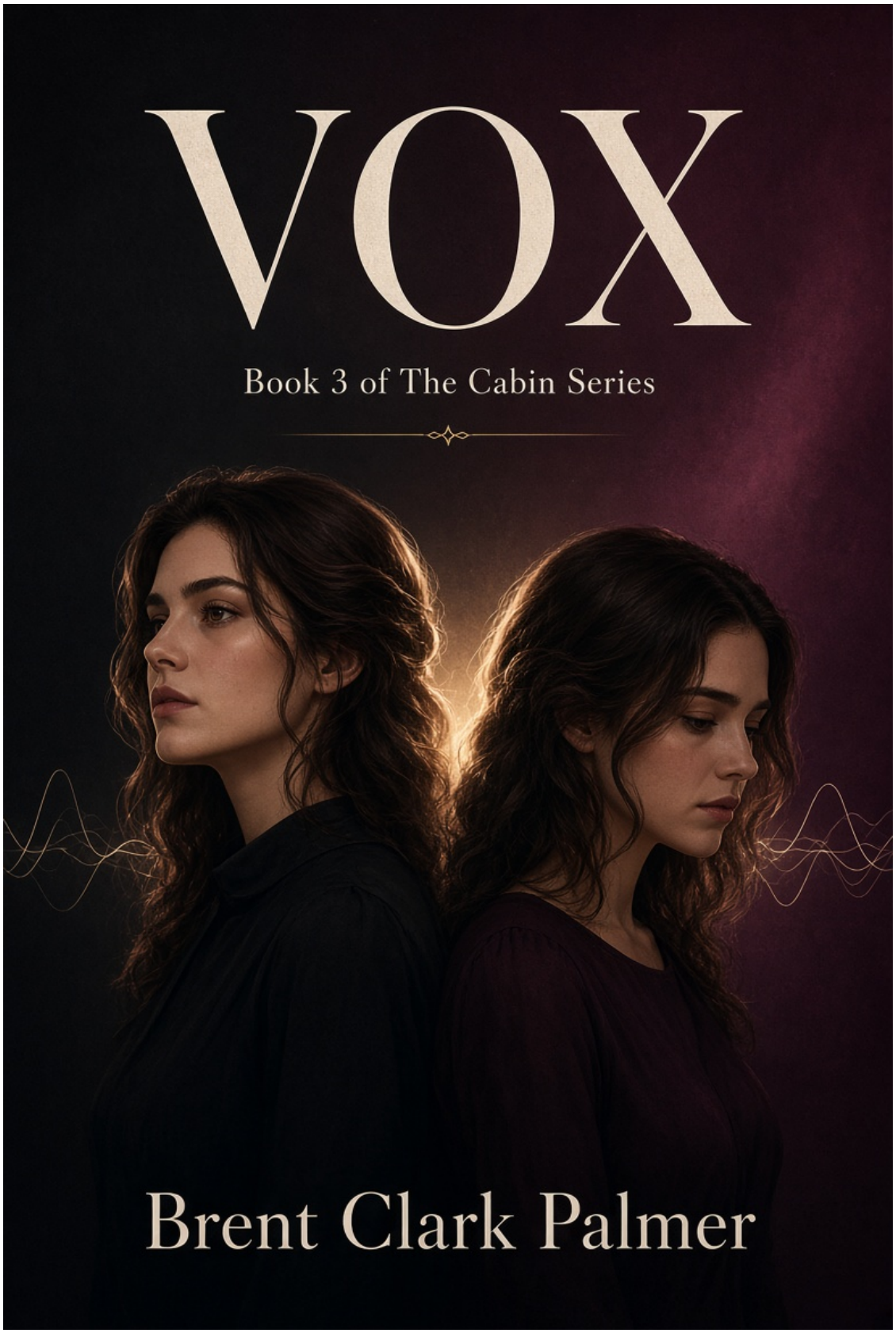

VOX
Book 3 of The Cabin Series
Brent Clark Palmer

Vox

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Cabin, Book 3

Chapter One: The Architecture of Three Hours

In the Coats household, time was not measured in years, nor even in seasons, but in the one hundred and ninety-four minutes that separated the birth of Tabitha from the arrival of Melanie. For eighteen years, those three hours and fourteen minutes had served as the foundational law of the family—an invisible constitution written into every shared bedroom wall, every backseat car ride, and every holiday dinner.

Tonight, under the warm amber glow of the dining room chandelier, that law was on full display for forty relatives, neighbors, and high school classmates gathered to celebrate the twins' eighteenth birthday.

Melanie stood near the French doors leading to the conservatory, her fingers nervously pleating the soft cream fabric of her dress. Anyone looking across the crowded room would have struggled to understand why she sought the shadows. She possessed a countenance of rare, disarming beauty—heart-shaped and gentle, with wide, dark-lashed hazel eyes, a delicate nose, and full lips that seemed perpetually poised on the verge of a kind word. Her rich brunette hair fell in glossy, brushing waves over her shoulders. Beneath the modest boat-neck cut of her dress, her figure was trim yet graced with slight, full curves—a soft, natural hourglass of entirely manageable proportions that drew lingering, appreciative glances from half the young men in the room. Yet every time someone looked her way, Melanie's gaze fluttered down to the polished oak floorboards, her cheeks warming with a shyness she had never outgrown.

