

The muffled roar of the cafeteria carried through the wall of the teachers' lounge, two hundred kids competing to see who could be the loudest while eating chicken nuggets. Every few seconds a shriek would cut above the rest and Mei would glance toward the door out of habit, half expecting someone to come running in with a bloody nose or a tray-related emergency. It hadn't happened yet, but the lunch hour was young.

Rachel dropped into the chair across from her and cracked open a La Croix. "I feel like I haven't talked to you in days. How was your weekend?"

"It was good." Mei stabbed a cherry tomato with her fork. "Ethan got tickets to the Mariners game on Saturday so we made a whole thing out of it. His sister came, and our neighbor Nathan." She ignore the flutter in her stomach, chewing the tomato. "I'm not really a baseball person but Ethan was in heaven. Him and Nathan were like two kids at a candy store."

"That's cute. I didn't know you guys were close with your neighbor."

Mei took a drink of sweet tea, suddenly feeling hot. "Ethan is, not me." She took a bite of salad, unsure why she sounded so defensive. "Ethan doesn't have a ton of guy friends around here and Nathan is just... easy to be around. Sierra took about a thousand photos and put them all over her Instagram." Mei shook her head, smiling.

Rachel laughed. "At least you got out of the house. My weekend was spent preparing for the arrival of Diane." She rolled her eyes and stole a crouton from Mei's plate. "Greg's mother is coming for a visit next month and she's already started sending texts about Thanksgiving, hoping to nail down a location." She lifted her hands and made air quotes.

"It's... a little early for all that. Isn't it?"

"You would think" Rachel took a sip of her La Croix. "Last year she complained that our house was too stuffy. Keep in mind, it's almost double the size of hers." She was building steam now, her hands getting involved. "And now she wants to have a conversation about—"

The lounge door opened and Jack walked through giving Mei a warm smile. He rushed over to the table, the sound of Rachel's voice fading to nothing as Mei watched him approach.

"Okay. Don't judge." He pulled out the chair next to Mei and sat down without being invited, spinning his phone around on the table so she could see the screen. "I know it doesn't look like much yet, but it's getting there."

The photo showed a wooden frame sitting in what looked like his garage. Two-by-fours and plywood, a few cross beams that weren't quite level. Painters' plastic was draped over the top resembling something like a ghost costume. Mei tilted her head.

"Is that the gazebo?"

"It will be." He swiped to another angle. Same structure, somehow worse from this direction.

"I'm thinking white paint, lattice on the sides, maybe wrap the fairy lights around the posts. But I keep second-guessing myself on the color and I figured you'd have an opinion."

"White is perfect. The warm lights will make it glow." She grabbed his phone to zoom in on the picture. Their fingers brushed and she sucked in air, dropping it to the table.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry." She pushed it toward Jack with the tip of her finger like it was on fire.

"You okay there, hun?" Rachel asked with a smirk on her face.

"It's fine. That thing is battle tested." He picked it up and scrolled to another picture. "I have hands like a snake when it comes to these things."

Mei failed to suppress her laughter.

"What do you think about space in front of it?" He pointed to the front of the structure. "should we do flowers? Or maybe some kind of streamers?"

"Streamers?" She looked at Rachel who rolled her eyes. "No, it has to be flowers. You really are bad at this." She smiled, as Jack dipped his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I tried to warn you," he said, leaning back in the chair and stretching his legs under the table.

"Here." She reached for her phone. "Just text me." She said it without even thinking about it. "It will be easier than you tracking me down between classes every time."

Jack held her gaze a moment longer than he should have. Something had shifted in the way he was looking at her, but she couldn't quite piece together what it was. "You sure?"

"Something tells me you're going to need the help," she said, unlocking it.

"I'll try not to blow you up too much." He handed the phone back and started toward the door.

"I'll believe it when I see it," she called after him, and he laughed without turning around.

The door closed and the lounge went quiet. Rachel was peeling the lid off a yogurt, her spoon already in hand, staring at Mei like she grew another head. Mei picked up her fork and pushed a piece of cucumber around the container.

"What?"

"Nothing." Rachel took a bite of her yogurt. She chewed it slowly, like she had all the time in the world. "I just don't think I've ever seen you give a man your phone number before. That's all."

"It's for the dance, Rach. This is the third time now that he's come to me with questions."

