

A romantic couple is shown from behind, standing on a balcony or near a large window at night. The man is shirtless and muscular, wearing dark pants. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a light-colored off-the-shoulder sweater and dark shorts. She is holding a dark mug. They are looking out at a rainy night scene where rain is streaming down the glass. In the background, there are lit-up windows of a building across the street. A small table with a lit candle is visible on the left.

Katniss Wild

HE TOOK ME
AND THOUGHT OF
Her

A FORBIDDEN ATTRACTION.
A LIMIT CROSSED.
AND A GAME THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING.

He Took Me and Thought of Her

Katniss Wild

Chapter 1

I cut the tomato into quarters without taking my eyes off the kitchen window. My hands seem to work on their own.

Matthias is standing by the low garden fence. He rests his hands casually on the wood, his pale T-shirt stretched slightly across his shoulders. On the other side stands Verena in a flowing summer dress. The thin fabric makes it immediately obvious that she isn't wearing a bra. She says something, laughs softly, and brushes a strand of hair from her face without taking her eyes off Matthias. He doesn't laugh with her, but he watches her with that intent expression, his brows drawing together slightly.

We've lived next door to each other for ten years. For almost as long, I've forced myself to look away whenever the two of them talk. I tell myself they're just neighbors making conversation. But every time they stand at the fence, he leans a little closer to her, as though they share an unspoken understanding. Verena certainly knows what she does to him. It shows in the way she approaches the fence without hesitation and holds his gaze without a trace of embarrassment.

My fingers tighten around the damp knife handle. My throat tightens. I should turn away, get back to the tomatoes, and ignore the easy intimacy between them. Instead, I keep staring through the glass. There's no mistaking how strongly he's attracted to her. The sight hurts, but I refuse to look away—and at that very moment, I feel my panties getting wet. It's sickening and intoxicating at once. I wipe my hands on my linen blouse, acutely aware of the oppressive afternoon heat in the kitchen.

The patio door slides open silently behind me. His footsteps cross the tiled floor. I don't turn around, even when he stops so close that his chest nearly touches my shoulder blades. I smell dry wood and his sharp aftershave. The familiar scent makes me close my eyes.

His hands settle on my bare arms. The calluses on his palms scrape lightly across my skin as he moves up to my shoulders and begins massaging my neck. I let my head fall forward.

He slides his hands down my sides. Then he grabs my hips hard enough that his fingers nearly dig into my flesh. He pushes me forward until the cool metal edge of the counter presses into my stomach. I'm trapped between it and the warmth of his body.

When he lowers his head, his breath brushes my ear. My muscles tremble involuntarily, and his grip immediately tightens. Then his hands travel up over my stomach and close around my breasts through the fine linen. He kneads them so insistently that my nipples grow hard and sensitive beneath his hands. I press my lips together to hold back a moan. Everything about the way he touches me today is more decisive, more deliberate. I feel him take a deep breath, the faint vibration of his chest against my back. In that split second, I know he's about to say something neither of us can take back.

"We both know I've been looking at her for ten years, Corinna," he whispers in my ear. "You know it, too."

There it is. For ten years, I've pushed it aside and convinced myself it was harmless. Now a single sentence from him has made it real. As he speaks, I can't take my eyes off Verena, who's still standing outside in the garden. Hearing him finally admit it tightens my throat. At the same time, I feel myself getting even wetter.

"No," I manage, more a helpless reflex than a firm refusal. "She's our neighbor, Matthias."

He ignores me. Instead, he pulls me tighter against him, grips my breasts harder, and rubs his thumbs over my stiff nipples.

"I watch her every goddamn day," he says without raising his voice. I can feel his gaze following mine through the window. "I notice every move she makes. She almost never wears a bra under those thin dresses. I watch her breasts bounce when she walks, and I can see her nipples through the fabric." His voice drops lower. "She does it on purpose, Corinna. She knows I'm looking. She's teasing me."

He presses his hips forward. His erection pushes against my ass through his jeans. He feels me gasp despite myself, and that involuntary admission seems to spur him on.

"For ten fucking years, I've imagined her red lips wrapped around my cock," he murmurs. "I've pictured her on her knees, tilting her head back and taking me deep down her throat. I want to watch her suck me greedily while you're in here setting the table for the barbecue."

