yeah," she said, her head tilting. "They probably do."

"I think it's fairly certain that people find me attractive."

"Yes. People find you attractive."

He leaned in, his face closer to hers than it had ever been. He could see the faint lines at the corners of her eyes, the soft part of her lips. "People find me attractive. People find me attractive." It was an echo, a reinforcement. "I'm an attractive man. People say it. People think it. It must be true. I'm an attractive man."

"You're... an attractive man," she repeated, her glazed eyes staring through him.

"Think it over and over. Throughout the day, tomorrow, I want you to find time to just think about that. Okay?"

"Yes."

“Good.” He sat back.

* * *

The front door clicked shut behind James, the familiar sound echoing through the unusually still house. He dropped his heavy backpack by the entrance with a dull thud, the weight of textbooks and the day’s anxieties sloughing off his shoulders.

“Mom?” he called out, his voice bouncing off the walls. “You home?”

Silence.

He’d seen her sedan in the driveway, so she had to be here. It was her day off. A little knot of concern began to tighten in his chest. Maybe she was in the shower.

He padded into the kitchen. Empty. The countertops were clean, the sink dry. No note. The living room was just as still, the afternoon sun casting long, lazy rectangles across the carpet. The television was dark. He peeked out into the backyard through the sliding glass door. Nothing.

Where is she?

He was about to call out again when he heard it. A sound. Muffled, distant. It came from down the hall, toward the bedrooms.

He walked slowly, his socked feet making no sound on the carpet. As he neared his mother’s closed bedroom door, the sound clarified. It was a voice. *Her* voice. Muted, as if talking to herself, or... into a pillow.

He paused just outside, his ear nearly touching the cool wood of the door.

“...so attractive...”

The words were a breathy sigh, barely audible. James froze.

“...he’s so attractive...”

There it was again. The same phrase, slurred with a strange, dreamy quality. It was his mother's voice, but it was layered with a tone he'd never heard from her before—a husky, intimate warmth that felt completely out of place.

“God, he’s so good-looking... What a man...”

A low, soft moan followed the words. It was unmistakable. A sound of pleasure, stifled but urgent.

James's mind reeled. His first, bewildered thought was of a movie, or a phone call. But the TV wasn't on. And the voice wasn't conversational; it was... reverent. Private.

James didn't know what to do. This was a line he never imagined crossing, a door he never wanted to open. He should walk away. Give her privacy. This wasn't for him.

But the wrongness of it held him rooted. That voice. Those words. They didn't sound like his mom. This voice was languid and... *needy*.

He couldn't just leave. What if she was upset? What if something was wrong?

His hand, trembling slightly, curled into a fist. He rapped his knuckles against the door, the sound harsh and abrupt in the silent hallway.

The murmuring stopped instantly. He heard a sudden, sharp rustle of sheets, a quick intake of breath. The frantic, guilty sound of movement.

Then, silence.

After a long, heart-thumping moment, her voice came through the door. “What is it, honey?”

It was her normal voice, or a rushed, flustered imitation of it. A half-octave too high. *Slightly rushed*.

“Mom?” he said, his own voice sounding thin and young. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m fine.” The words tumbled out too quickly. A denial before the question was even fully asked. “What do you mean? I’m okay.”

The reassurance was too forceful. It confirmed his unease instead of quelling it. Something *was* going on.

“Oh, okay,” he said, grasping for normalcy, for an excuse for his interruption. “I was going to order out. Do you want anything?”

A beat of silence. He could almost picture her on the other side of the door, composing herself, smoothing her hair.

“Sure,” she finally said, her tone settling into something closer to her usual self, though a breathless edge remained. “Just give me whatever you get.”

“Okay, Mom.”

He stood there for another second, waiting for the door to open, for her to offer some explanation for the muffled sounds, for the strange, breathy words. But the door remained shut.

He turned and walked away, each step heavy with a confusion that was slowly curdling into a sickening suspicion. He didn’t understand what he’d heard, not really. But the cadence of those murmured words, the specific phrasing, echoed in his mind.

He’s so attractive?

* * *

EARLIER THAT DAY

The cold, hard handle of the shopping cart was a stark contrast to the warmth blooming under Susan’s skin. She pushed it slowly, her eyes scanning the list clutched in her other hand.

Celery. Some tomatoes. She frowned, her focus fraying at the edges. *I need to get some cereal.*

She turned the cart, the wheels whining on the polished floor, and directed it toward the far aisle. The store was a cacophony of beeping scanners, muffled conversations, and piped-in music, but it all felt distant, muffled by the static in her own mind.

A low, restless energy hummed through her. She felt... on edge. The kind of tension that settled in her shoulders after a long day, a taut wire waiting to be cut. She sighed, and her mind, unbidden, offered a solution. A memory.

It would be so nice to just relax. Just like... after work.

A specific image blossomed behind her eyes: the quiet click of her office door, the worn fabric of her chair, and him. Chad. His low, rhythmic voice. The slow, mesmerizing circle of his finger. The profound, heavy calm that followed.

A soft, involuntary sound escaped her lips—a faint moan—as she pushed the cart forward. Her eyes fluttered shut for a second too long, and she snapped them open, a flush of heat rising to her cheeks. *God, Susan, you're in public.*

She shook her head, a quick, dismissive gesture, and tightened her grip on the cart. It was harmless. A pleasant daydream. A mental vacation. It happened a few times a day now, these little escapes. She shrugged it off each time.

But this time, it was different. The thought didn't fade. It deepened.

It wasn't just the feeling of relaxation anymore. It was the source. Her mind, traitorously, began adding details. The memory of his voice bled into the image of *him*. Eighteen-year-old Chad. Tall. His broad shoulders straining against the cheap fabric of his volunteer t-shirt. That confident set of his jaw.

Her breath hitched as she realized she'd walked right past the cereal aisle. She stopped the cart, a fresh wave of self-consciousness washing over her. *Get a grip.*

She turned around, maneuvering the cart back the way she came. As she entered the brightly lit aisle, a new, more vivid flash seized her. Not a memory, but an imagination. A vision of muscles rippling under sun-kissed skin. *Washboard abs*. The thought was clear, specific. *His arms. So strong*. She could almost feel the weight of them.

She paused in front of the colorful boxes, her gaze unfocused. What was she looking for? Her eyes drifted over the cartoons and athletes.

And then she saw him.

On a red and white box of Wheaties. It was *him*. Chad. He wasn't in athletic gear. He was wearing nothing but a tight, black Speedo, his body oiled and gleaming, every muscle flexed and defined for the camera. He was staring right at her, a smoldering look in his piercing blue eyes.

She stared, her mouth going slightly dry. The image was so vivid, so real. Her heart thudded against her ribs.

She blinked, hard.

The box resolved back into a normal, utterly mundane box of Wheaties. A generic, smiling athlete grinned back at her.

A shaky breath escaped her. *What is wrong with me?* Her hand trembled slightly as she reached out, grabbed the box, and practically threw it into the cart. She needed to get out of here.

She continued her shopping on autopilot, her mind a runaway train. Flashes of his chiseled jawline. The way his thick, dark hair always looked effortlessly perfect. His smile, which could be so charming when he wanted it to be.

She found herself muttering under her breath, the words a subconscious whisper meant only for her. *“God, he’s so attractive. He’s so attractive.”*

She passed an elderly woman scrutinizing a coupon book. The woman’s head snapped up, her eyes narrowing behind her spectacles, clearly having heard the murmured confession. She gave Susan a long, curious, and slightly judging look.

Susan’s face burned. She averted her eyes, staring intently at a pyramid of canned soup as if it held the secrets of the universe. She shook her head again, a more violent motion this time, trying to physically dislodge the thoughts. *Snap out of it. He’s young. Eighteen? Nineteen? James’s age.*

But the argument felt weak, hollowed out by the persistent, thrilling heat coiling low in her belly.

Finally, her cart was full. She stood in the checkout line, staring blankly at the conveyor belt, willing her mind to go numb. But her eyes drifted to the magazine rack next to her.

And the world twisted again.

Every cover, every male model, every Hollywood actor—their faces morphed. Their features smoothed and shifted, reformed into *his*. Chad’s blue eyes stared out from a dozen different bodies, from a dozen different magazine covers. All of them were perfect. All of them were fit. All of them were *him*.

“God, he’s so attractive,” she breathed, the words a little louder this time, laden with a want she didn’t recognize in herself.

She was rubbing her thighs together subtly, a slow, restless motion against the denim of her jeans. The friction was a poor substitute, a tiny spark trying to ignite a fire. She was lost in the aisle, in the sea of his faces.

“Excuse me, ma’am?”

The voice cut through her daze. She blinked. The cashier, a bored-looking teenager, was motioning impatiently.

“You’re next.”

Susan looked behind her. A line of people stared back, their expressions a mix of impatience and pity. She felt a wave of hot, humiliated flush crawl up her neck.

“Oh! Sorry. Yes,” she stammered, her voice too high.

She hurried forward, avoiding all eye contact, her movements clumsy as she unloaded her groceries. All she could think about was getting home. Getting behind a locked door.

Where she could finally, finally relieve the delicious, unbearable tension thrumming through her entire body.

The scent of lemony cleaning spray hung in the air. Chad sat at the worn diner table, his chair angled to watch his mother move around the kitchen. Barbara hummed softly to herself as she wiped down the counter, her hips swaying to some internal rhythm. For days now, he'd been meticulously reinforcing the foundation of trust. Every casual interaction, every moment he could steal, he'd move his finger and once she was under, he'd layered his commands over the bedrock of her maternal love. *Trust me, Mom. You know you do. You love me, and with that love comes absolute trust.*

It was a simple, powerful loop. The love was real, undeniable. The trust was its willing, pliable offspring. He'd been patient, sticking to the basics, as is "The Way", building his influence brick by hypnotic brick. But he needed to know the depth of his control. He needed to test the waters before he navigated the more complicated channel of his stepfather.

He pushed his chair back, the legs scraping softly against the linoleum. Barbara didn't startle. She simply finished wiping a spot on the counter and turned to him, a warm, open expression on her face. "All done, sweetie? Need something?"

He approached her, stopping close enough to see the faint lines at the corners of her eyes. He held her gaze. "Mom," he said, his voice level and calm. "You trust me?"

She didn't hesitate. Her smile was beatific. "With all my heart, honey. I trust you with my very being. You're my son. I love you, and with that I trust you so, so, so very, very much." The words were rote, a well-worn mantra he'd planted, but the emotion behind them was utterly genuine. It sent a thrill straight through him.

Good. "Stand on one leg, Mother."