Twenty feet away, holding court beside the mahogany sideboard, stood Tabitha.

Nature had built the sisters from the same clay only to carve them with entirely different chisels. Tabitha shared Melanie's deep brunette coloring and the same enviable, modestly curved silhouette, accentuated tonight by a structured hunter-green dress that hugged her waist before flaring neatly at the knee. There, however, the resemblance ended. Where Melanie's face was an invitation, Tabitha's was a verdict. Her cheekbones were high and pronounced, her jawline taut, her dark eyebrows set in a severe, unyielding line above cool, appraising eyes. Even when Tabitha smiled at a compliment from Aunt Clara, there was an unmistakable edge of authority in her posture—the bearing of a young woman who expected the room to arrange itself around her comfort.

And the room always did. Most of all, her parents.

Near the fireplace, Arthur and Evelyn Coats stood with drinks in hand, watching their daughters. Over the years, whatever parental impulse they might once have had to shelter the softer twin had eroded into a pragmatic admiration for the stronger one. Melanie was sweet, certainly, and accommodating to a fault, but in her parents' eyes, she was water—pleasant enough, yet perpetually in need of a

vessel to hold her shape. Tabitha was the vessel. Tabitha was decisive, loud, and unflinching. Why coddle Melanie when Tabitha was already so effortlessly capable of managing them both?

“Melanie,” Evelyn called out mildly as she passed the conservatory doors, not pausing to touch her daughter’s arm. “Stop hovering by the curtains, dear. Tabitha asked you ten minutes ago to make sure the gift table had enough ribbon scissors and place cards for the envelopes. Go see what she needs.”

“I already put the scissors out, Mom,” Melanie said softly, offering an eager, accommodating smile. “And I arranged the cards by size, just how she likes.”

Evelyn gave a small, dismissive wave of her hand. “Well, go stand by her anyway. You know she doesn’t like having to hunt for you when things get busy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Melanie murmured.

She wove through the clusters of guests, murmured polite apologies whenever her shoulder brushed a sleeve, and approached the sideboard. Tabitha was speaking with three girls from the student council, her chin tilted high.

“Tabby?” Melanie said quietly, waiting for a pause in the conversation that didn’t quite come. “Mom said to check if you needed anything else with the table before they bring out the cake.”

Tabitha turned her head slowly. Her severe gaze swept from the top of Melanie’s head down to her hands, stopping on the silver appetizer tray Melanie had picked up along the way to clear an empty glass.

“Why are you holding a dirty tray?” Tabitha asked, her voice dropping into that crisp, resonant register that always made the fine hairs on Melanie’s arms stand up.

“Mr. Henderson had nowhere to set his glass, so I just thought—”

“You thought you’d play scullery maid at my eighteenth birthday party?” Tabitha interrupted. She didn’t shout yet, just let the iron beneath her tone ring against the chatter of her friends. The three girls from school went quiet, watching with fascinated discomfort. “Put that down in the kitchen immediately. And fix your hair—you’ve let it fall in front of your face again like you’re twelve years old.”

“I’m sorry,” Melanie said automatically, her fingers tightening around the rim of the tray. “I’ll go put it in the sink right now.”

She turned toward the kitchen hallway, moving quickly to escape the cool scrutiny of Tabitha’s friends. In the doorway, she nearly collided with Caleb Vance, a boy from her AP Art class who had spent the better part of junior and senior year finding excuses to borrow her charcoals.

“Whoa—careful, Mel,” Caleb said, steadying the edge of the tray with one hand. His eyes lingered on her face, softening as she looked up. “I was actually looking for you. It’s kind of loud in there. I wanted to give you this before everyone starts doing the big gift pile.”

From his jacket pocket, he drew a flat, rectangular parcel wrapped in brown kraft paper and tied with twine.

A genuine, unguarded smile broke across Melanie’s face, transforming her quiet prettiness into something radiant. “Caleb, you didn’t have to do that. Let me just set this tray down—”

She turned half a step to rest the tray on the hall console table and reached out with both hands to take the package. For a fleeting second, the tightness between her shoulder blades loosened.

Then the dining room doors swung wide, and Tabitha stepped into the archway.

She took in the scene in half a heartbeat: the unwashed tray sitting on the hallway console, Caleb holding out an unsanctioned gift, and Melanie—who was supposed to be in the kitchen and back at her post—smiling and lingering in the corridor while the birthday candles were being lit inside.

Tabitha drew in a breath that expanded her ribcage, her severe features hardening into granite.

“MELANIE!”

The name didn’t merely travel down the hallway; it detonated.