Rachel nodded, a half smile still on her lips. She scraped the side of her yogurt cup and took another bite before she spoke again. "Fair enough." She left the spoon in her mouth. "So, now that you have this new neighbor, are you and Ethan getting enough alone time together?"

Mei looked at Rachel, searching for whatever was behind the comment, but Rachel's face was neutral. She was already cleaning up her trash.

"Things with Ethan have never been better." Mei closed her salad container and stood to rinse it in the sink. "You know I would never—"

"Oh i know. That's not what I meant, I swear." She stood. "I just don't want to see anyone get the wrong idea is all."

Mei dried her hands on the paper towel and tossed it in the trash. Her and Rachel said their goodbyes and hugged. As she walked down the hall, Mei looked at her phone. Jack's contact was still on screen. A warmth spread low in her belly. She dismissed it and called Ethan to see how his day was going.

Ethan was propped against the headboard scrolling through his phone when Mei came out of the bathroom in one of his old t-shirts and a pair of cotton shorts. Her hair was damp from the shower and she smelled like coconut shampoo. She climbed into bed next to him and pulled the comforter up to her waist, reaching for the book on her nightstand. Something about a woman who moves to a small town and falls in love with a veterinarian. She'd been reading it for two weeks and he had no idea how far she'd gotten because every time she talked about it his eyes would glaze over.

He went back to his phone. He'd been looking at camera mounts for the better part of an hour, trying to figure out what kind of setup would work. His birthday was a few days away and the thought of it had been living in his chest since he woke up that morning. Nathan had told him to bring it up. He'd tried several times, but the closest he'd gotten was asking if she was planning to make it with him. When she told him yes, he was to dumbstruck to ask any follow-up questions. He added a tripod to his cart, looked over at Mei reading her book with the most innocent smile, and deleted it.

Mei's phone buzzed on the nightstand. She picked it up, read whatever was on the screen, and laughed so hard she almost snorted. Ethan watched her from the corner of his eye. Her smile was wide and she was shaking her head as she typed back.

"What's funny?"

"It's Jack." She was still typing, and didn't bother looking over. "You know, the PE teacher. I told you about him. He's just being goofy." She turned the phone so Ethan could see. On the screen was a giant balloon arch that said 'Harmony Falls Gaala'. Ethan turned his head confused.

"It's supposed to say Gala. Thank God he teaches PE and not English," Mei said with a giggle.

Ethan nodded, staring at the guy standing in front of the balloon arch. His green eyes sparkled as he stared at the camera. His arms were larger, or at least larger than Ethan's. His hair was disheveled in a way he knew Mei liked.

"I didn't know you two were texting." He handed the phone back to Mei, trying to ignore the fluttering of nerves in his stomach.

"It just started today." She shifted against the headboard, pulling her knees up. "He keeps needing help with stuff for the dance and it was easier than him cornering me in the hallway. I told you about him, at game night. He can't do anything by himself."

"Right. The daddy-daughter thing." He shifted in bed, the nervous flutter in his stomach turning into a full blown rumble. He wouldn't call it jealousy. He was never that guy. But there was something about the way Mei laughed when she saw his text. The way she lit up even now.

"Seems like you're having fun with it."

She looked at him. "With the dance?"

"Yeah."

"I am." Her expression softened. "Is that... I mean, is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay." He squeezed her knee through the covers. "I'm glad." He looked at the screen again. "I just didn't realize your date was so cute."

He didn't really mean it the way it sounded, but the second it left his mouth he expected Mei to shut down. Delete his number and say it wasn't like that. That wasn't what he wanted though. This was a side of her he'd never seen before, and he loved it. The confidence she'd been building since she started seeing Nathan was showing up everywhere now. The way she dressed, the way she carried herself, the way she looked people in the eye instead of at the floor. His wife was becoming the woman he always knew was in there. He didn't want to ruin that over something as stupid as being jealous over a text message.

"It's not a date." Mei rolled her eyes, but the smile was still on her face. She grabbed his shirt, pulling him over to her. "You're the only man for me Mr. Morrison." His hands hit the mattress on either side of her head and she wrapped her legs around his waist before he'd settled his weight. Her hips rolled up to meet his and even through his boxers and her shorts the heat coming off her was startling. She was grinding against him.

"Wow, someone's excited about something." Her fingers threaded through his hair. "What has you so worked up, mister? Thinking about your birthday?" Her fingers slid across her back, pulling his shirt up his back.