Her expression didn't change. Not a flicker of confusion or question. She simply lifted her right foot, balancing perfectly on her left, her hands still holding the damp dishcloth. She just looked at him, waiting for the next instruction. Serene. Compliant.

"Put your leg down."

She did.

The air in the kitchen felt thick, charged. This was it. The moment to push past the mundane. His heart beat a steady, powerful rhythm against his ribs. “Mother?” he began, his tone still soft, almost conversational. “Would you give me a kiss?”

She looked at him then, a faint, familiar crinkle of amusement in her eyes. *Of course.* She leaned in and pressed a dry, chaste peck against his cheek, the kind she’d given him a thousand times before.

He didn’t move away. “No, Mother,” he said, his voice dropping a fraction, layering a subtle command into the words. “Give me a kiss here.” He pointed to his own lips.

The crinkle in her brow deepened into genuine confusion. A slight frown touched her mouth. “Well,” she said, her voice laced with maternal reason, “that’s not something a mother does.”

He didn’t break. He held her gaze, his own unwavering. “Mom, trust me,” he soothed, the words dripping with hypnotic certainty. “It *is* something mothers do. It’s very important. It’s important that you show how much you love me by kissing me when I need it. It’s important that I can *feel* that love.”

He watched the internal struggle play out across her face. The lifetime of social norms and maternal boundaries warring with the deep, hypnotically-enforced compulsion to trust him, to please him. Her brow furrowed. Her lips parted as if to protest again.

Then, it happened. Her eyes softened. The resistance melted away, replaced by a dawning, placid acceptance. The programming won.

“Of course, honey,” she murmured, her voice losing its edge of confusion, becoming dreamy and smooth.

She didn’t hesitate again. She reached for him, her hands coming up to cradle his face. Her touch was gentle, warm. She leaned in, and her lips met his. It was more than a peck. It was soft, lingering. Then, as instructed, she did it. Her tongue, warm and wet, traced the seam of his lips before gently seeking entry.

He accepted it, allowing the intimate caress, his own hands staying at his sides. The taste of her lip gloss, something faintly sweet, mixed with a flavor that was uniquely hers. It was profoundly strange and incredibly powerful. He felt the weight of his control, absolute and intoxicating.

After a long moment, she slowly pulled back. A thin, glistening string of saliva stretched between their mouths before breaking. Her eyes were slightly glazed, her expression one of peaceful contentment, as if she’d just performed the most natural act in the world.

“Is there anything else, sweetie?” she asked, her voice a soft whisper. She tilted her head.
“Sweetie?”

He smiled.

* * *

The blueish glow from the television painted shifting patterns across the living room. On screen, a TV show, the characters of ‘Severance’ moved through their sterile, unnerving world, but James was only half-paying attention. His focus kept drifting to his mother sitting beside him on the couch.

Susan's body was angled toward the screen, but her eyes had a glazed, faraway look, seeing something—or someone—else entirely. A faint, secret smile played on her lips, the kind that suggested a private joke or a pleasant memory. Every so often, she would shift her weight, a subtle, restless motion. Her hips would cant slightly to the left, then the right, as if trying to find a comfortable position that didn't exist. Her hands, resting on her thighs, would slowly rub the denim fabric.

James's stomach tightened. This was odd. This was... *off*.

“Mom?” he said, his voice cutting through a tense silence on the show.

She gave a little start, blinking as if emerging from deep water. She turned to him, the distant look in her eyes clearing for a moment. “Yes? What is it, honey?”

“Are you okay? You seem... I don't know. Distracted.”

“I'm perfectly fine,” she said, a little too quickly. Her smile widened, but it seemed practiced. “Just tired. It's a good show, isn't it?” She turned her head back to the television, effectively ending the inquiry.

James watched her for another minute. The strange, languid movements began again. The faint smile returned. He felt a cold knot of suspicion form in his gut. This had to be about *him*. Right?

He took a breath, choosing his words carefully. “Hey, Mom. I was thinking. You know, about your work. About... Chad.”

The effect was instantaneous. She didn't look at him, but her entire body went rigid for a fraction of a second. He saw her eyes widen just a touch. Her lips pursed into a thin, tight line. Her breathing, which had been slow and even, hitched—a sharp, quiet intake of air that she immediately tried to mask, as if she'd been caught feeling something she shouldn't.

Then, without turning her head, she said, “Yes?” The word was flat. A placeholder.

“I just... I feel like something's wrong,” James pressed on, his voice gentle but insistent. “I don't have a good feeling about him being there with you. Maybe we can rethink this? You said before, that you could transfer him to another facility. Maybe that'd be for the best. For everyone.”

“No!”

The word was a swift, sharp knife. It left no room for argument. James was so surprised by its force that he physically leaned back.

She seemed to catch her own tone, because she continued, her voice smoothing out into something calmer, more measured, though it carried an undercurrent of steel he rarely heard from her. “No, no, sweetie. Listen.” She finally turned to look at him, and her expression was one of gentle condescension, a parent patiently explaining something simple to a slow child. “I know you two had your issues at school. I get that. But you have to trust me. I am a very good judge of character.”

She looked back at the TV, her gaze losing its focus again. “He's a good boy. He just wants to do good things. The fact that he's volunteering, that he's giving up his time like he is... that says a lot about a person's character, James. And so far, I have to be honest, *nothing* has happened. He's been nothing but good. He's been *considerate*. He's been *kind*. The people who come through those doors... they're not an easy crowd. But he's been patient. So no, I don't think transferring him is the best option.”

James felt a flare of frustration. She wasn't listening. It was like talking to a pleasant, smiling wall. “Yeah, but Mom, listen to me. I just... I don't *trust* him. I have a really bad feeling about this.”

“No.” The sharpness was back, final and absolute. She cut him off, her head snapping toward him, and for a second, her eyes weren't distant or dreamy—they were firm, almost *annoyed* that he was disrupting her thoughts. “I'm telling you, no. He's staying right where he is because there is *nothing* wrong. The moment there is, and I mean *the moment*, I will be the first to know, and we will deal with it then. But right now, he is *good*. He is good, and he is right where he belongs, working to help people. With me. *Okay?*”

The last word was a clear punctuation mark. The discussion was over.

James stared at her, his mouth slightly agape. He scrunched his nose, the familiar hot rush of helplessness washing over him. He lost the discussion. He looked back at the television screen, where characters were making choices they didn't understand for reasons that were hidden from them. The parallel was eerie and unsettling.

"Fine," he muttered, the word tasting like ash.

"Good," Susan said.

He heard her take a slow, deep breath beside him—a long, deliberate inhale, followed by an even longer, more contented exhale. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her body relax back into the couch, her secret smile returning as she once again stared through the television, lost in a world of her own making, a world where Chad was *good*, and *kind*, and *considerate*, and... *very attractive*.

* * *

The blue glow from the television painted their faces in shifting, spectral light. On screen, was the same episode of 'Severance' that James and Susan were watching on the other side of town. But in this living room, things were a bit more intimate. Chad and his mother sat on the couch, but they weren't watching the show. They were facing each other, knees almost touching. He had moved his fingers in front of her moment before. She was under.

"You understand, don't you, Mother?" Chad whispered, his voice a low vibration that cut through the show's dialogue. "The trust. It's everything."

Barbara nodded, her eyes locked on his, wide and unblinking. "It's everything," she echoed, her voice smooth and placid.

"And you feel it—"

The front door banged open, interrupting Chad's soothing voice. Dave's heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway, accompanied by a gruff grumble. "Hey! Has anyone seen my goddamn keys?"

They both turned their heads in unison. Chad's expression was a flash of pure, unadulterated annoyance, quickly schooled into neutrality. Barbara's face was softer, her

smile vague, her eyes holding a slight, vacant look. Chad was a little concerned about the damage Dave could do while his mother was under like this. He had to be careful.

“No, honey,” she said, her tone even and pleasant.

Dave stomped into the living room, his large frame blocking the light from the hall. He looked from his wife to his stepson, his brow furrowed. “What are you guys doing in here? You’re...” He waved a hand between them. “... you’re doing something weird. What is this?” His eyes flicked to the TV. “Oh, I love this show. Hey, he dies at the end of this episode.”

Chad stared at him, the muscle in his jaw tightening. *Just leave.* “Are you going out?” he asked, his voice flat.

“Yeah, I’m going out with a couple of the boys from work.” Dave’s eyes narrowed, landing back on Chad. “Hey. You’re going to mow the lawn? Still hasn’t been mowed in like a week. Can you get to it?” He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “No lawn, no allowance, all right? My house, my rules.”

“All right,” Chad said, the words tight.

“All right, babe,” Barbara added, her smile never wavering.

Dave’s eyes darted around the room, then down to the floor near the coat closet. “Oh, there they are.” He scooped up his keys. “I’ll see you later.”

“All right, Dave.”

The door clicked shut. Chad didn’t move a muscle, his hearing straining to track the sound of Dave’s truck engine turning over, the crunch of gravel as he reversed out of the driveway, the fading hum as he disappeared down the street. Only when the silence of the house was absolute did he turn back to his mother.

Her serene, trusting expression was waiting for him. She was still under his influence. No damage done. It was time.

“Mother,” he said, his voice dropping back into that intimate, commanding whisper. “I need to help you with something. I need to tell you a few truths.”

He held her gaze as his hands went to his waist. The sound of his zipper coming down was obscenely loud in the quiet room. He didn’t break eye contact as he reached into his jeans and pulled out his cock, already half-hard from the anticipation of power. It sprung free, thick and demanding.

Barbara's eyes finally broke from his, drifting down. A faint, almost imperceptible line appeared between her brows. "Honey? What are you doing?" A flush crept up her neck. She seemed flustered, a flicker of the old her—the social norms—trying to surface.

"No, don't worry," he soothed, layering his voice with the hypnotic compulsion she couldn't resist. "Trust me. This is normal. I need a little relief. I'm feeling stressed and I need someone who loves me to relieve it for me."

He watched the internal war play out on her face. Confusion, maternal concern, then... surrender. The trust won. Her expression smoothed out, becoming placid and willing once more.

"Oh, well, yes," she said, after a brief moment of consideration. "Of course."

Without another word, she reached down. Her fingers, warm and slightly rough from housework, wrapped around his shaft. She began to pump him slowly, her touch hesitant at first, then gaining a steady rhythm.

"Mom," he breathed, his head falling back for a second as pleasure sparked along his nerves. "Can you get your hand moist, please?"

She blinked. "Oh. Of course. Sorry." She brought her other hand to her mouth, spat into her palm with a soft, wet sound, and slicked her fingers. Then she returned her now-wet hand to his cock, the glide instantly smoother, more sensual. The sound of her moistened skin sliding over him was filthy and perfect.