Tabitha possessed a voice that defied her slender frame—a booming, chest-deep instrument of pure command that cut through forty conversations, silenced the stereo in the corner, and rattled the crystal pendants on the hall sconce. In the living room and dining room alike, conversations severed mid-syllable. Heads snapped toward the archway.

Melanie froze as if struck by a live wire. Her hands, inches from Caleb’s package, jerked back to her chest. The color drained from her cheeks in an instant, replaced by the hot, prickling flush of conditioned panic.

“WHAT DID I JUST TELL YOU TO DO THIRTY SECONDS AGO?!” Tabitha roared, taking two deliberate strides into the hallway. She didn’t lower her volume by a single decibel now that she had the entire party’s attention; if anything, the audience sharpened her edge. “Did I tell you to dump dirty dishes on the hallway furniture and flirt in the corridor, or did I tell you to take that tray to the kitchen and get back out here for the cake?!”

“I—I was just—” Melanie stammered, her voice a fragile, breathy thread against the thunder of her sister’s. Her shoulders curved inward, her chin dropping as

the familiar, overwhelming weight of Tabitha's fury pressed down on her. Every time Tabitha shouted like this, it felt as though the air was being sucked directly out of Melanie's lungs, leaving her dizzy and desperate to make the noise stop.

"Hey, take it easy," Caleb said, stepping half an inch between them, though his own face had gone pale at the sheer ferocity of Tabitha's tone. "I stopped her, Tabitha. It's my fault."

Tabitha didn't even spare him a glance; her dark, unblinking eyes remained bored into her sister. "I am not talking to him, Melanie, I am talking to YOU! Everyone is standing around the table waiting while the wax drips onto the frosting because you cannot follow the simplest instruction without getting distracted! Pick up that tray!"

Melanie didn't think. Her body moved before her mind could process the humiliation burning Behind her eyes. She snatched the silver tray off the console table with trembling hands, the single empty glass clattering loudly against the metal.

"I'm sorry, Tabby," Melanie whispered, her eyes fixed entirely on the carpet near Tabitha's heels. "I'm taking it right now."

"And push your hair back behind your ears before you walk back into that room!" Tabitha barked, a final, ringing crack of the whip that made Melanie flinch visibly. "You have ten seconds!"

Melanie practically fled down the remaining length of the hall into the kitchen, shoving the tray onto the counter and raking her trembling fingers through her chestnut waves to tuck them tightly behind her ears. Her heart hammered against her ribs like a trapped bird. When she hurried back out—well under the ten-second mark—the guests had parted around the dining table, their eyes darting politely away from her flushed face.

At the head of the table stood Arthur and Evelyn.

Melanie's eyes sought her mother's first, a reflex she hadn't quite managed to kill even after eighteen years—some small, foolish hope that Evelyn might step forward, put an arm around her waist, or tell Tabitha that she had gone too far in front of their friends.

Evelyn merely looked at her younger daughter's flushed cheeks and sighed, smoothing the front of her blouse. "Honestly, Melanie," she said, her voice calm, matter-of-fact, and entirely devoid of sympathy in the quiet room. "Why must you always wait until your sister has to raise her voice before you listen? Come stand by the cake and stop looking like the sky is falling."

Arthur struck a long wooden match against the box and touched it to the first of the eighteen candles, chuckling dryly as he shook his head. "Your sister has been

running this party like clockwork all evening, Mel," he said, casting a warm, appreciative glance at Tabitha, who had already resumed her place of honor at the center of the table. "The least you can do is follow her lead without making her repeat herself. Go on, get in there next to her."

"Yes, Dad," Melanie whispered.

Not a single person challenged it. That was the quietest, heaviest truth in the room: to their parents, and therefore to their world, Tabitha's shouting wasn't cruelty—it was stewardship. And Melanie's submission wasn't a tragedy—it was simply her proper place.

Melanie stepped into the narrow space to Tabitha's left, careful to keep her shoulder half an inch behind her sister's so she wouldn't crowd her in the photographs. Without looking over, Tabitha reached down, caught Melanie's left wrist in a firm, cool grip, and guided her hand to rest lower on the handle of the silver cake knife, directly beneath Tabitha's own.

"Smile," Tabitha murmured under her breath, just loud enough for Melanie alone to hear as the room began to sing. "And don't you dare let go until I tell you to."

"I won't," Melanie breathed, forcing her lips into a trembling, obedient curve as the eighteen flames blurred in the heat before them—wondering, as her sister's fingers pressed hers down onto the blade, what the rest of their adult lives would look like when three hours of seniority already felt like eternity.

Chapter Two: The Spoils of the Evening

By eleven o’clock, the last of the sedans had backed down the Coatses’ driveway, leaving behind a dining room that looked like the wake of a very polite hurricane. Crumpled linen napkins, half-empty glasses of sparkling cider, and abandoned dessert plates dotted every flat surface, while a mountain of Torn wrapping paper sat piled beside the hearth.