A stifled whimper escapes me. Tears rise in my eyes as his words take shape in my mind. He pins me against the counter and whispers those words into my ear, giving me no chance to shut him out or pull away.

"I want to be buried deep inside her," he murmurs, slowly rubbing his hard cock against my backside. Outside by the fence, Verena laughs and runs a hand over her bare throat, completely unaware of what he's telling me about her. "I want to shove that dress up and fuck her. I want to feel how tight and wet she is when she takes me inside her. I want to hear her moan while I shoot my cum deep into her."

My legs tremble. I dig my fingers into the edge of the counter, unable to look away from the woman outside. Every word hurts because I can hear just how badly he wants her. And yet, right now, there's nothing I want more than for him to keep talking.

Chapter 2

That evening, Matthias leads me wordlessly into our dark bedroom, straight toward the partially open window. Humid night air slips through the narrow gap, but I'm focused entirely on what's happening outside. Verena's patio across the way is brightly lit. The light spills through the glass onto the floorboards, casting thin shadows all the way to our feet. I stand right in front of the window, staring at the house next door. If Verena is out there, she could see me now.

Matthias steps close behind me. He catches the hem of my summer dress and slowly draws the delicate fabric upward. His movements are calm, almost measured. The dress slides over my hips before he lifts it over my head and lets it fall carelessly to the floor. I'm left standing at the window in nothing but my panties, feeling the cooler air against my warm skin. He bends down and presses a wet kiss to my shoulder.

His hands glide down my sides to my thighs, and I unconsciously spread my legs a little farther apart. When his hands travel up again, he hooks a thumb under the edge of my panties, pushes the fabric aside, and touches me where I'm already wet. His fingers move slowly over my most sensitive spot while I keep staring at the illuminated terrace across the way.

Then he withdraws his hand. As I flatten my palms against the windowsill, I hear the metallic rasp of his zipper and the rough scrape of denim.

He grasps my hips, pulls my panties down, and pushes me forward in one fluid movement. My bare skin presses against the cool windowpane. The sudden chill makes me draw a sharp breath. Across the way, the light stays on while I stand naked and exposed against the glass.

I feel his cock against me. Matthias moves his hips forward and enters me slowly. He doesn't thrust; he maintains a slow, steady pressure. I let out a soft gasp, my breath fogging the glass. He keeps pushing in until our bodies are pressed tightly together.

He stops and stays completely still, deep inside me. For a moment, he's all I can feel. He takes one hand off my hip and wraps it around my throat-not choking me, but holding me firmly enough that I can't turn my head away. He leans close to my ear.

"Do you think Verena's standing at her window?" he whispers calmly. "Do you think she's watching you offer yourself up like a cheap slut while I'm imagining I'm buried deep inside her?"

I stare toward her yard with him deep inside me, knowing his thoughts are with her. His words catch me off guard, and I hold my breath. I should be ashamed. I should look away. Instead, my fingers dig harder into the white wood of the windowsill, and I instinctively push my hips a little farther back against him.

My body responds to his words immediately. I can't do a thing to stop it.

"She's laughing at you, Corinna," he murmurs. He begins moving slowly against me. He pulls almost all the way out before sliding deep inside again. "She knows damn well I'm fucking you while all I can picture are her tits. I can feel how you react to me. Because you know exactly how much she turns me on."

Tears roll down my cheeks and drip onto the windowsill. I bite my lower lip while his words sink in. I hate what he's saying, yet I still press my hips against him. I want him to go on.

Matthias notices. He moves faster, more forcefully, pushing me harder against the glass. Verena's brightly lit terrace is still right in front of me. Knowing she might see us simply by lifting her head keeps my eyes fixed on her terrace.

His hands leave my throat and move around to my front. He cups my breasts and squeezes harder. The pressure is almost painful, but I don't pull away.

The sound of our bodies moving fills the dark bedroom. Across the way, the light is still on.

Matthias bends close to my ear. "You're so pathetic, Corinna," he whispers without raising his voice. "You're standing at the window in your own house, letting me fuck you like a cheap whore just because I'm telling you about another woman. Verena's over there wearing expensive silk. All you've got on is my sweat. Right now, you're nothing but the hole I'm warming my cock up in for her."

I close my eyes for a moment, but his words don't disappear. He's here with me while talking about her. Every sentence hits the place I've tried to ignore for years. And instead of pulling away, I push back against him.