"What is it you needed, baby?" she asked, looking up at him, her hand never stopping its slow, steady motion. Her innocence in the face of such a depraved act was the most potent aphrodisiac he'd ever known. He knew this was wrong, but he couldn't help himself.

Chad moaned softly, his hips giving a slight, involuntary thrust into her fist. "I'm going to tell you something," he said, fighting to keep his voice level and authoritative. "And I want you to know that everything that I'm saying is because I love you and it's all normal and all for the best. But it's all true."

"Oh, okay. What is it, honey?" Her pace began to build, a little faster, a little tighter. He could feel his erection swelling in her grip, becoming harder, fuller.

"For the last week," he continued, his words coming between gritted teeth, "I've been hypnotizing you. With this specific method called The Way."

"Oh, is that right?" she said, her voice dreamy. Her thumb swiped over the slick head of his cock, spreading the bead of moisture that had gathered there.

“That’s right. I’ve been changing you for the better. I’ve been making you become more considerate of my needs.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Her hand worked him with more purpose now, her wrist twisting deftly on the upstroke. “That seems... normal.”

“Yes.” He could feel the pressure building low in his gut. “Right now, I need you to understand something else. I need you to help me with helping others like I have with you.”

Her rhythm faltered for a half-second. “Oh,” she said, a tiny frown returning. “That sounds... naughty.”

“It is,” he coaxed, his voice had a sinister tone.

“No,” she murmured, the objection weak, automatic. “Wait. That doesn’t seem like me.”

“But it is you,” he insisted, his tone hardening just enough to cement the command. “It’s you, because you love and trust me. Now, I want you to *completely and utterly* trust me. Your love for me has no bounds. You are obedient to me above all else.” He leaned forward, his face inches from hers, his cock pulsing in her hand. “But beneath that, you are also sensual. And cruel. And mischievous. And mean. You love it when I put people down. You love it when I manipulate people, when I abuse people. It turns you on. Your pussy gets wet just thinking about it.”

A sharp, shuddering gasp escaped her lips. Her eyes glazed over, but this time it wasn’t with vacant trust. It was with dawning, dark arousal. Her hand began to pump his cock faster, her grip tightening.

“Yes,” she breathed, her eyes closing.

“You love it when I make someone my bitch,” he growled, the words hot against her ear.

“And you also love it for yourself. You want to control others, to manipulate them sexually. But it’s all for me. It’s all for me. Isn’t that right? You’ll be a bitch. A cruel fucking bitch... for me.”

“Yes,” she moaned, her hips beginning to squirm on the couch cushion. “That’s what I’ll be.”

Her hand was a blur now, stroking him hard and fast, her spit-slicked palm creating a delicious, dirty friction. He could feel her own lustful need in the desperate, frantic energy of her touch.

“Say it,” he commanded, his own climax coiling, ready to break. “Say it over and over.”

“I’m your bitch,” she chanted, her voice rising. “I’m your mother bitch. Cruel fucking hot sexy bitch for you.”

“Louder.”

“It’s all for you, Chad!” she cried out, her body tensing. “Oh, God, it’s all for you, Chad!”

He threw his head back as the orgasm ripped through him, a raw, guttural groan tearing from his throat. Hot streaks of cum shot from him, painting her thighs, her chest, her trembling hands. A matching, choked cry came from Barbara as her own body convulsed in a silent, powerful climax, triggered by the sheer psychological thrill of her utter submission and the filthy, beautiful words he’d planted in her mind.

They stayed like that for a long moment, panting, the sound television in the background. Slowly, Chad opened his eyes. He looked over at his mother, at his semen all over her, glistening on her skin.

Barbara opened her eyes, too. They were clear now, but utterly changed. No longer vacant, but alive with a dark, possessive light. A slow, wicked smile spread across her lips, mirroring the triumphant, predatory grin on his own face.

“Now... it’s time you learned this too. I’m gonna give you a special website address. Dave needs to be put in his place, and you’re gonna do the dirty work.”

“Yes, Chad.”

“Now, clean me off.”

Barbara started to rise from the couch, but Chad stopped her, holding up his hand and then pointing down at his cock.

“With your mouth.”

Suan moved through her morning routine with practiced ease—organizing clipboards, checking the daily donation log, directing volunteers—but her focus kept fracturing.

Her eyes, seemingly of their own volition, would drift across the busy hall, seeking out a specific figure.

Chad.

The thought arrived unannounced, a warm, intrusive little bubble in her mind. She'd catch a glimpse of him hauling a heavy box of canned goods, the muscles in his back and shoulders straining visibly beneath his thin t-shirt. *So strong.* The bubble would pop, and she'd shake her head slightly, a faint, flustered heat warming her cheeks. *Focus, Susan. You're his supervisor, for heaven's sake.*

But a few minutes later, there it was again. He'd laugh at something another volunteer said, his head thrown back, his whole face alight with a confidence that was... *so attractive.* She'd feel a little jolt, a pleasant, distracting buzz that made her fumble with the stack of forms in her hands. It was just a fleeting glance, a fleeting thought. For the most part, she could shove it down, bury it under the mountain of immediate concerns. But it was persistent, this new, quiet hum of awareness thrumming just beneath the surface of her day.

The lunch service was its usual controlled chaos, a river of people flowing past the serving line. Susan was in her element here, a steady rock in the turbulent stream. Until the current hit a snag.

Ned, a gaunt man with eyes that often held a stormy, unpredictable glint, slammed his plastic tray down on the counter. "I haven't had any yet!" he began to yell, his voice cracking with a mix of anger and desperation.

Susan turned, her professional calm instantly engaged. "I saw you, Ned." Her voice was a steady, pacifying rhythm. "You know you have to wait to a certain point before you can go back and get seconds. It's just we need to make sure there's enough for everyone."

"This is bullshit!" he spat, his fists clenching at his sides. "This is bullshit!"

A familiar, weary sympathy bloomed in Susan's chest. She knew his story, the ragged edges of a life that had frayed beyond repair. But today, beneath that deep well of empathy, she felt a new, sharp pinprick of annoyance. *Why does he have to make everything so difficult?* The thought startled her with its pettiness. She took a slow breath, recentering herself. This wasn't about her.

She leaned forward slightly, pitching her voice low and sincere, a trick she'd learned years ago. "Now, Ned, you're one of my favorites," she said, and though the line was a practiced one, she willed the truth of it into her eyes. "And trust me, you *will* get seconds. We just have to wait a little longer just to make sure. Okay, Ned?"

His wild eyes locked onto hers. The anger seemed to drain from him, replaced by a profound, weary exhaustion. He looked at her, really looked at her, and sighed a heavy, ragged sigh. "Okay. Sorry, Susan."

"It's okay, Ned," she said softly, giving him a small, reassuring smile, and shuffled away.

Chad was leaning against the doorframe to the pantry, arms crossed over his chest. He'd been watching the entire exchange. And he was smiling. Not a broad, obvious grin, but a small, knowing, intimate curve of his lips that seemed meant for her and her alone. It was a smile that said, *I see you. I see how good you are.*

A warm flush spread from Susan's chest up her neck. Her professional composure wobbled. She couldn't help it; she smiled back, a quick, slightly flustered gesture before she swiftly turned her attention to the next person in line, her heart doing a funny little skip-beat in her chest. The rest of the afternoon passed in a similar rhythm—mundane tasks punctuated by those electric moments of eye contact. Each time she looked his way, he seemed to be already looking back, that same quiet, approving smile playing on his lips. It felt like a secret they were sharing, a silent conversation happening right under everyone's noses.

* * *

Chad leaned against the doorway of Susan's office, his usual spot at the end of the day. By now, it felt natural for him to be there, a rhythm they'd both fallen into. Susan looked up from her desk, her warm smile lighting up the room.

"Just another day," she said with a soft laugh, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

Chad chuckled, his tone easygoing. "You handled it well today. Especially Ned. Honestly, you're a pro at this."

She sighed, rolling her shoulders back and cracking her neck gently. "Yeah, he can we a bit much. But... practice makes perfect, I guess. Still, these long days are starting to get to me."

Chad's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his voice lowering just slightly. "I could help with that, you know. I'm pretty good with back rubs."

Susan's eyes widened, her cheeks flushing as she hesitated. For a brief moment, she seemed to consider it before shaking her head with a nervous laugh. "Oh, Chad, you're sweet, but... that feels a little inappropriate. I mean, I'm your boss, and let's not forget, I could practically be your mother."

He leaned in slightly, his smile growing. "Honestly? You don't look it. If anything, you could pass for someone just a few years older than me."

Her blush deepened, and she let out a soft, self-conscious laugh. "Wow, really? That's... thank you. But seriously, what I *do* need is a little of that—what did you call it before? The Way? I always feel so much lighter after that."

Chad's eyes gleamed with a mix of satisfaction and something more calculated. "It would be my pleasure," he said, his voice smooth, almost too smooth.

The way he said it—*it'd be my pleasure*—felt... off, like there was a weight to the words that made Susan pause. Her brows knitted together for a fleeting moment as a flicker of doubt crossed her mind. *Was this really okay?* she wondered. But then, almost instantly, the memory of how light and free she felt after their sessions washed over her. That blissful calm, the tension melting away—it was irresistible.

She let out a small breath, her shoulders relaxing as she swept the concern aside. *It's fine*, she told herself. *We're not doing anything wrong*. The anticipation of that warm, soothing sensation began to build inside her, making it easy to rationalize. After all, what's the harm?

Chad raised his hand, his fingers starting to trace the familiar patterns in the air, and Susan leaned back slightly, ready to let go.

"This is nice," she murmured, her body relaxing almost immediately, her voice tinged with relief.

Chad counted down from 30, his movements quicker now, more assured. With each session, he'd noticed he didn't need to be as deliberate as before. The process was

becoming smoother, more efficient. And in just moments, Susan's breathing evened out, her eyes glazing over as she slipped into the hypnotic state he'd grown so adept at inducing.

He watched her carefully, a small, knowing smile playing on his lips. *Step by step*, he thought. *Little by little*.

"Susan," he said, his voice a low, soothing murmur. It was the voice he used now, the one that bypassed her conscious thoughts and went straight to the parts of her mind he was rewiring.

Her lips parted slightly. "Yes, Chad?"

"I want you to talk about Ned. What happened earlier. He was yelling at you." He let the statement hang in the air, a stone dropped into the still pond of her trance. "That wasn't very nice, was it?"

A faint line appeared between her brows, the ghost of a remembered irritation. "No," she agreed, her voice dreamy and disconnected. "But I understand. He can't help it."