She was right. He was hard, painfully so. He hadn't even realized when it happened. His breath caught as her hands continued to roam his body. But it wasn't his birthday he was thinking about, at least not for the last few minutes. Her fingers dragged his shirt up his chest and he sat back long enough to pull it over his head.

When he came back down her lips were on his. Her legs tightened around him and she rocked her hips upward, pressing his cock against the soaked cotton of her shorts. The wetness was unmistakable. He could feel it through two layers of fabric, warm and slick, spreading with every roll of her hips.

His hand slid down her side and under the waistband of her shorts. His fingers pressed against her and his brain went blank. She was drenched. His fingers slid through her folds without traction, her arousal so thick it coated his hand in one pass. She gasped, her hips bucking into his touch, and he pulled back to look at her.

"God, Mei." He grabbed her hips and pulled her down harder. "You're so wet already."

She looked down at him. Cheeks flushed, eyes half-lidded. She rolled her body, pulling Ethan under her as her teeth nipped his ear.

"So?" She sat up fully, pressing her heat fully into his manhood and pulling off her shirt without a second thought. "Is this what you were thinking about? Is this how you want me for the video?" She bit her lip seductively, pressing her palms flat on his chest as she rolled her hips again.

His cock pulsed hard against her in response. She moaned at the feeling. He'd never seen her be the aggressor. He almost told her yes, just so he could hold onto the moment. But this may be the best chance he had to talk to her about the position he wanted. He just hoped it wouldn't freak her out too much.

"Well?" She ground down harder and his hands shot to her hips. "Is this what you've been thinking about?"

"Yes." It came out hoarse. "But I want to... Can you turn over?"

He held his breath as her facial expression changed. Her smile held, and her eye brows flicked up in surprise. Her hands trembled, just briefly, then she climbed off of him. The absence of her weight, her heat, made his cock twitch against his stomach. She turned away from him and lowered herself onto her hands and knees.

"Like this?" reaching back and pushing her shorts down. Then she kicked them off the end of the bed.

Ethan stopped breathing.

Her bare ass was right there. Her thighs were parted just enough that he could see her slit glistening between her legs, the dark patch of hair between her legs visibly damp. Her hands were flat on the bed, her chest pressing against the fabric of the comforter. It definitely seemed like she'd done this before, but he fought the urge to ask, not wanting to break the spell.

He'd watched this exact scene dozens of times now on his laptop. The same position, the same arch. But this was far more erotic. He could see everything. The fine hairs at the base of her spine standing on end, the goosebumps chasing across her skin, the way her fingers curled into the comforter waiting for him.

He stripped his boxers. His cock was aching, flushed dark, the tip already slick as he moved behind her. His hands found her hips and his thumbs pressed into the soft skin above her ass. She pushed back before he was ready, her body searching for him, and his cock slid through the wet heat between her thighs. Her arousal coated the length of him and they moaned in response.

He gripped the base of his shaft and pressed against her entrance. She pushed back into him, enveloping his entire length in a single stroke.

"Ohhh God." The sound tore out of her as he sank to the hilt, his hips flush against her ass. The wet heat of her wrapped around every inch of him and for a second he couldn't see. She was soaked. He'd bottomed out with almost no resistance, and the slick sound of their bodies meeting echoed in the quiet room.

Her head dropped between her arms and she moaned into the mattress. She'd been vocal before, but nothing quite like this. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd ever seen how so aroused. Her walls clamped around him, making his knees weak. The picture of the PE teacher flashing through his head then vanishing just as quickly.

He pulled back slowly, wanting to feel every inch of her. His shaft was coated in her arousal, her pussy gripping him, stretching around him, reluctant to release. The visual sent a bolt of heat through his gut that nearly ended everything. He thrust back in and she cried out, her back arching so sharply her shoulder blades pressed together.

"Ethan— oh god— You feel so good, baby."

A pulse of pride washed through him. The way she said his name made his cock pulse. He didn't know why he had that reaction. There was no reason to assume she was thinking of anyone else. But the confirmation made him crash into her faster and harder than he had planned.

If the added aggression bothered her, she didn't show it. She slammed back into him to meet every thrust, her ass hitting his pelvis with a wet slap that filled the room. He could hear her getting wetter. The obscene sound of his cock driving into her over and over, mixed with her moans was better than any move he'd watched.

"You feel so hard."

Her words nearly made him cum. He'd never heard her say anything like that before.