"Yes," I gasp. My own voice sounds strange to me. "Fuck me for her."

He gives a short laugh, and I feel it against my back. He pulls me tighter against him, and my body tenses beneath his next movement. My orgasm hits so suddenly that for a moment I can't think straight. I press my face against the fogged glass and struggle to keep my balance.

Matthias holds me steady. After a few more thrusts, he lets out a deep groan and buries his face in my neck. Then he slowly pulls out.

I remain at the window for a moment, bracing myself on the sill until my legs feel steadier.

Behind me, I hear him zip up his jeans. Just moments ago, he was whispering all those things in my ear. Now he dresses with the same composure, as if nothing unusual has happened. He bends down, pulls my panties back up, and picks my dress up off the floor. Then he hands it to me.

I stare at the thin fabric and try to collect myself.

"Freshen up. We're going over there," he says, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter 3

The evening air hangs heavy and warm over Verena's terrace. The steady chirping of insects mingles with our neighbors' laughter. The smell of charcoal and marinated meat fills the garden. I'm sitting in a wicker chair, holding a cool glass of white wine. A bead of condensation slips down the glass and lands on my thigh. I flinch at the unexpected chill.

I can still feel Matthias all over my body. My thighs brush together, and the lingering sensitivity from my orgasm still throbs between my legs. I imagine I can still smell sex on my skin even though I washed afterward. Every passing breeze feels as if it might give me away. I take a long swallow of wine, hoping to settle my racing heart, if only for a moment.

Meanwhile, Verena moves effortlessly among the guests. She's wearing a thin beige summer dress that follows the curves of her body. She passes around baguette, refills wineglasses, and moves easily from one conversation to the next, laughing along the way. She's the perfect hostess. Nothing about her suggests that an hour ago Matthias was whispering fantasies about her into my ear. When she smiles at me in passing, her perfume carries the scent of white flowers.

My eyes drift uneasily toward Matthias. He's standing by the grill, a dark beer bottle in his hand, chatting casually with our neighbor about lawn mowers. He chuckles at a bad joke. He looks nothing like the man who humiliated me in our dark bedroom by the open window just a short while ago.

I watch them carefully, searching for the secret signs he talked about, for proof that there was something real behind his dirty talk. But there's nothing. They don't even glance at each other. They behave like any other neighbors at a barbecue. I feel the tension in my neck begin to ease and let out an audible breath.

It was a game. Just a game. I repeat the words in my head until I can almost believe them. He seized on my fear and used it to drive us both into a reckless frenzy. What happened at the window was pure fantasy. This is reality. He wanted me. The boundary marked by our fence is still there.

Our neighbor's laughter trails off. Matthias puts down his bottle and hands him the grill tongs. "Be right back," he says easily. "Gotta use the bathroom." He turns and strolls through the open patio door into the brightly lit house.

It's the most ordinary thing in the world: a man going to the bathroom during a barbecue. I cling to that thought, and for the first time all evening, I feel safe again.

A few minutes pass. Verena starts clearing the wooden table. Cutlery clinks softly against plates while the conversations continue around us. She stacks the dishes and carries them over to the chair where I'm sitting. The warm glow of the string lights falls across her face.

"Corinna, would you be a sweetheart?" she asks casually, picking up an empty bowl from the little table beside me. "I still need the rest of the napkins. Could you grab them? They're on the workbench in my garage."

It's such an ordinary request, a small favor between neighbors. The last of my suspicion fades. I smile at her. "Of course."

I set down my glass, but before I can leave the terrace for the garage, Thomas calls to me from the other side of the yard. He launches into a lengthy account of his battle with moss. I nod politely and let him talk, though a simple errand like this should take no time at all.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Verena disappear into the house with the dirty plates without a second thought. Five long minutes go by before I finally extricate myself from the conversation with a polite excuse. I turn away, leaving the warm glow of the string lights behind me.

My flats make barely a sound on the damp grass as the voices fade behind me. Back here, the air smells of moist earth and fallen leaves. I head toward the half-open garage at the end of the driveway. Its wide entrance is dark and still. The smell of old wood and motor oil drifts out. Just grab the napkins, I tell myself, and step inside.

The sharp odor of old gasoline hits me as I enter the garage. Pale light from a streetlamp falls through the small side window in narrow bands. Two steps toward the workbench, I catch a movement where there shouldn't be one. I stop short.