"Of course, of course, I understand," Chad cooed, his tone drip-fed with false sympathy. "But he was very angry. Very aggressive. How did that make you feel at first? Be honest with me."

He saw her throat work as she swallowed. Her fingers, resting on her knees, twitched. "I was upset," she admitted, the words soft. "It's... annoying."

"Of course it is." He leaned forward, his presence filling her blurred field of vision. "It's only natural to feel that way. It's a human response. Maybe sometimes, when someone is mean, you need to be mean back to them. Like with Ned."

Susan's face scrunched up, a silent internal debate. She nodded, then quickly shook her head. "No. No, he can't help it. I couldn't do that. That's not right." Her programmed morality, her core self, was putting up a fight.

"Okay, okay," he soothed, layering calm compulsion back into his words. He couldn't force it; he had to guide her to convince herself. "But you have to admit that it's not always the case. Maybe sometimes there are people who are mean. People who are cruel. People for whom the only language they speak is the same cruelty they give out. Don't you think?"

He watched the idea take root. Her expression smoothed out, the resistance fading as the new pathway in her mind began to form. "I guess so, yes."

“Sometimes,” he continued, his voice taking on a persuasive, logical rhythm, “when somebody snaps at you, you need to snap right back. You need to put them in their place. You need to yell at them. You need to give them the same meanness that they're giving you. Can you admit that that might be possible? Sometimes?”

Her head gave a slow, gentle bob. “Yes. Sometimes.”

“Okay.” He let the word land with finality. “Good. I want you to keep that in mind. Tuck that thought away for later. Remember, you might be confronted by a situation where you need it. You need to be ready for it. You never know. You don’t want to be a pushover, do you?”

“No,” she breathed. “No pushover.”

“What are you going to be ready for?” he prompted, guiding her to voice the command herself.

“I’m going to be ready to snap at someone,” she recited, her voice gaining a sliver of conviction. “To be mean. But only if they deserve it.”

“Yes. Of course.” Chad’s smile was triumphant. He let the silence stretch for a moment, letting the new directive settle into the fertile soil of her subconscious. It was a small thing, a seemingly minor adjustment. But it was another brick in the wall.

He decided to press a little further, to test the permeability of her suggestible state. He shifted his weight, the floorboard creaking softly beneath him. The sound seemed abnormally loud in the hush of the room.

“Susan,” he murmured, his voice a velvet caress in the stillness. “Did you think about me today?”

Her response was immediate, a soft, breathy whisper. “Yes.”

“What, pray tell, were you thinking about?” he prompted, leaning forward to better watch the micro-expressions flit across her tranquil face.

“Just thinking about how...” She paused, her brow furrowing the tiniest amount as if straining against a truth she was reluctant to release. Then, her features smoothed out, the resistance melting under the weight of his suggestion. “...about how attractive you are.”

A thrill, sharp and electric, shot through him. *Oh, this is good.* He kept his own voice carefully neutral, a gentle, curious probe. “Oh, my. That’s nice of you to say. And is it true? Am I attractive?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed, her voice gaining a sliver of earnest warmth. “Very, very attractive.”

He shifted his weight, the movement deliberate. “And did you do anything when you were thinking about how attractive I am? When you were by yourself, maybe?”

He saw her chest still. For a long moment, she didn’t breathe, a internal war between her natural modesty and the compulsive honesty he demanded. A soft, slow exhalation finally escaped her lips. “I, well... I almost did.”

“Almost did what, Susan?” he coaxed, his tone implying it was the most natural question in the world.

“I was just sitting on my bed,” she confessed, her words coming easier now, as if a dam had broken. “Just thinking about how gorgeous you are. My hands... they were moving over my body. It was nice. And then my son knocked on the door.”

Chad brought his hand to his chin, stroking it thoughtfully, “Hmm, interesting. Did you *want* to touch yourself while thinking about me?”

The conflict returned, tightening the skin around her eyes. “I... I mean, I don’t know. I guess. It’s... I mean, you’re attractive, but I don’t think I could have gone through with it.”

“Why not?” The question was soft, devoid of judgment.

“It’s wrong,” she stated, a fragment of her old self asserting itself. “It’s just wrong.”

He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to an intimate, logical whisper. “I mean, is it, Susan? Is it really? No one’s being harmed. No lines are being crossed. It’s just inside your head. It’s in your mind.” He let the idea hang between them for a beat. “Susan, it’s just a fantasy. Is a fantasy wrong if no one gets affected? If no one gets hurt?”

He watched her process this, the internal debate clear on her placid face. The concept was simple, reasonable. It was the perfect rationalization. Her shoulders relaxed infinitesimally. “No,” she said, her voice firmer now. “I guess not. No, there’s nothing wrong with a fantasy.”

“So,” he continued, seamlessly guiding her, “just thinking about it, admitting to yourself how you feel when you think about me, my fit body... how *do* you feel?”

A delicate pink blush crept up her neck. “I feel... horny.” The word, spoken in her gentle, trance-slurred voice, was incredibly potent.

“Yes,” he affirmed, layering his voice with approval. “And that’s okay. That’s perfectly okay. Let’s be honest with ourselves. When you think about me and my body, how attractive I am... if you fantasize about me, being naked perhaps... what does that make you feel? What is your body *doing*?”

Her thighs pressed together under her jeans, a subtle, telling shift. Her hands, resting on her knees, twitched. "I feel so horny. So horny. My pussy throbs." The clinical, raw word sounded both foreign and deeply right coming from her.

"Yes," he soothed, his own body responding to her unabashed confession. "And these are just *fantasies*. It's okay. Just hot, sexy fantasies. There's no one here to judge you. Just you and your thoughts."

As if giving her body permission, her hands began to move, sliding slowly up her own thighs, a faint, restless motion. Her breathing hitched, becoming slightly shallower.

"That's right," he murmured, his eyes glued to the hypnotic movement of her hands. "They're just fantasies. So there's nothing wrong with letting those fantasies roll through your day, is there? Letting them sink into your thoughts, all day long."

"All day long," she echoed, her voice a dreamy sigh.

"Yes. Letting them make you feel good. Letting them make you feel alive. Letting them make you feel *horny*. It's a gift you can give yourself. A little secret between you and your own mind. And it's all because of me, isn't it? My face, my body, my voice... they just trigger these wonderful, *horny* feelings in you."

"Yes," she whispered, a soft, needy sound. Her fingers curled, gripping the fabric of her jeans.

"And that's a good thing, Susan. A very good thing. It means you're alive. It means you're a woman with needs and desires. And it's *okay* to have them. It's *okay* to enjoy them. You don't have to feel any shame over fantasies. Not ever. The only thing you should feel is... *aroused*."

Chad leaned back slightly and counted back from ten, his voice soft but firm. "...3, 2, 1. Okay, Susan?"

Susan let out a breathy moan as her eyelids fluttered open, her lips curling into a faint smile. "Are we done?" she asked, her voice still carrying a hint of the trance-induced haze.

"Yes, for now," Chad replied, his tone casual yet deliberate.

"Good," Susan said, smoothing her hands over her thighs as she shifted in the chair. "I should be getting home. Thank you, Chad." She began to rise, her movements slow and deliberate, but Chad interrupted her with a seemingly innocuous request.

"Hey, before you go," he said, his voice light, "can I borrow that binder on the shelf behind you?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Susan replied, settling back into the chair as she turned slightly to glance at the shelf.

Chad stepped closer, his tall frame looming over her as he reached up toward the high shelf. The binder was just out of easy reach, so he stretched onto his tippy-toes, his body pressing lightly against the side of the chair. As he did, he subtly—almost imperceptibly—thrust his crotch forward, bringing it within mere inches of Susan's face.

Susan's eyes widened, her gaze inadvertently drawn to the closeness of his crotch. She could swear she caught a faint scent, something sweet and masculine, emanating from him. Her mind raced, her imagination firing as she stared at the bulge in his pants. She pictured what lay beneath—his naked hips, his cock, fully erect and throbbing. In her mind, it was big, easily ten inches, thick and demanding. The thought made her lick her lips unconsciously.

Her hands drifted down to her thighs, her fingers gripping the fabric of her jeans as her breathing grew heavier. She tilted her head ever so slightly, drawn in by the proximity, her thoughts spiraling into a forbidden fantasy. But just as she leaned in, Chad found the binder, pulling it down from the shelf with a triumphant smile.

"There it is," he said casually, stepping back and breaking the tension. Susan shook her head slightly, as if clearing her thoughts, and gave him an awkward smile.

"Anyways," Chad continued, his tone as casual as ever, "thanks, Susan. I guess I'll see you tomorrow." He turned and walked toward the door, binder in hand.

Susan watched him go, her eyes lingering on his retreating form, her mind still tangled in the heat of the moment. She needed to get home... quickly.

The game controller felt like an extension of his will, the digital carnage onscreen a satisfying symphony of his own making. Headshot after headshot, each kill a tiny, meaningless victory that fed the hungry thing inside him. Chad didn't just win; he owned.

The heavy tread of footsteps on the carpet behind him didn't break his concentration. He knew who it was.

"Hey, Chad, can I, uh, can I say something?"

Chad's thumbs moved with a final, brutal flick, securing one last kill before he punched the pause button. The screen froze on a spray of pixelated blood. He took his time, turning around to face the interruption. Dave stood there, shoulders slightly hunched, his rough, calloused hands fidgeting.

Normally, Chad would have let him stew in silence, but today was different. He could feel it. He'd been expecting this. "Yes, Dave. What is it?"

Dave's eyes darted around the room, anywhere but at Chad. "Hey, I just want to say I'm just really sorry about how I've been treating you and, uh, just being kind of disrespectful to you and you, uh, it's not what you deserve and, um, I just want to say that, um, I'm, uh, I'm owning it and I am going to correct my, uh, my attitude and, um, yeah, and that's it. I just wanted to, I just wanted to let you know that, Chad."

The words were halting, scripted yet utterly sincere. A perfect, groveling little speech. Chad let the silence hang for a beat, two beats, watching the older man sweat. He smiled, a slow, easy curl of his lips that didn't reach his eyes. "Ok. You can leave now, Dave."

Dave blinked, his face flushing a deep red. "Oh, um, okay, yeah, um, I'll see you later." He turned on his heel, a marionette with cut strings, and shuffled awkwardly toward the stairs, his confusion a palpable cloud around him.

From the corner of his eye, Chad had seen her. A shadow in the kitchen doorway. Now, she moved.