"Just like that. Ugggh." Her hand went to her chest, squeezing her nipple. "This is how you want me for your video?" She rolled her hips as she thrust into him. "Show me how hard you're going to take me."

He grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled. The leverage drove him deeper and her arms buckled. Her chest hit the mattress, changing the angle, and suddenly he was so deep inside her that he knew he wouldn't last much longer.

"Ah — ah — Ohhh — Oh God — don't stop —"

He could see everything from this angle. Her pussy taking him, stretched tight around his cock, her arousal smeared across both of them. The muscles in her back flexing with each impact. Her fingers twisted white-knuckled in the sheets above her head. It was exactly what the videos looked like and nothing like them at all because the videos didn't have her sounds, her smell, the way her body pulsed around him every time he bottomed out.

The heat was already past the point of return. His thighs were locking. His balls had drawn tight against his body and his stomach was clenching. He tried to slow down. Pulled almost all the way out, holding there, gripping her hip, his cock throbbing at her entrance.

"Ethan." Her hips rolled and bucked. "Please." She pushed back and the head of his cock slipped inside her.

He lost it.

Her grip was like velvet and the moment he slipped back into her slick heat her body gave out. His vision blurred as the orgasm ripped through him so fast his knees nearly gave out. He buried himself as deep as he could and held there. His cock pulsed inside her, emptying in thick waves, each throb sending another shock through his chest and stomach and thighs. A groan tore out of him with each blast.

"Yes.... yes... OHHHH!" Mei didn't stop. His orgasm seemed to spur her on, her hips working faster, chasing her own release.

"Fuck— I'm sorry— I didn't expect to—"

She looked over her shoulder, hair stuck to her face, cheeks flushed dark. He expected her to roll over. To tell him it was okay and his release was all she wanted.. Instead, she stayed exactly where she was and reached her right hand between her thighs.

His eyes went wide, and his cock flexed, still inside her, another drop of cum leaking out.

She found her clit with her fingers and the first touch made her whole body jerk. A shaky moan escaped her and Ethan felt her walls clench around her. Her fingers grazed the base of his cock as she touched herself. The overstimulation made him hiss through his teeth, but he didn't dare move.

Her hips shifted forward, chasing her fingers, and his softening cock slipped out making them both sigh. His eyes never left her body. He could see his cum trailing down the inside of her thigh, mixing with the slick mess already coating her skin. His absence only seemed to make her touch more urgent. Her fingertips pressing between her folds.

"Mmmpph. I'm so close. Keep... keep watching." Her eyes were shut tight, her brow pinched in concentration.

He was still on his knees behind her. He could see everything. Her hand working between her thighs, her fingers circling her swollen clit, the glistening mess of her arousal and his cum spread across her pussy and the insides of her legs. Her hips were rocking back against her own hand in a slow rhythm, her ass swaying with each movement, and every few seconds her walls would clench around nothing and she'd whimper into the mattress.

It looked exactly like the videos he'd watch, the angle was near identical. His brain overlapped the thoughts The women on his laptop. He'd envisioned them as Mei, and now here she was. In the exact same position, doing the exact same thing.

"Ohhhh God. Ohhh yesssss." Her movements were growing in urgency. She was close, he could see it.

His cock twitched. He was getting hard again. Despite having cum just minutes ago he was already swelling back to life. Mei's hips rolled faster. Two fingers slid inside herself and she gasped, her back arching, her free hand gripping the sheet. She fucked herself on her fingers, her palm grinding against her clit. He wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked slowly, watching her, his mouth dry.

The image shifted. The same angle from the videos, but the camera had moved. That wasn't right. He had moved. He was watching from somewhere else, from the camera, and someone else was behind her. Someone taller, broader through the shoulders. It was the man she'd been texting. The PE teacher, driving hard and fast into Mei as she moaned like a pornstar.

Ethan's hand froze on his cock. The image vanished so fast it left an afterburn. His heart hammered. He was kneeling on his own bed, behind his own wife, watching her touch herself, and for the briefest second the man behind her hadn't been him. His cock throbbed harder, causing him to squeeze himself.

His hand started moving again, faster, and he watched Mei's fingers disappear inside herself, watched her hips buck, watched the wet shine of her skin, and he couldn't have stopped stroking himself if the house was on fire.

"Ohhh god." Mei's voice was muffled against the mattress. Her hips were stuttering now, her fingers a blur between her thighs. "Oh ffff— ohhhh—"

Her whole body locked. Her thighs clamped together around her hand and her back arched so hard her head came off the mattress. Her hips jerked and her shoulders began to shake as her pressed deep inside her. Her walls pulling them as if they were a cock.