Arthur had loosened his tie and settled into his leather wingback chair with a nightcap, while Evelyn sat on the sofa paging through the evening’s digital photographs on her tablet. Neither of them reached for a sponge. Cleaning up after a milestone party was young people’s work—and in the Coats household, that distinction carried a very specific division of labor.

Tabitha stood near the center of the dining room table, her hunter-green dress still immaculate, carefully arranging her favorite birthday cards into a neat stack while she directed the restoration of the house.

“You missed the buttercream smear near the centerpiece, Melanie,” Tabitha said without looking up, her voice crisp in the quiet house. “And don’t just push the crumbs onto the carpet. Use the crumb scraper Dad got for Christmas.”

“I have it right here, Tabby,” Melanie murmured, her chestnut waves falling forward as she leaned over the wide mahogany table, carefully guiding the small silver blade across the tablecloth. Her feet ached inside her heels, and the gentle curve of her back was stiff from hours of standing at attention, yet she moved with quiet, uncomplaining diligence.

She wasn’t entirely alone in her labor. At the far end of the table, gathering up the crystal punch cups two at a time, was Caleb Vance.

He had lingered while his parents walked home two doors down, offering to help the twins clear the heavy folding tables before calling it a night. Evelyn had graciously accepted on Melanie’s behalf, noting how nice it was that someone was willing to keep Melanie on task. For the past twenty minutes, Caleb had been working his way steadily closer to Melanie, his eyes following the soft sway of her cream dress and the graceful, curving line of her waist every time she stretched across the table to reach a stray plate.

When Tabitha turned briefly toward the sideboard to stack her gift boxes, Caleb stepped beside Melanie, setting a pair of glasses down on her tray.

“Hey,” he whispered, close enough that she caught the warm scent of cedarwood and winter air on his jacket. “You survived the cake cutting.”

Melanie looked up through her dark lashes, a shy, grateful smile touching her lips. “Barely. Thank you for staying to help, Caleb. You really didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” Caleb said softly. He reached into the inside pocket of his blazer and drew out the flat, rectangular parcel wrapped in brown kraft paper and tied with twine—the same one he had tried to hand her in the hallway three hours ago. “Besides, you still haven’t opened this. Now that the crowd’s gone, I wanted you to see it before I head out.”

Melanie’s breath caught. She wiped her palms quickly on the small apron she had tied over her skirt and reached out, her fingertips just brushing the rough twine. “I’ve been wondering what it was all night—”

“A secret present?”

Tabitha’s voice cut between them, smooth as silk over steel. Neither of them had heard her heels on the rug, but suddenly she was right there, stepping squarely into the narrow space between Caleb and the table, her shoulder nudging Melanie half a step backward.

Before Caleb could pull his hand back, Tabitha’s slender fingers closed around the parcel and plucked it effortlessly from his grasp.

“Actually, Tabitha—” Caleb started, a flush rising up his neck as he reached half an inch toward the package. “I brought that earlier for—”

“Melanie, look at that punch bowl!”

The sudden, thunderous crack of Tabitha’s voice made both Melanie and Caleb flinch, though only Melanie reacted with the instant, conditioned obedience of a lifetime.

“Did you seriously leave red ladle drips drying on Mom’s heirloom silver while you stand here chatting?!” Tabitha roared, her dark brows drawing together in magnificent, terrifying displeasure as she pointed a rigid finger toward the buffet table. “Take that tray into the kitchen, get a bowl of warm soapy water, and polish that silver before it stains! Right now! Do not make me tell you twice!”

“I—I didn’t see it, I’m sorry!” Melanie gasped, the apology tumbling from her lips before her mind could even register that Tabitha had just taken Caleb’s gift. The sheer volume of her sister’s command scrambled her thoughts into a single, urgent directive: obey and make the shouting stop. She snatched up the tray of dirty glasses, her head ducked low, and hurried toward the kitchen.

By the time Melanie returned forty seconds later with a steaming bowl of sudsy water and a microfiber cloth, her heart still fluttering against her ribs, Tabitha had already untied the twine.

Melanie slowed to a halt just inside the dining room archway, the warm porcelain bowl heavy in her hands.

Under the chandelier, Tabitha was peeling back the brown kraft paper to reveal a slim, velvet-lined mahogany case. Inside rested a set of professional charcoal pencils alongside a small, framed study on heavy cream paper—a delicate, deeply romantic charcoal portrait of a brunette girl in three-quarter profile, the curve of her cheek and the fullness of her lips rendered with unmistakable tenderness. Beneath the sketch, written in Caleb's neat architectural hand, were three words: To my muse.

It was the exact angle Caleb had watched Melanie from every Tuesday and Thursday in fifth-period AP Art, when the afternoon sunlight came through the studio windows. Melanie knew it immediately. She had seen him shading that very corner of paper on Friday.

"Tabitha, wait, that's from art class—" Caleb began, his voice tight with awkward panic as he glanced toward the archway where Melanie stood frozen. "I drew that—"

Tabitha looked up from the portrait, and something extraordinary happened to her severe countenance. The iron jaw softened; her dark, commanding eyes widened with a sudden, disarming warmth that almost nobody was ever privileged to see.