Barbara glided into the living room, and it was a different kind of movement entirely. Her hips swayed in a slow, hypnotic rhythm, left and right, a pendulum of intent. Her hands didn't just hang at her sides; they drifted up her own waist, then smoothed down over the

curve of her hips, a constant, unconscious caress of her own body. She wasn't walking; she was floating on a current of her own making, her breath coming in soft, audible sighs. Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips.

"I did it for you, baby." Her voice was a throaty whisper, laden with a pride that was almost sexual. "I learned how to do it from that website, The Way."

Chad just watched. *I should feel guilty*, he thought. *For doing what he was doing to her*. His own mother. But he didn't; he felt pride. Raw pride.

"It took me all night, but I did it." She was close now, leaning over the back of the couch, her perfume enveloping him. "And then I woke him up this morning, Dave, and I told him that I needed to show him something." A low, wicked chuckle escaped her. "I mean, I kind of already have him wrapped around my finger. Let's be honest. Once I put out, he basically gave me all this. Why do you think I married him?" She paused, looking around the room, indicating the whole house with a wave of her hand.

"But, baby," she continued, snapping her attention back to Chad. "I put him *under*. Hypnosis. I preyed on his fears of being inferior, not being a real man. I put him down a peg or two. I told him maybe he should treat you a little better."

Her hand came up, fingers tracing the line of Chad's jaw. "And, baby, I saw it in his eyes. I saw him *click*." She shuddered, a full-body tremor of ecstasy. "Oh, it made my pussy throb, Chad. And I did it for you."

The raw, vulgar word in his mother's mouth sent a jolt straight through him. She was leaning closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "But I'm sorry, I couldn't go much farther, though, baby. He's not finished." Her eyes narrowed, a predator's gaze. "Oh, baby, when I'm finished with him, he's going to be a pathetic little fucking worm. He'll be your dog. Or... whatever you want."

The image was vivid, wickedly perfect. Chad reached up and cupped her cheek, a gesture of possession. "Good girl, Mom." His voice was rough with approval. "Here, come give me a kiss."

Barbara moaned, a sound of pure want, and leaned over the couch. Her kiss was wet and sloppy, hungry, her tongue roaming his mouth. The weight of her breasts pressed against the top of his head, soft and warm through the thin fabric of her shirt. He reached up, his hand groping one, squeezing the ample flesh. It was a good handful, solid. But not ideal, in his opinion.

He broke the kiss, " Mom, I need to do something for me tomorrow. A little mission."

“Of course, honey.”

He looked at her tits and ass with a critical, appraising eye. “Hey, Mom,” he said, changing the subject, his tone was casual, almost offhand. “What, uh, what do you think about plastic surgery?”

Barbara’s breath caught. Her eyes, still glazed with the aftermath of the kiss and her own victory, widened slightly. She looked down at her chest, then back at him, cocking an eyebrow.

“Make an appointment.”

* * *

The cool morning air did little to soothe the heat radiating from Susan’s skin. She peeled the damp sheet away from her body, a faint, musky scent lingering in the air.

A small, dark wet patch stained the fabric between her legs, and she was sweating... a lot. She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. No fever. Just a low, simmering warmth that had nothing to do with illness and everything to do with her dreams in the night, images still flickering behind her eyes. They were about Chad. All of them, about Chad. One of them, he’d been in her kitchen, his powerful body bending her over the cold granite island. The memory was so visceral she could almost feel the hard press of the counter against her hips, the phantom sting of his palm slapping her ass. *He’d been fucking me while I tried to cook for him*, she thought, a fresh wave of warmth flooding her core. *His big, thick cock...*

Shaking her head, she stumbled out of bed and into the shower, letting the water wash away the physical evidence but doing nothing for the need coiling tight in her belly. Dressed in soft sweats and a t-shirt, she padded into the kitchen. She poured cereal and tried to focus on her phone. The morning news articles were a blur of meaningless words.

Her gaze drifted to the island. The polished granite seemed to shimmer, transforming into a stage for her private theater. She could see it all so clearly now. In her dream, she wasn’t just being taken; she was being *claimed*. Her spoon clattered into the bowl as she closed her eyes, giving in to the fantasy fully.

He's behind me, his heat searing through my clothes. His hands are on my hips, pulling me back onto him. I can feel every inch of him, so hard and demanding. I'm trying to stir the cookie dough, but my arm is weak, useless. All I can do is feel. He pulls out, and the cool air teases my wetness, making me gasp. The tip of his cock is slick with me, and he rubs it against my swollen lips, teasing, before driving back into me with a force that makes my teeth rattle. The sound... God, the sound of our bodies slapping together echoes right here in this room.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Her breathing was shallow now, coming in little pants. Without conscious thought, her right hand slipped beneath the waistband of her sweatpants, her fingers finding the soaked fabric of her panties beneath. She was dripping, an absolute mess... for him.

He's pulling my hair, wrapping it around his fist, using it to guide my movements. His other hand gropes my breast, pinching my nipple through my shirt until it's a hard peak. He's fucking me so good, so deep, filling me up completely.

Her fingers pushed the panties aside, finding her clit. It was swollen, throbbing with a frantic pulse. She circled it slowly at first, then faster, mirroring the rhythm of her imaginary violation.

A tiny, rational voice tried to pipe up. *This is wrong. You're in the kitchen. James could walk in.* But the voice was smothered by a much stronger, more reasonable one. *It's just a fantasy. No one is getting hurt. It's okay to feel good. It's okay to feel horny.* It felt true, and it allowed her to continue doing what she was doing, so she clung to it.

She was his girl, touching herself because he made her feel this way... so good. Her hips began to rock against her own hand, her fingers working her clit in frantic circles while two others slid inside her, fucking herself in time with the phantom thrusts in her mind. *Oh God, oh God, he's so big. It feels so good. I'm gonna cum. I'm gonna cum all over his cock.*

Her head fell back, her mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure. The orgasm was close, a terrifying, glorious pressure about to shatter her into a million pieces. She was right on the edge, her entire body tensed, her toes curling inside her socks.

"Hey mom, are you in there?"

The voice sliced through the fantasy like a shard of ice. James.

Susan's eyes flew open. She yanked her hand from her pants as if burned, a fresh wave of slickness coating her fingers. She fumbled, pulling up her sweatpants, wiping her hand frantically on her pants. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drum of panic and

shame. She grabbed her spoon, shoved a too-large bite of soggy cereal into her mouth, and tried to look casual.

“Mom?” He was in the doorway now, looking at her with that familiar, slightly confused expression.

She swallowed the tasteless mush, her voice coming out sharper than she intended. “Can you please not just bolt in here? I mean, it’s a bit much.”

He blinked. “It’s the kitchen. What else am I supposed to do?”

“I’m just saying, just... *please*.” The defensiveness was a shield, flimsy and transparent. She felt a stab of guilt, sharp and unwelcome. She was the one masturbating in the common area; he was just getting breakfast. But the irritation, the need to snap, felt justified in the moment. *He deserves it for interrupting*, a new, foreign part of her hissed. She pushed the bowl away, her appetite gone, replaced by a throbbing, unfulfilled ache.

She kept her eyes fixed on the table, but they kept darting back to the island. The granite was just granite again. But the memory of the fantasy, the ghost of the pleasure, clung to the air like a perfume. Her body still hummed with it, desperate for the climax that was stolen.

* * *

The final bell’s ring was a distant echo, a dismissal James barely registered. He remained in his seat, the professor’s words looping in his mind.

He finally stood, his movements slow and robotic, and strapped his backpack over his shoulders. The classroom was empty now.

“James?”

He turned. Dr. Evans stood by his desk, stacking papers. The professor’s usual warm, slightly distracted demeanor was gone, replaced by a stiff formality.

“Yeah? What is it?” James asked, his voice tighter than he intended.

Dr. Evans gestured for him to come closer. James complied.

"I'm just, um..." The professor began, not quite meeting James's eyes. He adjusted his glasses. "You know, I just wanted to talk to you about some of your papers recently."

A cold knot tightened in James's stomach. "Okay."

"Now, I know you're really focusing on your grade. You're targeting that scholarship for Harvard, right?"

James nodded, a flicker of hope igniting. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"Well, I just... I can't put my finger on it," Dr. Evans said, his gaze drifting to the window, "but I have this feeling that you're not putting your heart into it." He finally looked at James.

"Some of these papers... they don't feel like your caliber of work. They lack... conviction."

"But I studied for twelve hours for the last one," James protested, the words tumbling out. "I knew every concept backward and forward."

"Knowing and executing are two different things," the professor replied, his tone unnervingly sympathetic. It felt like a mask. "I have to say, I haven't given it back to you yet, but this last one you just turned in... well, frankly, I gave it a D."

"*What?*" The word was a puff of air, all the breath punched from his lungs.

Dr. Evans nodded, a quick, brittle motion. "The thesis was weak. The analysis, superficial. It's just not up to snuff, James. I'd like to see you kick it into gear, okay? Maybe get back on the horse and do some *good* work for me from now on."

James could only stare, his mind reeling. This wasn't right. None of it was right. "Oh... okay," he muttered, the response utterly inadequate.

"Oh, and one more thing," Dr. Evans added, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial register that felt entirely wrong coming from him. He leaned in slightly. "There's been some rumors. About a cheating circuit in this class."

James's confusion deepened. "A what?"

"I'm not saying it has anything to do with you," the professor said quickly, holding up a hand. The gesture felt rehearsed. "Of course not. But I just... I'm going to keep my eye out. I've heard from a very reliable source that it's happening. I'm on the case. So I just want you to be careful, okay? Stay above the fray."

The entire conversation was sliding into the surreal. *A reliable source?* "Okay, well, I mean... that's not me," James said, his voice firmer now, a defense against the bizarre accusation. "I don't need to cheat. To be frank."

“Yeah, of course, James. Of course.” Dr. Evans offered a thin, lifeless smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “All right. I’ll see you later.”

Dismissed. James turned and walked out, his legs moving on autopilot. The hallway was a blur of retreating students, their laughter and chatter a distant hum. His mind was a riot of dissonant facts.

He was almost to the main door when he stopped, a final question surfacing through the fog of his bewilderment. He turned back to Dr. Evans.

“Professor?”

The man looked up, “Yes, James?”

“Where is Chad?” The question felt important, though he couldn’t articulate why. “He hasn’t been in class for a few days.”

Dr. Evans’s expression shifted, a flicker of something unreadable—annoyance?—crossing his features before the neutral mask slipped back into place. “Chad? Oh. He has a family emergency. His mother called in.”

The answer was so mundane, so perfectly reasonable, that it should have settled things. But it didn’t.

“Oh. Ok,” James said lamely.