I take two more steps before the shapes in the darkness resolve into something I recognize: my neighbor and my husband.

Matthias has Verena bent over the old wooden workbench. Her summer dress lies on the concrete floor like a rag tossed aside without a thought. She's naked, and he's driving into her in a steady, urgent rhythm. Nothing about it seems rushed or furtive, nothing like a fleeting moment of weakness.

Matthias's hands move over Verena's back, seize her hips, and pull her harder against him with each powerful thrust. He presses his face against her neck. A rough, uncontrolled moan escapes him. I know that sound all too well. It's the noise he makes when he loses control.

"You're perfect, Verena," he rasps. "So fucking tight."

My hands curl into fists. It wasn't a game. What happened at the window wasn't fantasy. He's doing exactly what he said he wanted to do.

Verena opens her eyes. Slowly, she turns her head and looks over her shoulder into the dark doorway, straight at me. She holds my gaze.

She doesn't startle. Not so much as a twitch, no hurried attempt to cover herself. She studies my face for a moment, then tilts her head ever so slightly, as if she'd been waiting for me all along.

I stand rooted to the doorway. Her smile on the terrace. That casual request. She knew Matthias was here. She sent me here on purpose, at this exact moment, so I would see him inside her.

Matthias drives deep into her again. He doesn't notice me, completely oblivious to everything around him. Verena bites her lower lip without taking her eyes off me. She arches her back a little farther, presses her hips back against him more deliberately, and makes me watch how much she enjoys what he's doing to her.

I just stand there, unable to turn away or say a word. I watch her claim my husband-and under that unwavering gaze, I feel myself getting wet despite everything.

Matthias gasps loudly and grips her hips even tighter.

I take a shaky step backward. My shoes scrape softly against the sandy concrete. Verena's lips curve into a small, knowing smile-a silent greeting. I turn and hurry out of the garage, back into the darkness of the garden.

Chapter 4

The bedroom is pitch-black. I sit on my side of the bed, knees drawn tightly to my chest. My hands clutch the white sheet.

I can barely breathe. My panties are still wet from everything that's happened tonight. The window. His words. Verena's gaze in the dim garage. I'm sitting in my bedroom, on my own bed, and yet I no longer feel safe in this house. There are no boundaries left for me to retreat behind.

The bathroom door closes with a soft click. A thin strip of light falls across the floorboards.

Matthias steps out. He's wearing nothing but loose gray sweatpants. A few drops of water still glisten on his shoulders. He's washed away the smell of the garage, of Verena and sex. Now he smells like shower gel again, clean and familiar. I've breathed in that scent every evening for years. That ordinary, unchanged scent almost sends me into a panic.

He stops. When he looks at me, there's neither guilt nor remorse in his eyes.

He comes over and sits close beside me. The mattress dips under his weight. His hands, still warm from the hot water, settle against my face. He draws me firmly but unhurriedly toward him. I don't resist. I let him pull me onto his lap.

He wraps his arms tightly around me and presses my head against his bare chest. My fingers move restlessly over his skin, searching for something to hold on to. My ear rests against his ribs. I can hear his heartbeat clearly, steady and untroubled. It's that calmness that upsets me most. Nothing about him suggests he was groaning over Verena in the garage just ten minutes ago.

Gradually, my quick breaths begin to match the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Matthias strokes my hair and presses a long, comforting kiss to my forehead, the kind he's given me a thousand times.

"Shh," he whispers. "Calm down."

His voice is deep and gentle. He strokes my arm and takes my ice-cold fingers in his. "What happened over there doesn't change anything, Corinna," he murmurs against my temple. "It has nothing to do with us. It was sex. A dirty fuck, because I wanted it. Yeah. And Verena's good for that. But that's all she is. She isn't you."

He speaks as if none of it is a contradiction. He can want Verena and sleep with her without it touching the bond between us in the slightest. Now he's sitting here with me, and to him our marriage seems completely separate from anything that happens outside this bedroom.

"Look at me," he says softly. He puts a finger beneath my chin and lifts my head until our eyes meet. "In here, it's just us," he says with such certainty that I almost have to believe him. His thumb brushes a tear from my cheek. "This is our home. You're my wife. No one will ever come between us. Our marriage is untouchable."