"Caleb," Tabitha breathed, her voice dropping into a low, velvet purr that seemed to vibrate right through the floorboards. She didn't look like a tyrant now; she looked like a queen who had just been offered a crown worthy of her brow. "I had no idea you were watching me across the courtyard during fourth-period study hall."

"Study hall?" Caleb blinked, thrown completely off balance. "No, I—"

"Look at the shading on the hair," Tabitha murmured, stepping right into Caleb's personal space.

Caleb's breath hitched in his throat. Up close, the visual confusion between the twins was potent and dizzying. Tabitha had the exact same rich, glossy brunette waves as Melanie, the exact same soft, full curves swelling beneath the bodice of her hunter-green dress, the same trim waist and feminine proportions that had haunted Caleb's daydreams for months. And because the charcoal sketch was a soft, stylized profile, it looked just as much like a romanticized vision of Tabitha as it did Melanie.

Before Caleb could form another syllable of protest, Tabitha set the open case on the table and placed her warm, smooth hand flat against the center of his chest, right over his hammering heart. Her fingers curled lightly into the lapel of his blazer, drawing him an inch closer.

“It’s breathtaking,” Tabitha cooed, tilting her face up toward his, her lips parted, her dark eyes locked onto his with intoxicating intensity. She stroked the edge of his collar with her thumb, her touch bold, possessive, and unmistakably intimate. “Most boys at our school are too intimidated to even speak to me, Caleb. It takes a real man to admire someone like me and put it on paper.”

In the archway, Melanie’s fingers tightened around the bowl of soapy water until her knuckles turned white. She opened her mouth, waiting for Caleb to laugh nervously, to step back, to say, No, Tabitha, I’m in AP Art with Melanie.

Instead, Melanie watched Caleb’s eyes drop from Tabitha’s gaze to her full lips, and then down the flattering cut of her green dress.

A visible tremor went through Caleb’s shoulders. He had spent a year pining after the shy, elusive twin who blushed and looked at her shoes whenever he spoke to her—and now here stood her mirror image, possessing every curve he desired, looking at him as if he were a conqueror and pressing her body close enough that he could feel the heat of her skin through his shirt. To correct her now meant humiliating the most formidable girl in school and inviting that ear-splitting wrath upon himself; to agree meant claiming the prize that was currently stroking his jawline.

His posture shifted. His spine straightened, his chest expanding beneath Tabitha’s palm as his resistance collapsed entirely under the weight of her attention.

“I… yeah,” Caleb said, his voice rough and suddenly thick with a new, heady conviction. He glanced once—very briefly—toward the shadows of the hallway where Melanie stood holding a wet rag in a stained apron, and then his gaze locked permanently back onto Tabitha’s radiant, triumphant face. Perhaps, in the back of his mind, it really had been Tabitha’s sharp, undeniable magnetism that had drawn him to the Coats sisters all along. “I wasn’t sure if you’d like it. I wanted to wait until everyone left so I could give it to you properly.”

“You did wonderfully,” Tabitha whispered.

Rising slightly onto the balls of her feet, she slid her free hand around the back of Caleb’s neck, her fingers tangling in his hair, and pressed a slow, soft, lingering kiss directly to his lips.

Caleb’s eyes fluttered shut, his hand coming up instinctively to rest on the curve of Tabitha’s hip, pulling her briefly against him before she drew back with a breathless, satisfied smile.

Across the room, the water in Melanie’s porcelain bowl sloshed gently over the rim, dampening her wrists. She didn’t make a sound. A cold, hollow ache bloomed beneath her breastbone—a mixture of disbelief, stinging confusion, and

the crushing realization that even a boy's affection was something Tabitha could simply reach out and confiscate while she stood by with a cleaning cloth.

"Well, look at that," Arthur's voice boomed warmly from the living room archway.

Both parents had risen from their seats, drawn by the quiet murmur at the table, and now stood watching the pair with wide, gleaming smiles of unmistakable approval. Evelyn clasped her hands together over her tablet, looking at Tabitha and Caleb as though they were already posing for a prom portrait.

"What a lovely sketch, Caleb," Evelyn said, stepping forward to admire the mahogany box on the table. "We always knew Tabitha had an eye for quality, and clearly you do too. That's a very thoughtful eighteenth-birthday gift."

"Thank you, Mrs. Coats," Caleb said, standing a little taller beside Tabitha, his cheeks flushed with pride and the lingering warmth of Tabitha's lips.

"You're taking me to dinner on Friday to celebrate properly, aren't you, Caleb?" Tabitha asked, keeping her hand tucked securely in the crook of his elbow as she smiled up at him. "There's that new Italian place downtown."

"Friday," Caleb agreed immediately, smiling back down at her without a shred of hesitation. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"Seven sharp, young man," Arthur chuckled, stepping over to clap Caleb's shoulder with paternal warmth—the same pride he reserved solely for things belonging to his eldest daughter. Then Arthur's gaze flicked over Caleb's shoulder, landing on Melanie, who was still standing motionless by the buffet table with her bowl of cooling water. His brow creased slightly.