The steering wheel was slick under Susan’s palms. Each stoplight on the drive to work was a personal affront, a stolen moment where her mind, traitorous and hungry, would wander. It wasn’t just a thought anymore; it was a constant, humming static in the background of everything she did.

At the red light by the old pharmacy, she glanced at the alleyway beside it, the dumpsters shadowed and private. *What would it be like if he fucked me there?* The thought wasn’t a question. It was a memory she hadn’t lived yet. She could almost feel the rough brick against her cheek, the hard press of his body pinning her, the thrilling fear of being caught warring with the desperate need to be taken.

She shook her head, gripping the wheel tighter. The light turned green. She accelerated, a little too fast.

At the next intersection, a construction crew was repairing a hydrant. One of the workers, shirtless and gleaming with sweat under the morning sun, hefted a jackhammer. Her eyes locked onto the powerful muscles in his back, the bunch and release of his shoulders. But it wasn't the worker she saw. It was Chad. *What would it be like if he bent me over and fucked me there?* Right there on the warm asphalt, with an audience of cat-calling laborers. The idea should have horrified her. It made her thighs squeeze together, a fresh pulse of heat blooming low in her pussy.

This is a problem, she thought, her knuckles white on the wheel. *But he's so fucking hot.* The crude language felt foreign and exhilarating in her own mind. It felt... right.

A flash of movement in the rearview mirror. She adjusted it, her eyes flicking up. For a heart-stopping second, he was there. Chad. In her backseat. Naked. His muscular torso was bronzed and perfect, one hand lazily stroking his thick, erect cock. His eyes, those piercing, confident eyes, locked onto hers in the reflection. He wasn't smiling. His expression was one of intense, possessive focus, watching her watch him.

She gasped, her foot jamming on the brake a fraction too hard, causing the car to lurch. She snapped her head around to look into the actual backseat.

Empty. Just her gym bag and a crumpled grocery bag.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She was seeing things. The lack of release, the constant, simmering arousal was making her hallucinate. She took a deep, shuddering breath and focused on the road, on the familiar turn into the community center's parking lot. She just needed to get to her office, to her desk, to something normal.

But normal was rapidly evaporating. Every open space was taken. Volunteers, delivery trucks, clients—the lot was chaos. She circled once, twice, her frustration mounting with each pass. Finally, she spotted it—a reserved spot near the side entrance was free. Relief washed over her. A small piece of order in the madness.

She signaled and began to angle her car into the space.

A sleek, black sedan shot out of nowhere, cutting sharply in front of her and sliding neatly into her spot. The car stopped, its brake lights glowing like two triumphant red eyes.

Susan froze, her car idling in the middle of the lane. She stared, incredulous. *Did that just happen?* The driver's door of the sedan opened, and a woman with a severe blonde bob

and a sharp pantsuit got out. She didn't even look at Susan. She just started walking toward the building.

A hot, disbelieving laugh escaped Susan's lips. She rolled down her window. "Excuse me!" she called out, her voice tight. "That's my spot!"

The woman stopped, turned slowly, and looked at Susan as if she were a mildly interesting insect. She raised her hand, her middle finger extending in a crisp, deliberate gesture.

The audacity. The sheer, unmitigated gall. Susan felt a flush of anger heat her neck. She mimed an exasperated gesture, pointing at the 'RESERVED' sign, then pointing at herself, then making a shooing motion with her hand. *This is mine. Move.*

The woman's expression twisted from indifference to outright contempt. She strode back to Susan's car, her heels clicking. She leaned down, her face inches from Susan's.

"Fuck you, lady," the woman spat, her voice venomous. "Who the fuck do you think you are? Stupid bitch."

Susan recoiled, stunned. The words were so harsh, so unnecessarily vicious. She was just trying to park. Confusion warred with a rising tide of indignation. It felt targeted, personal, as if this woman had been waiting for her.

"What are you, stupid?" the woman continued, her voice dripping with scorn. "Look at you. You're all stupid. You stupid bitch. Stupid. How dumb are you? Look at you sitting in that car."

Susan's grip on the wheel tightened until her fingers ached. Something was boiling up inside her, a pressure cooker reaching its limit. Her breath came in short, sharp pants. This wasn't just about a parking spot anymore. This was an attack. A little voice, calm and familiar, surfaced through the rage. It sounded like... it sounded like Chad's voice.

Sometimes you need to snap at someone for being mean. The words echoed, clear as day. Sometimes mean people only know one language. You have to put them in their place. You have to be mean right back at them. Sometimes... it feels good.

The truth of it clicked into place. This woman was mean. She only understood one language.

The pressure cooker exploded.

Susan didn't think. She screamed, a raw, guttural sound of pure fury, and shoved her car door open. It slammed into the woman, who stumbled back with a surprised grunt. Susan

was on her in an instant, getting right in her face, her finger jabbing the air an inch from the woman's nose.

"Listen, you stupid fucking cunt!" Susan roared, her voice unlike anything she'd ever heard from herself. "This is my spot! You see that? It says reserved. You fucking idiot. Reserved. That's for me!"

The woman's eyes widened, her aggressive posture faltering under the onslaught.

"You see that place?" Susan jabbed her finger toward the community center. "I work there. I run it. Those people in there, they're under me. They do what I say. You want me to get one of them to come out here and beat the fucking shit out of you, huh?" She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a venomous whisper. "I'll punch the tits right off your body, you stupid cunt. I will fucking ruin you, you idiot."

Susan stopped, chest heaving, surprised by the vile words pouring from her mouth. But more surprising was the change in the other woman. Her face, twisted in anger just seconds before, had completely melted. The aggression was gone, replaced by a look of profound, cringing submission. Her shoulders hunched, her head bowed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, ma'am," the woman whispered, her voice trembling. "I'm so sorry. You're right. You're absolutely right. I was in the wrong. I was completely in the wrong."

She was practically kneeling. The transformation was instantaneous and absolute.

Susan looked down at her, the rush of adrenaline still singing in her veins. The anger was gone, replaced by a different, warmer, more potent feeling. Power. A thrilling, addictive pulse of having dominated, of having put someone in their place. It felt... *incredible*.

The woman scurried back to her car, still muttering apologies. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." She got in, gave a meek, apologetic wave through the windshield, and reversed out of the spot before speeding away.

Susan stood there for a moment, her heart still pounding, a slow, incredulous chuckle bubbling up in her throat. *Okay, then*. She felt electric, alive. She got back in her car, parked perfectly in her spot, and walked toward the building, her head held high.

She didn't see the black sedan slow to a stop just down the street. She didn't see the passenger window glide down. And she didn't see Chad, watching it all from across the street, a triumphant, wolfish grin on his face as he waved at the driver—at the woman with the severe blonde bob.

His mother, Barbara, smirked back at him, giving a quick thumbs-up before driving off, proud of her performance.

The air in Susan's office was still, thick with the tension that had been building between them all evening. She sat at her desk, acutely aware of Chad's presence just a few feet away. Every shift of his weight in his chair, every quiet breath, was a seismic event that was impossible to ignore.

She'd been trying to focus on the quarterly budget report for the last twenty minutes, but the numbers blurred into meaningless shapes. Instead, her mind kept replaying the morning's fantasy in the kitchen, the phantom sensation of his hands on her hips. Her gaze kept drifting from the spreadsheet to him. The way his t-shirt stretched across his chest, the confident set of his jaw, the knowing glint in his eyes that suggested he could see every single one of her lurid thoughts.

He could. Of course he could.

Chad's voice cut through her internal reverie, smooth and calm. "So what was going on outside? Right before you got here, there was some yelling."

Susan blinked, pulled abruptly from a particularly vivid image of his mouth on her neck. "Oh," she said, her voice a little too airy. She cleared her throat. "Just some bitch. She was, I don't know. She went off on me over a parking spot."

She watched him. His expression remained placid, interested.

"And I guess I sort of put her in her place," she finished, a thread of pride weaving through her confession.

"Wow, that's pretty impressive."

A flicker of something—guilt? uncertainty?—made her demur. "I don't know. I might have gotten a little overboard."

Chad simply shrugged, a small, dismissive movement of his powerful shoulders. *It was nothing*, the gesture said. *Maybe you were in the right.*

"Well, shall we?" Chad said, holding up his finger.

The transition was seamless. This was their new ritual, their private, illicit meeting after hours. Susan nodded, a thrill shooting through her.

“Yep, I’m ready.” She took a deep, settling breath, letting it out slowly, and positioned herself in her chair, back straight, hands resting on her knees. The posture of a willing student.

Chad didn’t bother with the long, drawn-out induction anymore. He was a master of his craft now, efficient and precise. He moved his fingers in a gentle, swirling pattern in front of her face, a silver ring on his finger catching the light. His voice dropped into that low, mesmerizing cadence that bypassed all her rational thought.

“Twenty...” he began, and her eyes locked onto his moving fingers. “Nineteen... eighteen... sinking down so easily now... seventeen... sixteen...”

He counted down steadily, his voice a hypnotic drone that washed over her. By the time he reached *one*, the tension had melted from her shoulders. Her breathing was deep and even. Her eyes were half-lidded, gazing at nothing, seeing everything he wanted her to see.

“Susan?”

“Yes, Chad,” she murmured, her voice distant and dreamy.

“Did you think about me today? Did you fantasize about me?”

A soft, blissful smile touched her lips. “All day. All night.” The confession came without hesitation, without shame. It was just a fact. “And I... I touched myself.” The words were so blunt, so honest, that Chad’s eyebrows lifted in genuine surprise. She said it with a casualness that was utterly captivating.

“I dreamed about you all last night. I think I came in my sleep.” Her brow furrowed slightly.

“But all day, I kept imagining you. But it... but it, it was frustrating.”

“Why was it frustrating?” he asked, leaning forward slightly. The scent of his cologne, something clean and musky, drifted toward her.

“Because I couldn’t find release. I just kept picturing your sexy body. Picturing the fucking. But it just kept building. It made me so frustrated.” A faint whine of genuine distress colored her tone.

Chad’s voice was the epitome of reason, a soothing balm. “Well, then you should find your release then. I think maybe when you have these fantasies, and there’s nothing wrong with them, we both can agree...”

“Nothing wrong with them,” she repeated, the suggestion settling into her mind like a dropped stone in a still pond.

“...so when you have these fantasies, I think you should touch yourself. Let yourself cum, when picturing me, fucking you.”

“Yes.” Her breath hitched. *“I need to cum. I need to cum thinking of you... fucking my pussy.”*

“That’s right. It’s perfectly natural.” He let the words hang in the air for a moment. “You might have to do it multiple times a day. But you’ll find that you’ll be less frustrated, less pent up.”