I listen to him, feeling the familiar pressure of his hands. These are the words I've needed to hear. I want to believe his world really works that way, that the invisible boundary between sex and our marriage will hold for him even if I can no longer see it. I dig my fingers into the soft fabric of his pants and cling to him. I bury my face against his neck and breathe in the clean, familiar scent of his skin. I need him now—my husband. To reassure myself that he's really here with me, I press even closer. He rubs my back soothingly as I close my eyes and let myself be held.

Slowly, he lifts me off his lap and gently lays me on my back. The white cotton sheet is cool against my overheated skin.

He moves between my knees, grasps my hips, and slides my wet panties down, dropping them carelessly onto the floorboards.

Then he enters me. There's no forceful thrust, no hard pressure. He eases into me slowly. He supports his weight on his forearms, his face just inches from mine. He doesn't break eye contact.

His hands cradle my face, his thumbs sweeping gently over my cheeks. He lowers his head and kisses me deeply, with the intimacy of years together. This kiss has nothing to do with the garage or the window. It belongs to us alone.

His hands glide slowly over my shoulders, my breasts, my stomach. I loop my arms around his neck and pull him closer.

Matthias moves inside me in a steady rhythm. His gaze stays on my face while I kiss him. My fingers slide into the hair at his nape and hold him there. With each movement, a little more of the tension in my body eases.

My breathing turns uneven. I press my lips to his shoulder as my hips lift to meet him. My orgasm comes quietly, spreading through my lower belly until my fingers grip his skin more tightly.

Matthias holds me close. A little later, he lets out a soft groan and stays above me for another moment.

Then he draws me against his chest. I hear his heartbeat beneath my ear. His hand moves slowly once over my back and comes to rest there. My fingers loosen their hold on his neck, and I close my eyes.

Chapter 5

I'm standing barefoot by the coffee machine. The grinder whirs, and the rich smell of freshly ground coffee fills the room. This is my kitchen. My home. I straighten a little and tighten the knot of my silk robe.

Matthias's words from last night still echo in my head, calm and certain. Our marriage is untouchable. I cling to the invisible dividing line between our world inside this house and whatever he wants with Verena outside it. My familiar sense of safety has returned.

The glass patio door slides open without a sound. No knock, no hesitation, not even a pause to see how I'll react. Verena simply walks in.

She isn't wearing shoes or pants. The only thing she has on is one of Matthias's plaid shirts. It's far too big for her. The hem ends just below her bare ass and sways against her naked thighs. The sleeves are rolled up untidily, and the collar hangs open.

I set the coffeepot down hard on the counter. For a moment, I struggle to breathe.

Verena walks through my kitchen as if she's done it a hundred times before. She strolls past the island and barely glances at me, utterly unfazed by my presence. A faint smile plays on her lips.

Matthias is already sitting in his usual place at the wooden table. He's wearing a clean white T-shirt and dark jeans. He looks completely at ease. He's absorbed in the news on his phone and only looks up when Verena approaches. He shows no surprise or discomfort. He simply waits.

Verena doesn't spare me another glance. She walks straight up to my husband, pushes his right knee aside, and straddles his lap. The loose fabric of his shirt rides farther up her thighs. She wraps her arms around his neck, leans forward, and kisses him.

I stare at them, waiting for him to push her away on instinct. To break the moment, move her off him—at least here, now, right in front of me, in our own kitchen.

But he does none of those things.

He puts his phone on the table, then rests his hands on Verena's bare thighs. He strokes her skin with a firm, unhurried touch that I know all too well.

I have to brace one hand against the counter. His comforting words last night weren't lies. Only now do I understand what he meant. He hasn't given up on our marriage. But apparently, to him, that also means Verena can do all of this without affecting our bond in the slightest. He lets her have her way, making room for her as though it's the most natural thing in the world.

Verena breaks the kiss. She takes a quiet breath, then turns toward me and looks me up and down from her place on his lap. Leaning comfortably against Matthias's chest, she reaches across the set table. Her fingers curl around the handle of my favorite coffee mug, the one I drink from every morning. She lifts it to her lips and takes a leisurely sip.

My fingers twist in the delicate silk of my robe.

Verena lowers the mug. Her smile widens slightly. "It's cold," she says softly. "Make me some fresh coffee, sweetheart."

She's sitting in my house on my husband's lap, wearing his shirt, drinking from my mug, and giving me orders. And it's precisely that outrageous arrogance that makes me wet against my will.