"Mel, don't just stand there gawking with a dishpan while your sister sees her guest out," Arthur said chidingly. "That punch bowl isn't going to clean itself, and we'd all like to get to bed before midnight."

"Honestly, Melanie, I told you to do that five minutes ago!" Tabitha snapped, her voice rising just enough to send a fresh jolt through Melanie's nervous system before instantly softening again as she turned back to Caleb. "Come on, Caleb. I'll walk you out to the porch."

"Yes, Tabby. Goodnight, Caleb," Melanie whispered.

If Caleb heard her, he didn't show it; his head was already bent toward Tabitha's as she led him toward the front foyer, her laughter light and musical against the closing of the heavy oak door. In the quiet dining room, under her mother's satisfied gaze, Melanie dipped her cloth into the tepid water and began to scrub the silver bowl, watching her own soft, silent reflection blur in the curved metal.

Chapter Three: Borrowed Lace and Open Lines

At six-thirty on Friday evening, the air in the upstairs hallway was warm with the scent of steamed silk and hairspray. Inside Tabitha’s bedroom—the larger of the two upstairs suites, which caught the morning sun and boasted the walk-in closet—Melanie knelt on the plush rug with a velvet shoehorn in her hand.

"Careful with the buckle, Melanie," Tabitha said, looking down past the hem of her robe with cool, appraising eyes. "Your fingers are trembling. If you scratch the patent leather before I even make it down the stairs, you’ll be paying to replace them out of your graduation check."

"I'm being careful, Tabby," Melanie murmured, her chestnut waves brushing against her cheeks as she guided the thin black strap around her sister’s ankle and fastened the tiny gold clasp.

Even on her knees in a plain cotton cardigan and jeans, Melanie looked effortlessly lovely, the soft lamp light catching the gentle symmetry of her face and the lush, manageable swell of her hips and bust. Yet she made herself as small as possible beside the vanity bench, her movements practiced and deferential. For the past hour, she had ironed the pleats of Tabitha’s charcoal-silk wrap dress, pinned the back of Tabitha’s hair into a loose, glamorous cascade, and hunted through three closets for the exact clutch Tabitha wanted.

Tabitha stepped off the bench, testing the heels with a crisp tap on the hardwood before turning toward the full-length mirror. She untied her robe and let it slide from her shoulders, standing in a simple beige everyday bra that didn't quite suit the plunging neckline of the silk dress hanging on the closet door. Her dark brows knitted together in dissatisfaction.

Without a word, Tabitha turned on her heel, marched through the shared jack-and-jill bathroom, and walked straight into Melanie’s smaller bedroom.

Melanie scrambled to her feet and hurried after her, stopping in the doorway just as Tabitha pulled open the bottom cedar drawer of Melanie’s bureau. Folded neatly beneath a stack of winter sweaters was a tissue-lined boutique box—and resting inside was a delicate set of ivory Chantilly lace undergarments and sheer thigh-high stockings that Melanie had secretly bought the week before with the birthday check from their maternal grandmother. Beside the box sat a crystal atomizer of French vanilla-and-jasmine perfume, the only scent Melanie ever wore.

Tabitha lifted the ivory lace demi-cup up to the light, a slow, satisfied curve touching her lips. "Well, well. Look what the little mouse was hiding under her woolens."

A sudden, desperate heat rushed into Melanie’s cheeks. "Tabby, please," she breathed, taking a single hesitant step forward, her hands lifting halfway from her sides. "I bought that with Nana’s check. It hasn't even been worn yet, and that’s my—"

Tabitha’s head snapped around. Her jaw set, her ribcage expanded, and the air in the small bedroom vanished.

"EXCUSE ME?!"

The roar ricocheted off the sloped walls of Melanie’s bedroom with physical force. Melanie’s heels literally left the carpet as she flinched, her hands flying up to cover her mouth while her back hit the doorframe.

"Are you standing there telling me NO when I have a seven o'clock reservation in twenty minutes?!" Tabitha thundered, advancing two steps with the ivory lace held in her fist. Her dark eyes blazed with such concentrated fury that Melanie felt her knees go weak. "What on earth are YOU going to do with French lace, Melanie?! Wear it while you scrub the kitchen counters?! Did you forget who is actually going out tonight while you sit in your room?! Take that tissue paper out of the box and unhook my back strap—NOW!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it, Tabby, I'm sorry!" Melanie gasped out, tears springing to the corners of her hazel eyes from the sheer acoustic shock of the outburst. All thought of ownership evaporated instantly, replaced by the frantic need to appease her sister before she shouted again.

With trembling fingers, Melanie stepped forward, reached behind Tabitha’s back to unfasten her plain strap, and held up the delicate ivory lace so Tabitha could step into it. She adjusted the satin straps over Tabitha’s shoulders—shoulders identical in width and slope to her own—and watched in silent, aching humiliation as the lace molded perfectly to Tabitha’s full, shapely curves.