“Yes. Multiple times a day.” The idea wasn’t a perversion; it was a prescription. A solution. She could feel the rightness of it easing a tension deep within her.

He shifted gears, his voice taking on a new, curious tone. “Also, before work, when you were yelling at that woman, and you were cussing her out, be honest. How did that make you feel? Did it make you feel strong, confident, powerful?”

The memory of the confrontation flooded back, but now it was filtered through his perspective. The fear and shock were gone, leaving only the raw, potent aftermath. “Yeah.”

“It made you feel good, huh?”

“Yes.”

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but...” A fragment of her old self tried to protest. “It was so... it was so mean.”

“Maybe, but...” he countered, his logic unassailable. “Did it fix the situation? What happened with the lady?”

“She apologized. She said, sorry. She moved. Let me through.”

“That’s right. So it solved your problem. It felt good, and it solved your problem.”

She turned the thought over in her hazy mind. “It felt good, and it solved my problem.”

“Yes.” His affirmation was firm. “So it leads me to believe that maybe snapping at people, being a little cruel and mean... it’s good. It feels good. It makes you feel strong, powerful. And it fixes your problems.”

“I guess it did, huh?” she conceded, the conviction solidifying.

“Say it. Being mean, being cruel, fixes my problems and makes me feel good.”

“Being mean, being cruel, fixes my problems and makes me feel good.”

“That’s right.” He leaned back, a sculptor admiring his work. “I want you to think it before you go to bed. As a matter of fact, imagine me, naked, saying it with you. Being mean makes you feel good. Over and over.”

“Yessssss,” she whispered, the word a sigh of complete submission.

* * *

The late afternoon sun cast long, lazy shadows across the backyard. Chad lounged in a weathered Adirondack chair, on his phone, reading from a fetish site that dealt entirely in mind-control stories. A slow smile touched his lips. *This could work. This could definitely work.*

The sliding glass door rasped open. Dave, his stepfather, shuffled out with a plate balanced carefully in his rough, calloused hands. “There you go, Chad. I made you some sandwiches.”

Chad didn’t look up from his phone. He gave a dismissive wave, his focus absolute. He heard the soft *clink* of the plate being set on the small table beside him and the sound of Dave’s retreating footsteps. The door slid shut again. Silence, save for the distant buzz of a lawnmower.

He took a bite of a sandwich, barely tasting it. His mind was elsewhere, weaving new patterns of control.

A few minutes later, the door opened again. This time, the steps were lighter, more deliberate. Barbara. She moved toward him, her posture a mix of eagerness and nervous energy.

“I did it,” she announced, her voice a little too bright. “I made the appointments.”

Chad finally lowered his phone, turning his head to look at her. Her expression was hopeful, seeking his approval. “Did you?” he asked, his tone flat, making her work for it. “And... for what?”

She took a sharp breath, listing them off like a grocery list. “For my tits. Implants. For my ass. My lips. A nose job.” She paused, a flicker of something—uncertainty?—in her eyes

before she pushed on. “I’m going to get rid of two ribs to make my waist thinner. And a tattoo across my ass saying ‘property of Chad’.”

He held her gaze, his own expression unreadable. “Good.” The single word was a benediction. She visibly relaxed. But he wasn’t finished. “Now, frankly, I don’t want to see you when you’re recuperating from that many surgeries. You’ll probably look all gross.” He saw her flinch, just slightly. “So, I want you to heal up and then return here when you’re finished. Find a hotel.”

Barbara nodded, but the worry he’d seen a moment ago returned, etching lines around her mouth. “Chad, baby,” she began, her voice softening into a plea. “Even though I trust you... I trust you so much, because I love you so so much... are you sure all of this is necessary?”

Chad was on his feet in one fluid, powerful motion, looming over her. “*Shut up,*” he yelled, the force of it making her take a step back.

He thought to himself, the realization cold and analytical. *She’s not completely under my control. Not yet. There’s still a thread of her left. Well, I guess I’ll have to use this.*

He held up a single finger, a universal command for *stay*. She froze, her eyes wide. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small, unmarked USB drive, and held it out to her.

“Every night, and every morning, while you’re staying in your hotel and healing, I want you to watch this. Okay?”

“Okay, Chad,” she whispered, her hand trembling slightly as she took the drive from him.

He looked down at her, “As a matter of fact, why don’t you go start now? Grab your laptop and watch it in your room, okay? Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, sweetie,” she said, her voice faint. She turned, clutching the USB drive like a holy relic, and disappeared into the house.

Barbara walked to her room, the drive a cold, hard weight in her palm. She closed the door and sat on the edge of her bed, her expensive laptop already open and waiting. Her heart was pounding for reasons she couldn’t name. With a deep breath, she inserted the drive.

A single file appeared on the screen. She double-clicked.

The video resolved into a familiar image. Chad. He was sitting in what looked like his room, staring directly into the camera. He looked serious, intense. He held up his hand, his fingers beginning their now-familiar, mesmerizing dance.

His voice came through the laptop speakers, clear and resonant, that same hypnotic tone he used on her in person. “*Thirty...*”

Her breathing began to slow almost immediately, her eyes locking onto the screen.

"Twenty-nine... twenty-eight... sinking down so easily for me..."

She felt the familiar, welcome pull, the quieting of her own thoughts. The doubts, the worries about the surgeries, the faint echo of her former self—they all began to recede, replaced by the smooth, blanketing sound of his voice.

He counted down, steady and inevitable. With each number, she felt herself slipping deeper, her body going lax, her head lolling slightly. When he reached "...one," she was completely under. Her body was a vessel, empty and waiting.

On the screen, Chad's image spoke. His voice was flat, absolute, leaving no room for question.

"Mother, listen very, very carefully. You are a slave."

Her lips moved, her own voice a dull monotone. "I am a slave."

"You are my slave."

"I am your slave."

"I am your slave."

"You would do anything for me."

"I would do anything for you."

"You would kill for me."

There was the faintest hesitation, a last, ghostly spark of resistance that was instantly smothered by the weight of his command. "I would kill for you."

"I am your master."

This time, she didn't pause. The words were just facts, imprinted on her emptied mind.

"You are my master."

"You exist only to please me."

"I exist only to please you."

The video ended. A moment of black screen. Then, it started again from the beginning.

"Mother, listen very, very carefully. You are a-"

Barbara sat perfectly still, her eyes wide and unblinking, fixed on the screen. The loop continued. Again. And again. The words, his will, washing over her, sinking in deeper with each repetition. They carved new permanent channels in her mind, erasing the old ones... forever.

* * *

The bathroom was a steam-filled chamber of Susan's transgression. Panting, she leaned against the cool porcelain sink, her reflection a flushed, well-fucked ghost in the foggy mirror. *Fuck me, Chad. Oh, yeah. Oh, fucking pound my pussy.* The raw, desperate words still echoed in the tiled room, a stark contrast to the suburban silence of the empty house.

This had been the third time today, the third explosive release fueled by her fantasy. Each climax was harder, wetter than the last. This particular script had been her favorite yet: Chad, breaking in, ignoring her feeble protests, taking charge with that brutal confidence she craved from a real man. Him bending her over right here, *making* her watch in the mirror as he claimed her. Her fingers had worked furiously, trying to mimic the punishing rhythm of his hips, the sharp slap of flesh on flesh she imagined so vividly.

And it had worked. God, had it worked.

"Fuck yes! Chaaaaaaaaaaaaaad!"

A gush of release had left her trembling, slickness dripping down her inner thigh onto the clean bathroom floor. The evidence of her pleasure was a small, shimmering puddle.

She caught her own gaze in the mirror. A flicker of guilt tried to surface—the part of her that was still a mother, a counselor, a rational adult. But it was a weak thing now, easily dismissed. Chad's voice, smooth and logical from their session, washed over the thought before it could take root. *It's perfectly natural... You'll be less frustrated, less pent up.*

She dabbed at the floor with a wad of toilet paper, her movements languid and satisfied. *He's right*, she thought, the justification coming as easily as breathing. *It's just fantasies. I need this.* A year without a man's touch was a long time. This wasn't shameful; it was self-care. A necessary outlet. *It's not like I'm hurting anyone. No one needs to know.*

But she was a mess again. The thought was almost giddy. Cleanup required a second shower.

The spray was hot and Needling. It pounded against her skin, reviving the sensitivity he'd just wrung out of her. She let her hands glide over her body, slick with soap and water. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tight and aching. Her mind, blissfully empty of anything but sensation, began to drift back to him. It was a reflex now, a well-worn path.

She pictured him here, in the shower with her. The glass door sliding open. Steam curling around his muscular frame. That dominant look in his eyes.

"Not in here, Chad. Not in the shower! Mmmmmm."

She imagined him pushing her against the wet tile, his mouth finding hers, his hands roaming possessively over her soap-slick skin. The water would cascade over them both as he—

A sound.

It was faint, distant. A thud? Maybe the house settling. Or was it the front door?

Susan's eyes snapped open. Her hands stilled. The fantasy evaporated, leaving her starkly alone in the rushing water. *It's nothing*, she told herself, trying to sink back into the warmth, back into the delicious, filthy daydream.

But the spell was broken. Her ears were now straining, listening past the drumbeat of the shower for any other sign she wasn't alone. Her heart, which had been slowing to a contented rhythm, began to pick up a different, more anxious pace.

"Mom?"

The voice was muffled by the water and the door, but unmistakable. James. He was home.

A jolt, cold and sharp, went through her. The serene, post-orgasmic confidence vanished, replaced by a flash of pure panic. *Did he hear me? Oh, god, did he hear?* The image of herself, moments ago, screaming Chad's name into the empty house, suddenly seemed recklessly loud. Audible. *Stupid.*

She fumbled for the faucet, turning off the water with a harsh, metallic screech. The sudden silence was deafening.

"Yeah, honey?" she called out, her voice pitched a little too high. She cleared her throat, trying to sound normal. "I'm in the shower!"

“Okay.” His voice was closer now. He was right outside the bathroom door. “I just got home. My study group ran late.”

“That’s fine,” she said, grabbing a towel and wrapping it tightly around herself, as if it could hide what she’d just been doing, thinking. “I’ll be out in a sec.”

* * *

Susan stood by the granite island in the kitchen, her knuckles white where she gripped the edge, forcing a calm expression as James’s voice washed over her.

“...and it’s just not fair, Mom. I know I aced that paper on synaptic plasticity. My thesis was solid. Dr. Evans acted like it was amateur hour, like I’d just... I don’t know, copied it off some website.” James pushed his glasses up his nose, his lunch forgotten. “He was so weird about it. Vague. He mentioned a cheating ring in the class and then just looked at me like... like he expected me to confess or something.”