Ethan came for a second time.

This one caught him off guard. His stomach clenched and his cock pulsed. The first blast hitting the back of Mei's thigh, but she barely noticed, her body still writhing in bliss. The second blast was softer, and he felt the liquid mess coat his fingers. It was less than the first time but somehow more intense, almost painful, and his hand kept moving until the last throb faded and his arm gave out.

Mei's body had gone limp. She was flat on her stomach now, her face turned to the side, her eyes barely open. She was breathing in shattered pieces. Then she looked back at him over her shoulder. Her eyes widened, then crinkled.

"Did you just—" She pressed her face into the mattress, her shoulders shaking. "Oh my god, a second time?"

His face was on fire. "I didn't— I don't know how that—"

She rolled onto her side, not bothering to clean herself off, and looked at him with the biggest grin.

"I didn't know you liked watching me that much." She said it soft. Almost shy.

He didn't know what to say. His brain was still short-circuiting. He fell back onto the bed, exhaustion completely overwhelming him. Everything had happened so fast he wasn't exactly sure what made him cum again.

Mei didn't mind. She didn't need an answer. She turned herself around slowly, crawling over his body and lying on her chest. Her skin was hot and damp and she was still trembling faintly against him. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in and held on.

"I love you." She said it into his skin, already fading, her voice thick with sleep. "So much." Her fingers found his and laced through them and held. Within a minute her breathing had evened out and her weight had gone heavy and warm against him and she was somewhere far away.

The last of the buses had pulled away over an hour ago but the parking lot was full again. Parent-teacher conference night turned Rapid Springs into a different building after dark. Mei had wrapped up most of her conferences early. There was still twenty minutes left before the end of everyone's least favorite quarterly event, and there was still one parent she had yet to see. She'd kicked her flats off under the desk and was sitting cross-legged in her chair, her phone in her lap.

Mei: You better not have eaten all the dumplings before I get home.

Ethan: No promises. They're really good.

Mei: Save me at least two or you're sleeping on the couch.

Ethan: What if I save you three? What do I get then?

She bit her lip, heat climbing up her neck. They'd been like this all day. Mei wasn't even at work yet this morning with Ethan texted and admitted he was still thinking about last night. If she were being honest, neither could she. Her thighs still ached from the encounter. She was sore in the best possible way.

She glanced toward her closed door. The hallway was quiet. Her heart raced as she tapped on the camera app and her front facing camera appeared on the screen. Three months ago the thought of doing something like this would have made her die of embarrassment.

She unbuttoned the second button of her shirt, parting the fabric just enough to see the valley of her chest. She held her breath, smiled, then snapped the picture.

Mei: I expect three.

Ethan responded immediately.

Ethan: I just bought out the entire restaurant.

She laughed out loud, her hand flying to her mouth to try to muffle it. It was the exact response she needed. She started typing out a response when a tap came from the door. Mei gasped, looking up to see Jimmy Davis's dad walking through. He was still in his work clothes, the sleeves of his dress shirt cuffed to his forearms, his tie loosened at the collar. He always looked like he'd come straight from an office.

"Ms. Morrison. Sorry if I'm early. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Oh um..." Her cheeks burned. "Not at all." She stood and met him at the small table she'd set up near the window, the one with the adult-sized chairs she'd borrowed from the library.

"Thanks for making the time. Jimmy is always such a bright spot for the class."

"I appreciate that. He tells me all the time that you're his favorite teacher." He reached out to shake her hand, his gaze drifting to the open collar of her shirt.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. There wasn't any time to fix her shirt before he came in and now she was paying the consequences. She could probably make an excuse to turn back to her desk and quickly button back up. Instead she dropped into the seat across from him.

"Jimmy is the top reader in our class." She pointed to the corner behind her, now hyper aware of how her shirt parted with each movement. There was a picture of each kid on the wall in a cutout car. Jimmy's car was at least three lengths ahead of the person behind him. "He's completed six stories on his own and passed each of the comprehensive tests."

"I can't barely get the boy to turn off his video games at home." His gaze fell to her chest again and he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth. "I think that pretty well proves whatever you're doing here is working."