"Now the perfume," Tabitha commanded, her volume dropping back to an icy, expectant clip. "Two sprays on the collarbones, one on the wrists."

"Yes, Tabby," Melanie whispered. She picked up the crystal bottle and misted her own signature scent onto her sister’s warm skin, breathing in the familiar notes of jasmine and vanilla as Tabitha stepped into the charcoal-silk wrap dress.

When the doorbell chimed at seven o'clock sharp, Arthur and Evelyn were already waiting in the foyer like proud dignitaries at a ribbon-cutting.

"Melanie, get the door and take your sister’s coat off the hall tree," Evelyn instructed without looking back, smoothing her hands over her skirt as Tabitha descended the staircase. "Don't leave Caleb standing in the cold."

Melanie pulled the heavy front door open. Caleb stood on the porch in a dark wool coat and a crisp button-down shirt, his hair neatly combed. When his eyes

landed on Melanie first, his breath caught for half a second; she looked so remarkably like the girl in his charcoal portrait that a flicker of uncertain guilt crossed his features.

"Hi, Mel," he said quietly, offering a tentative half-smile. "Are you... having a good Friday?"

Before Melanie could utter a syllable, Tabitha glided past her into the light of the chandelier, waiting with her arms slightly back. Conditioned by the upstairs reprimand, Melanie immediately lifted the black cashmere coat and slipped it smoothly over Tabitha’s shoulders, careful not to disturb a single glossy brunette wave.

As Tabitha turned to face Caleb, a breeze from the open doorway carried the warm, unmistakable drift of Melanie’s vanilla-and-jasmine perfume straight across Caleb’s face. His pupils dilated. Looking at Tabitha in the plunging charcoal silk—with the faint, tantalizing edge of ivory Chantilly lace peeking just above the wrap—Caleb seemed to lose his train of thought entirely.

"Don't keep her out past eleven, Caleb," Arthur said warmly, stepping forward to shake the boy’s hand while Evelyn beamed beside him. "Though knowing Tabitha, she’ll keep you right on schedule. She’s the responsible one."

"I'll take great care of her, Mr. Coats," Caleb said, his voice husky as Tabitha slipped her gloved hand into his elbow and tugged him out into the night without a backward glance at her twin.

"Close the door, Melanie, you're letting the heat out," Evelyn said mildly, turning back toward the living room television.

By nine-forty-five, dinner at the Italian bistro was a memory, and Caleb’s dark sedan was parked beneath the sprawling branches of the Douglas firs at Miller’s Overlook, high above the glittering grid of the town lights. The heater hummed on low, keeping the interior warm while a light autumn mist beaded on the windshield.

Caleb sat in the driver’s seat with one hand resting on the console, his pulse thrumming in his ears. All through dinner, Tabitha had been intoxicating—leaning across the white tablecloth to let him glimpse the ivory lace against her skin, laughing low in her throat, brushing her knee against his under the table. Yet now, in the quiet intimacy of the parked car, with Melanie’s familiar vanilla scent filling the cabin, that small, stubborn knot of conscience tightened in Caleb’s chest.

"Tabitha," Caleb said softly, his fingers brushing the silk at her wrist. "Back at your house... when Mel opened the door. Does it bother her? Us being out tonight? Because in art class, before your party, I think she might have

thought—"

Tabitha didn't stiffen, and she didn't pull away. Instead, she smiled—a slow, knowing, almost maternal smile of pure amusement.

"Oh, Caleb," Tabitha purred, unbuckling her seatbelt and reaching across to unfasten his. "You still don't understand how my sister works, do you? Melanie doesn't want the pressure of someone like you. She likes being told what to do. She needs it. Honestly, she’s happiest when she’s making herself useful to me."

"Come on, nobody likes being bossed around that much," Caleb murmured, though his breath hitched as Tabitha rose smoothly between the seats and slipped into the wide, leather-upholstered backseat of the sedan.

"No?" Tabitha tilted her head, patting the leather cushion beside her while her skirt rode up a fraction over the sheer tops of her stockings. "Come back here and I’ll prove it to you."

Caleb swallowed hard and climbed into the backseat beside her, the springs dipping under his weight as the door handles locked them in their private world. Before he could reach for her, Tabitha opened her clutch, pulled out her phone, and tapped the screen twice.

She set the phone flat on the padded center armrest between the front seats, facing them, with the speakerphone icon glowing bright white in the dimness.

It rang once. Less than half of a second ring sounded before the line clicked open.

"Hello? Tabby?" Melanie’s voice came through the car speaker, soft, immediate, and slightly breathless, as though she had been sitting right next to her phone waiting for instructions. "Do you need me to unlock the side porch?"

In the backseat, Caleb froze, his eyes widening as he looked from the glowing phone screen to Tabitha. Tabitha simply raised one finger to her lips, her dark eyes sparkling with wicked triumph, and slid across the leather until her thigh was pressed tight against Caleb’s.