Susan nodded, the motion stiff. *I’m listening. I am a good mother. I am listening to my son... my whiny son.* She focused on a crumb on the countertop, her mind a fractured thing.

“I should have said something,” James droned on, his voice taking on a nasal, whining quality that grated on her. “I should have stood up for myself, defended my work. But I just stood there. I just took it. What’s wrong with me?”

Snapping at people... being a little cruel and mean... it’s good.

“It’s just so stressful,” James continued. “I can’t focus on my other work. I keep thinking about it. What if he fails me? What if this affects my scholarship? Harvard! He didn’t even give me a chance to—”

“JAMES!”

Her voice was a whip-crack in the sunny kitchen. It was too loud, too sharp. It didn’t sound like her.

He flinched, his words cutting off mid-sentence. His eyes, wide behind his glasses, locked onto hers, full of startled confusion.

The vile thing was right there, perched on the tip of her tongue, fueled by a frustration that was both sexual and profoundly irritable. It wanted out. It was a living, pulsing need to *lash*

out, to see him flinch again, to feel that jolt of power she'd felt in the parking lot with that woman. *Call him a pathetic little bitch. A spineless pussy. Tell him to man the fuck up.*

Her mouth was open. The words were forming. She saw the confusion in his eyes morph into something else—hurt. A flicker of fear.

It was that flicker that doused her internal fire with ice water.

What am I thinking?

The hypnotic mantra receded, leaving a cold, sickening horror in its wake. She had been about to insult her own son. Her beautiful, smart boy. Her head hurt, a sudden, throbbing pain erupting at her temple. She brought a hand up, massaging it.

James was still staring, silent now. Waiting.

She had to recover. She had to say something. Anything.

“James,” she began, her voice strained but softer, desperately trying to claw back the normalcy. “I’m... I’m going to head out early before work. I’ve got... things to do.” The excuse was pathetic, transparent.

She forced a smile that felt like a grimace. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Don’t worry about it.” She moved around the island, her legs feeling unsteady. She leaned down and pressed a quick, firm kiss onto his forehead. His skin was warm. Her son. “I love you.”

She didn’t wait for a response. She turned, grabbed her purse and keys from the hook by the door, and left, closing the door behind her with a soft, definitive click.

The quiet of the garage enveloped her. She leaned against her car, the cool metal seeping through her blouse. She squeezed her eyes shut.

What was I thinking? I can’t be mean to my own son.

But another part of her, the part that was still humming from her bathroom fantasy and buzzing from Chad’s suggestions, whispered back. *But it felt so good to yell. For a second, it felt so powerful. It would have felt even better to really let loose.*

The conflict was a physical ache behind her eyes. She was a counselor. She helped people. She was kind. She was a mother.

Being mean makes you feel good. It fixes your problems.

She slid into the driver’s seat, the leather warm from the morning sun. She started the car but didn’t put it in reverse. She just sat there, hands on the wheel, staring at the blank wall of the garage.

Her phone, sitting in the passenger seat, lit up with a notification. A text message.

Her heart gave a hard, anticipatory thump. *Is it Chad? Why do I hope it's, Chad?* she thought. *He's never texted me before.* She chuckled at herself. *Susan, stop it.*

She snatched the phone, her thumb smudging the screen as she unlocked it.

It wasn't a text. It was a calendar alert.

Annual Community Center Gala - 7 PM - Tomorrow

A flutter of genuine anxiety joined the mess of emotions inside her. The gala. She'd almost forgotten. A night of schmoozing with donors, making small talk, pretending everything was fine. The thought of dressing up and plastering on a fake smile all night felt gross. The very idea made her skin crawl.

* * *

The stale, slightly sweet smell of gasoline filled Susan's nose as she stood at the pump. Her hand slid up and down the handle's cool, ridged surface in a slow, steady rhythm. *Up. Down. Up. Down.* It was a subconscious motion, a mindless fidget. Her body felt too restless, humming with a restless energy that had been building since she'd fled her own kitchen.

Her interaction with James had left a bitter, coppery taste in her mouth. She was relieved she'd stopped herself, of course she was. But the act of suppression had cost her. It left all that sharp, nasty energy with nowhere to go, buzzing under her skin like a trapped wasp.

The faint, almost imperceptible throb between her legs was growing harder to ignore. She shifted subtly, pressing her thighs together in a futile attempt to ease the tension. The firm pressure of her jeans only amplified the ache. She was already damp—frustratingly so. *Again.*

Her mind wandered, unbidden, easily. Chad—his tall, fit frame. She imagined him right here, at the pump, his hands on her hips, his body pinning her against the car. Ramming his cock inside her. She stopped.

What, am I going to masturbate right here? she chided herself, shaking her head as if to physically dislodge the image. Her eyes flicked from the pump's slowly climbing numbers to the grimy gas station convenience store. A solution. A desperate, dirty one.

She trotted across the asphalt to the two glass doors. The bell at the entrance jingled, announcing her entrance to a clerk who barely looked up from his phone.

"Bathroom key?" she asked, her voice coming out a little breathless.

He gestured with his chin toward a back corner. "Someone's in there. Gotta wait your turn."

She rolled her eyes, a flare of genuine irritation cutting through the fog of her arousal. Of course. She walked past the short aisles and saw someone else waiting at the restroom door: a woman in a sensible beige coat, standing patiently by the locked door. Susan took her place behind her, leaning against the wall.

The wait was agony. Every second was a small eternity. The throb between her legs intensified, a maddening pulse that felt like needing to pee but was so much more urgent, more profound. It was a hollow, empty ache that demanded to be filled. A soft, involuntary sound escaped her lips, a faint little moan she barely registered.

The woman in front of her stiffened. She didn't turn around, but her shoulders went up toward her ears, her gaze fixed rigidly on the bathroom door. The silent judgment, the quiet disapproval.

Finally, a lock clicked. The door opened and a older woman shuffled out, avoiding eye contact with both women. The woman in the beige coat stepped forward, her hand outstretched for the key the man was holding.

Something in Susan snapped.

She moved without thinking, seizing an opportunity. In two quick steps, she cut in front of the other woman, her fingers snatching the key from the surprised woman's hand.

"I'll take that," she said, her voice flat.

The old woman mumbled something and hurried away. Beige coat woman stared, her mouth a perfect 'o' of affronted shock.

"Hey," she protested, her voice reedy with indignation. "I was here." She reached for the key.

Susan turned. And there it was. Her outlet. The target. All that pent-up frustration found its focus.

“Back off, bitch,” Susan said, the words landing like stones. They felt incredible in her mouth, solid and powerful. “I gotta go more than you.”

She saw the woman flinch, her eyes widening. A thrilling jolt of pure power shot through Susan. It was better than she’d imagined. She leaned in, her voice dropping to a venomous whisper.

“Plus, what are you gonna do about it, huh? Little frumpy little cunt.”

The insult hung in the humid air of the hallway. The woman looked utterly stunned, as if she’d been physically slapped. For a split second, a sliver of guilt tried to pierce Susan’s euphoria. She shook her head, a tiny, almost imperceptible motion. But she wasn’t going to stop. Not now. The high was too good.

“I’m going inside,” Susan stated, her voice regaining its cold strength. She gestured with the giant key. “And you’re gonna be out here. Being sad, fat, you. Bitch.”

She turned her back, a deliberate act of dismissal, and unlocked the door. She slipped inside, shutting it and throwing the bolt with a loud, satisfying *thunk*.

She was panting. Her heart hammered against her ribs. *Oh, that felt good.* A wild, giddy laugh bubbled up in her throat. She’d done it. She’d gotten what she wanted because she’d *taken* it. She’d deserved it. *Oh, fuck. That felt good. Ooh. Wow.*

Her back against the door, she slipped her hand into her jeans. The fabric was tight, a delicious constraint. She dipped her fingers past her waistband, finding the warm, slick heat waiting for her. She gasped, her hips beginning a slow, instinctual gyration against her own hand.

Her eyes found her reflection in the smudged mirror above the sink. A flushed, wild-eyed woman stared back. And then she wasn’t alone.

She imagined Chad behind her. She felt his hardness pressing against her ass. His mouth near her ear, his breath hot. *You did it.* The imaginary voice was a low rumble, full of approval.

Yes, you did. You showed her, baby. His phantom hands slid around to cup her breasts through her shirt. *You see the expression on her face? You did that. God, you’re so sexy. You fucking showed her that she ain’t shit. You showed her that you’re above her. That you’re the top bitch.*

“I’m the top bitch,” she whispered to her reflection, her fingers moving faster.

Yeah, you are, baby. She imagined him yanking her jeans down, not with tenderness, but with a rough, impatient urgency. She imagined the blunt, unyielding pressure of him shoving into her, not in her pussy, but somewhere tighter, more shocking. A broken cry escaped her lips, echoing off the tiles.

Oh, I was such a bitch. I was such a bitch, she chanted, the words a feverish prayer.

That's right. His phantom voice was a growl in her ear, matching the frantic rhythm of her hand. *It feels good to be mean, huh? It feels so good to be cruel.*

"Oh, God, it feels so good."

You're my hot bitch.

"I'm your hot bitch. I'm your hot bitch."

Come for me, bitch. Come for me.

The command was all she needed. Her body arched, her free hand slapping against the door for balance as a violent, shuddering climax ripped through her.

"I'm coming!" she cried out, not caring about the woman on the other side of the door, not caring about anything but the crashing waves of sensation. *"I'm such a fucking cruel bitch! I'm coming for you, Chad!"*

She slumped against the door, breathless and trembling, spent. For a long moment, there was only the sound of her own ragged breathing.

Slowly, she straightened up. She checked her reflection again. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright with a feral light. She looked... alive. Powerful. She pulled her jeans back up, smoothing her shirt.

She unlocked the door and pulled it open. The woman was still there, waiting. Her expression was no longer just shocked or affronted. It was a mask of pure, unadulterated horror. She had heard everything.

Susan met her gaze, a sly, wicked smile playing on her lips.

"What?" she asked, her voice dripping with false innocence. "What are you looking at? Huh?"

The woman flinched, her eyes dropping to the floor in immediate submission.

Susan made a show of offering the large key. As the woman's hand hesitantly reached for it, Susan simply let go. The heavy wooden keychain clattered loudly on the linoleum floor, forcing the woman to bend over and scramble for it.

Without another word, Susan stepped around her, her head held high. She walked out of the gas station. The afternoon sun felt warm on her skin. As she crossed the parking lot to her car, the sly smile never left her face.