She shifted in her seat, crossing her legs. Her body was warm, and despite her usual disgust for the way the man was looking at her, there was a pleasant tingle spreading through her. She cleared her throat, muttering a thank you. Then casually crossed her arms over her chest.

The rest of the conversation was standard. She rushed through his math and science grades, talking a little faster than normal. When the meeting ended, she stood with him, walking him to the door in such a way that he wasn't afforded another look. He thanked her again and was out the door.

Mei sat down and put her hands flat on her desk. Her pulse was still elevated and the warmth between her legs hadn't fully faded. She stared at a crayon mark on the corner of her desk, pressing her knees together.

Grace's apartment had gotten smaller over the past few weeks. Not physically, but the walls seemed to close in a little more each evening, especially after the Subway interview fell through. The bank statement on the counter was still sealed. She didn't need to open it to know what was inside. Her rent was already past due. She didn't need another reminder of how little she had left.

Grace sat on the couch and ignored the mess around her as she scrolled through the Dead Air Instagram feed. She did this every few days. Their page was littered with pictures of 'the investigation process', with the occasional personal picture of Sierra sprinkled in. Probably to show she was "a real person". It was another way for Grace to live vicariously through Sierra. The evening meds had kicked in about twenty minutes ago so she slowed a little slower than normal. Sierra, had a way of looking directly into the camera in every photo, chin up, daring someone to look away. Grace never commented or liked a post. She just looked, the same way she used to look at the women on the news who'd survived something and come out the other side still standing.

A carousel post from the weekend. Sierra at a baseball game, beer raised, grin wide, her arm slung around another woman in a Mariners jersey. The caption read: *Dragged the fam to the game. We lost but the nachos made it worth it.* 🍷🍔

Grace scrolled past. She hated baseball. There were too many people and she didn't get the rules.

The next one was a reel about a cold case in Nevada. A family had gone missing after winning it big in a local casino. The photo showed a picture of a man in a baseball cap and sunglasses with a back over his arm. Something clicked, like her mind was still playing catch up. She scrolled back up to the baseball picture.

She scanned the picture again. Not of Sierra this time, but just behind her, just out of frame and slightly out of focus. A man half-turned toward the field, cap low on his forehead. The beard was different. She'd never been looking for a man with a beard, and for a second she thought she was just losing it. He could have been anyone.

Her vision narrowed. The hum of the refrigerator disappeared. The Trazodone was supposed to prevent this, the way her hearing collapsed to nothing but her own pulse in her ears, but this was different.

"No fucking way," she muttered to herself.

She zoomed in, taking a screenshot. The image went grainy but it didn't matter. The beard may have been new. But those eyes. She stared at them, her nipples growing hard as she ran her thumb across the screen. If he were half as smart as he thought he was then he would have worn sun glasses. She'd spent eleven months in a psychiatric facility because of those eyes.

"Found you."

She set her phone face-down on the sofa. The heels of her hands went to her eyes and she began to rock, her nails digging into the back of her scalp. She'd found him. She'd actually found him. She never thought this day would come. Everyone thought she was crazy. She took three deep breaths, just like Dr. Waverly always told her to do. Okay, she found him. Now what?

She picked her phone back up and pulled up Dead Air's website. It took forever to load, like the universe was mocking her. But she didn't care. She was right. She would prove to everyone she was right. She was telling the truth. The About page came up and she searched for contact info, production credits. Anything that would give an address. It sat on the bottom of the page. a P.O. box out of Bellingham, Washington.

Next, she pulled out her credit card app. She had about 1500 left before it was maxed out. That would cover the flight and a few days in a crappy hotel. She could find a way to stretch it. She always did.

Her hand was twitching. She needed a plan. But all she could think about was getting to Bellingham and finding Nathan. That was all that mattered. She pulled up her email and found Dr. Waverly. She made up a story about a friend in need in Washington. She promised to check in every few days, and assured the doctor that she had a fresh refill of meds that she would take every day.

She got up and walked to the map on the wall. She pulled a red circle from the pack on the counter and pressed it over Bellingham. Then she took her Seroquel and went to bed.

Ethan had rescheduled his session to yesterday, meaning Nathan had an extra hour to review Mei last session, MM-03. It was a shorter tape since they went on their shopping spree last week, but it still held valuable information. Her posture was relaxed, her legs slightly apart. He'd read the situation perfectly.

A knock broke his concentration. He glanced at the clock, it was ten til seven. He couldn't contain his smile. She was early. He closed the laptop and slid it into the desk drawer next to his phone. There wasn't enough time to return the drive back to the safe, but it didn't matter. He could do it later.