I tear my eyes away from her and stare at Matthias, searching his expression for any reaction at all. Some sign that she's crossing a line.

He looks calmly back at me. His face barely changes. Then he raises his head slightly and gives me a silent nod.

The meaning of that nod is unmistakable: I'm supposed to do what she says. For a few endless seconds, I don't move. I open my mouth,

ready to tell her to get out, to scream at him, or to hurl the coffeepot against the wall. For a moment, I nearly do. But the silence in the kitchen and her expectant gaze hold me back. I close my mouth again.

I turn away. I go back to the coffee machine. And I obey.

I take a clean mug and pour the hot coffee into it. My hand is trembling so badly that the glass pot knocks against the ceramic. The coffee sloshes dangerously close to the rim. I turn around again.

Verena is watching me. She slips off Matthias's lap, steps barefoot onto the tiles, and comes straight toward me.

She takes the mug from my hand and sets it carelessly on the kitchen island.

She moves closer until she's standing right in front of me. Her hands settle on my shoulders. Her touch is soft but unyielding. She pushes my upper body forward. I don't pull back. I understand what she's about to do, and I let it happen. She bends me over the stainless-steel counter, right where I prepared the salad yesterday. The cold metal bites unpleasantly through the silk of my robe.

Verena lifts her head and looks past my shoulder at Matthias. "Undress her," she says, almost casually. "Then fuck your wife for me. I want to watch you take her."

I hear Matthias behind me. The rasp of his zipper cuts through the tense silence in the kitchen. He doesn't argue or hesitate for even a second. He simply obeys her command.

He steps close against my back. His hands grip my hips, push my silk robe up, and pull my damp panties down my legs. The cooler morning air brushes my bare skin.

Verena lets out a soft laugh. "Look at that, Matthias," she mocks, studying me with amusement. "Look how fucking wet she is. Your wife is such a horny little cuckquean." She looks at me from the side, clearly enjoying the sight of me exposed. "I bet," she adds quietly,

"she's going to love standing by and watching when you fuck me from now on."

Matthias drives his hips forward and thrusts deep into me.

A hoarse gasp escapes my throat. He pulls back a little and immediately thrusts hard into me again. He's taking me on command, giving her exactly what she asked for, each thrust driving me against the stainless steel in the same relentless rhythm.

Verena doesn't retreat an inch. She stays close at my side and bends over the counter until her face is level with mine. A satisfied smile crosses her face.

She brushes a strand of hair away from my forehead. Her touch is almost tender. Then she slips her hand into mine, intertwines her fingers tightly with mine, and presses my palm flat against the cool metal. The intimacy of her hand in mine feels unreal, especially with my husband moving in a steady rhythm behind me.

Matthias reaches forward, cups my breasts, and kneads them firmly in time with his thrusts. He's fucking me right in front of her, and I surrender completely to it.

Verena lowers her head a little more. Her lips almost brush my ear. "You two are sweet together," she whispers. Her warm breath grazes my skin. "But starting today, I decide when he's allowed to touch you."

Those words undo the last of my control. My orgasm hits all at once. My body clenches, and I gasp soundlessly against the cold steel.

My knees buckle, but Matthias catches my weight effortlessly. He holds me steady, thrusts deep into me a few more times, and finally comes inside me with a deep, ragged groan.

I'm sprawled across the kitchen island, my cheek pressed to the cold steel. My breathing comes in ragged bursts. For a few seconds, all I can feel are the aftershocks running through my muscles and the loud pounding of my heartbeat in my ears. Behind me, Matthias steps back. The rasp of his zipper breaks the silence.

He doesn't leave me standing there. He takes hold of my upper arms and helps me straighten up. My legs are shaky, but he supports me. Without a word, he draws the two sides of my silk robe together. His fingers brush my skin in passing. The small, familiar gesture is hard to reconcile with the command he obeyed only moments ago. He reties the knot at my waist and pulls it snug.

"Here," he says quietly. He gets a glass from the cabinet, fills it with water at the sink, and puts it into my hand.

I take the glass. My fingers tremble slightly as I drink. The cold water feels good. When I look up at him over the rim, he meets my eyes. He doesn't turn away from me to attend to Verena. He stays beside me, one hand resting on my shoulder.

The way he looks after me is exactly as it's always been. Our marriage is untouchable. He didn't lie to me last night. Our home, the life we've built together—all of it still exists. He hasn't thrown any of it away for her. The tightness in my chest begins to loosen.