"Mei. Come in." He opened the door with a smile and stepped aside, catching the scent of her shampoo as she passed. She was wearing a fitted green blouse, the top button undone, and dark jeans. He led her into his office where she took her usual spot on the sofa, sitting back with a smile on her face.

She looked comfortable, relaxed. He took his seat behind his desk, and scribbled on his notepad. *Arrived early, casual clothing. Open posture. Unprompted eye contact.*

"I hope it's okay I'm early." Her palms were flat on her knees. No sign of nervousness.

"Of course. I was just preparing for our meeting." He sat back in his chair, placing the notepad on his knee. "How was your week?"

"It was good." Her smile was genuine. "The kids are nearly done building their solar system. It's one of my favorite projects to do every year." She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Once they actually decide to keep the glitter focused on the planets the whole thing really comes together. You should see their faces the first time they come in and see the Solar System hanging, it really does make it worth it."

"That's great to hear." He made a note about her general happiness. "And things at home? I had a lot of fun with you and Ethan at the game. Thanks again for the invite."

"I'm glad you were able to come. I'm not much of a baseball fan. You did me a favor keeping Ethan company."

He nodded. She still hadn't broken eye contact, or fidgeted. He decided to push it, to see how the training was holding up.

"His birthday is in a couple of days." He paused, still no reaction. "Have you given more thought to his request?"

"I have. I told him I'd do it." Color climbed her throat but she didn't look away. "We've been... things have been really good between us. More frequent. More..." She searched for a word but still didn't look away. "Connected."

Ahead of schedule. He wrote it without looking down. The architecture was holding faster than projected. "You seem more relaxed tonight than I've seen you."

"I am." She sat straighter. "That's actually something I wanted to ask about."

He leaned forward. "Okay?"

Her gaze dropped to her hands. "I keep... The voice in the back of my head, my mother. I keep waiting for it to come back and it just doesn't."

"You expect it to?" He scratched his face. "I consider it great progress that it doesn't come when you're with Ethan."

"Yeah... I agree." Her fingers curled into her jeans. A nervous tick Nathan had picked up on during their first session. "But it doesn't seem to be there in other situations either."

"Something happened?" It was possible she was talking about last week at the dress shop, of course. But Nathan didn't think that was it. She was too comfortable when she first walked in for it to have been that.

She was quiet for a long time. Her jaw worked and her knees pressed together for the first time since she'd sat down.

"I... I had parent-teacher conferences." She picked at a thread on her jeans. "One of the dads came in. My shirt was... I'd unbuttoned it earlier. It doesn't matter why. But he kept looking at me." She squirmed in her seat. "At my chest. The entire meeting."

"And that made you uncomfortable?"

"That's the thing." Her voice dropped and Nathan leaned closer to hear it. "I should have been disgusted. He's a parent and he's married." She pressed her thighs together and her throat bobbed. "But I... I didn't hate it." Her hands came up and pressed against her cheeks. "Why didn't I hate it?"

There it was. The fault line. Nathan recognized it immediately, the moment the conditioning's success threatened to become visible to the subject. He'd seen it with Grace at roughly the same stage. The difference was pacing. Grace had panicked. Mei was frightened but present.

"The wall your mother built was never supposed to last forever, Mei." He leaned his face forward, making her eyes find his. "What you're feeling isn't wrong. Your body is learning to exist without a filter that was installed when you were a teenager. Of course it feels strange." He held her gaze. "A man found you attractive. It's okay to be flattered. For your body to react in kind."

Her hands dropped from her face. She exhaled, but the color stayed high on her neck.

"I want to try something." He stood and moved the chair aside. "Stand up for me."

She rose slowly, her hands finding each other at her waist.

"Turn around." He guided her with a gesture until she faced the back wall. The camera behind her blinked its red light just above eye level. "When Ethan hits record this weekend, every doubt you've been carrying is going to rush back at once. All of those emotions you're carrying right now, you'll carry then. I want you to practice sitting with that discomfort now, in a space where nothing is at stake."

She stared at the red light. Her breathing quickened.

"You were uncomfortable at the parent-teacher conference, because you didn't know what to think about your body's natural reaction."

She gave the slightest nod.

"You had a similar reaction in our last session, didn't you?" Her body went stiff, but he pressed on. "Let's talk about that night." He positioned himself at the edge of his desk, three feet behind her. "Walk me through what you were feeling when you went back into that dressing room."

Her head dipped. "My... my heart was going so fast I thought I was going to pass out. The dress was tight and I knew you could see..." She shifted her weight. "The saleswoman thought we

were a couple and then I saw your—" She stopped.

"My arousal." He stood, taking a step forward so she could sense him behind her. "You looked great and saw a man's natural reaction to that. Then what happened."

"I..." She shook her head, her thumbs sliding back and forth over each other. "I was aroused, and I wanted to get home... to Ethan."

"That's good, Mei" He reached out. His palm pressed flat between her shoulder blades. He could feel her heart hammering against his fingers through the thin cotton of the blouse. She inhaled sharply but she didn't step forward. "You see, you were still in completely control, despite the new feelings."

His hand slid down the fabric of her shirt, slowly. "What happened when you got home?" He'd taken another step forward, her words more of a whisper. Mei's eyes stayed focused on the red dot of the camera.

"I... I rushed upstairs."

Nathan's thumb slipped under the hem of her shirt. The slight contact of his skin or hers made her gasp.

"And... Did you make love to your husband?"

"We... No... Ethan and I didn't have sex."

His eyebrows lifted. He'd watched her practically sprint from his car. He'd assumed she was on Ethan the second she was in the door.

"I went upstairs and I..." Her eyes went to the floor. "I touched myself. Ethan wasn't even up there yet."

Nathan bit the inside of his cheek to stop from groaning. His cock stirred in his pants. "Look at the camera, Mei." Her head lifted. "You were reliving Kyle's apartment."

She nodded. He could feel the vibration of it through his palm.

"And then Ethan came upstairs." Her voice was higher. "He... he saw me and I thought he'd be angry or disgusted but he just... he just watched."

This time he couldn't keep from groaning. It was progress like he'd never dreamed. Not just Mei, but Ethan as well. His thumb traced a slow line across the small of her back and his cock strained against his slacks.

"He watched you." He practically whispered the word in her ear. "Just like you wanted. Like your fantasy."

"Y—Yes."

"That took courage, Mei. You should be proud of yourself." His breathing had changed and he heard her hear the catch, let the sound of his own arousal register. His hand gripped the bare skin of her hip. "What did you do when you realized he was watching?"

"I..." Her breathing was ragged. Nathan's grip tightened on her hip and she shuffled backward a half step. When she did they both gasped. The swell of his cock pressed into her jeans. "I didn't stop. Not until I..." Her hips shifted. Nathan wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, but the movement caused her to grind into her hardness for the briefest second. "I finished."

He held the position a second longer. Then he stepped back.

Cool air filled the space where his body had been and he heard the exhale leave her. He walked around the desk, adjusted himself without masking it, and sat.

"I think you're ready, Mei."

She turned from the camera. Her cheeks were flushed dark. She couldn't speak. He let her sit with it for a full ten seconds, then stood and walked to the door. She rose on unsteady legs and followed.

"I look forward to hearing how it went in our next session."

She crossed the lawn without looking back. Nathan watched until her door closed, then shut his own and locked it. The office was quiet. He stood with his hand on the knob, his erection straining against his slacks. He had to see the tape. To see if she had actually grinded against him, or if it was just movement.

CHAPTER 9 — CHOICE POINT

Ethan's birthday is days away. Mei has agreed to make a tape with him. The only question left: How will it turn out?

The Decision

PATH ONE: They both loved it

"It was everything I hoped it would be."

The camera is rolling and Mei isn't afraid. She's loud and responsive and everything Ethan had dreamed of. He knows exactly what he wants thanks to all his "research" and Mei gives him every bit of it. They share a climax neither of them are likely to forget.

PATH TWO: It's not what Ethan expected

"What the hell is wrong with me?"

It starts off great but halfway through Ethan goes soft. He grabs the camera off the tripod to buy himself time but the second the viewfinder is between them everything changes. Mei tells him it's okay and keeps going while he watches. He's harder than ever but doesn't want to join. She offers him a hand as she edges closer and they both finish harder than expected.

PATH THREE: Mei fakes it

"He'll never know the difference."

Mei wants to give Ethan his birthday more than anything. The camera starts rolling and she's fine at first. Then halfway through, her mother's voice slides back in for the first time in weeks. She can't get out of her own head and she knows how much this means to him. So she does something she's never done in their marriage. She fakes it.