A soft clink draws my attention to the dining table.

Verena is still sitting there. She's put my favorite mug on its saucer and is watching us. There's no jealousy on her face, no possessiveness waiting to surface. She props her chin on her hand and watches Matthias stand beside me. She seems perfectly at ease, almost pleased to see us close.

She stands. Matthias's plaid shirt rustles as she walks toward us barefoot across the tiles. She stops a short distance away.

"Don't worry, Corinna," she says evenly. "I'm not taking your place."

I hold the water glass tightly in both hands and look at her.

"He's your husband," she continues with a slight smile. "That isn't going to change."

She picks up my coffee mug, carries it to the sink, and sets it among the dirty dishes with the ease of someone already at home in my kitchen.

"But you're going to have to get used to sharing him a little," she adds. She leans against the counter and looks at me. "We'll see how far we can push your boundaries. I bet you're going to like it."

She turns toward Matthias. She doesn't ask him for a goodbye kiss; she merely brushes his arm as she walks past him. Then she heads for the glass patio door.

Before stepping into the garden, she turns once more and straightens the collar of Matthias's shirt, which she hasn't taken off.

"I'll keep this for now," she says with a small smile. "I'll bring it back in a few days. Enjoy your Sunday."

She pulls the door shut behind her. The click of the latch is the only sound in the kitchen, followed by the low hum of the refrigerator.

Through the glass, I watch Verena stroll across the lawn toward the hedge. Matthias stands beside me, his hand resting lightly on my back.

Standing in my kitchen, I know I ought to say something. I could look Matthias in the eye and tell him that this must never happen again. I could put an end to this game right here.

But I don't.

With his familiar hand against my back, I think of Verena's words: pushing boundaries. The thought unsettles me. Even so, I want to know what she'll do next.

Epilogue

Low voices drift from the television. Matthias sits beside me on the couch, his hand resting on my knee, his thumb absently brushing the rough denim of my jeans. I take a sip of red wine and lean against his shoulder. He moves a little closer, puts an arm around me, and kisses the top of my head. For a moment, the familiar gesture makes everything feel as ordinary as it did for years. He's here with me.

And yet nothing is quite the way it used to be. It's only been four days since Sunday morning. Matthias has been over to Verena's three times since then: Monday, Tuesday, and today, straight after work. Each visit lasted almost an hour. I haven't asked what they do together, and he hasn't volunteered any details. But I know when he leaves. I hear the quiet click of the front door when he returns. I catch myself counting every minute he spends with her. I could stop him; one word would be enough. But I stay silent.

The doorbell rings. Matthias glances toward the hall, but I'm already setting my wineglass on the coffee table. "I'll get it."

When I open the front door, Verena is standing on the doormat. She's wearing a dark coat and holding a carefully folded bundle of fabric. It's Matthias's plaid shirt.

"Freshly washed and ironed," she says in greeting, handing it to me. She sounds almost friendly, as if she'd only come over to borrow some sugar.

I take the soft fabric. "Thank you."

Verena smiles. She glances past me into the brightly lit hallway, then looks straight into my eyes. "Are you two doing anything Saturday night?"

I blink. "Why?"

"I've got an idea for us," she says calmly. "I think it's time for the next step." She doesn't explain what she means. She looks at me, lets

the words hang between us, and smiles faintly. "Think about it, Corinna. See you soon."

She turns and walks down the paved path. I close the door and stand there with the shirt in my hands.

Matthias has come into the hallway. He stops a few steps away and studies my face. He doesn't ask who was at the door. He heard her voice.

"You don't have to do this," he says quietly. He steps closer. "If you don't want to, I'll tell her no. She can stay next door. It's your decision."

He means it. If I asked, he would call it off. I run my fingers over the smooth fabric of his shirt. I think about the three afternoons he spent with her, about sitting alone in the living room, watching the clock and waiting for him to come back.

I look up at him. I don't shake my head. I step toward him, set the folded shirt on the hallway cabinet, and slip my hand into his.

"Let's wait and see what she has in mind," I hear myself say.

Matthias squeezes my fingers. He nods.

We walk back into the living room. I sit down beside him on the couch and rest against his shoulder. I haven't said no. And I can't stop wondering what Verena will ask of us on Saturday.

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