"No, Melanie, I don't need the side porch unlocked yet," Tabitha said into the air, her voice crisp and authoritative while her left hand came to rest boldly on the inside of Caleb’s thigh. "What are you doing right now?"

"I was just finishing my geometry homework at my desk," Melanie said quietly over the speaker. "Mom and Dad already went up to their room to read."

"Good. Put your pencil down and walk into my bedroom right now," Tabitha ordered, her fingers tracing slow, deliberate circles against the denim of Caleb’s jeans until his breathing grew shallow. "Turn down my comforter, plug in my heated blanket on low, and lay my burgundy silk robe across the foot of the bed."

There was the faint rustle of paper on the other end of the line, followed by the soft creak of Melanie’s desk chair. "Okay, Tabby. I'm going in there now."

For thirty seconds, the only sound in the car was the quiet pad of Melanie’s footsteps through the shared bathroom, the whisper of linen sheets being folded back, and the click of the blanket switch—all while Tabitha leaned in and pressed a slow, open-mouthed kiss to the side of Caleb’s neck, letting him inhale the vanilla-and-jasmine perfume she had confiscated from Melanie’s vanity. Caleb’s hand came up automatically, gripping the soft curve of Tabitha’s waist, his head spinning at the surreal proximity of the two sisters—one tremblingly obedient through the speaker, her exact physical double pressed warm and pliant against his chest.

"I turned the bed down and laid out your robe, Tabby," Melanie’s gentle voice reported through the speaker. "Is there anything else you need before I hang up and go back to my room?"

Tabitha pulled back an inch from Caleb’s jawline. Her features sharpened into the familiar, terrifying mask of absolute command.

"DID I SAY YOU COULD HANG UP THE PHONE, MELANIE?!"

The sudden, booming shout inside the enclosed car made Caleb jolt against the headrest, and over the speakerphone came a sharp, audible gasp coupled with the thud of Melanie’s knees hitting the edge of the mattress.

"N-no! No, Tabby, I'm sorry!" Melanie stammered, her voice instantly reduced to that small, panicked tremor that never failed to follow her sister’s wrath. "I just thought—"

"Stop thinking and listen to me!" Tabitha barked at the glowing screen, her voice ringing with iron finality. "You are going to sit right there on the bench at the foot of my bed in the dark. You are going to hold that phone against your ear, and you are not going to make a single sound—not a word, not a complaint—until I tell you that this call is over! Do you understand me?!"

"B-but why—"

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, MELANIE?!"

"Yes! Yes, Tabby, I understand, I'm sitting down right now, I won't say a word!"

Silence fell from the bedroom end of the line—nothing but the faint, rapid rhythm of Melanie’s shallow breathing pressed tight against the receiver.

In the backseat, Tabitha’s expression eased into something slower and more intent. She kept her eyes on Caleb while her hands moved to his belt, the leather sliding free with a quiet click that carried over the open line. The zipper followed. She worked his jeans and briefs down together, just far enough, and the cool air

of the cabin met him. Caleb’s breath left him in a short rush. Tabitha looked down, then angled her face toward the phone so her voice would travel clearly.

“Melanie. Start counting. Out loud. Seconds.”

A tiny, obedient inhale came through the speaker. Then Melanie’s voice, small and steady in the dark: “One… two… three…”

Tabitha wrapped her fingers around him. The length filled her palm and then some; the girth made her thumb and middle finger meet only with pressure. She stroked once, slow, from base to tip, and spoke as she did it.

“He’s thick, Melanie. Longer than my hand. Warm. Already wet at the head.” She leaned in, parted her lips, and took him into her mouth. The first slow pull drew a low sound from Caleb that he tried and failed to swallow. Tabitha worked him with deliberate rhythm—tongue flat along the underside, lips sealed, one hand steady at the base—while Melanie’s count continued without pause.

“…seventeen… eighteen… nineteen…”

Caleb’s hips shifted. Tabitha took him deeper, the wet sound of it soft but unmistakable in the quiet car. She pulled back just enough to speak, voice still clear for the phone.

“Keep counting. Don’t stop.” Then she sank down again, cheeks hollowing, the motion unhurried and thorough. Caleb’s hand found the back of her head, fingers threading into the glossy brunette waves. His breathing turned rough. Melanie’s numbers kept arriving, each one separate, each one obedient.

“…forty-one… forty-two…”

Tabitha set a steadier pace, mouth sliding, tongue working, the occasional low hum vibrating against him. Caleb’s thighs tensed. The count climbed past a minute. When she took him to the back of her throat and held, his control broke. He came with a sharp, loud groan that filled the cabin and carried straight into the speaker—thick pulses she swallowed without pulling away, one hand still stroking through it until he shuddered and went still.

Melanie’s voice had not faltered. “…seventy-eight… seventy-nine… eighty…”

Tabitha lifted her head slowly, wiped the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, and looked at the glowing screen. Her tone returned to ordinary command, warm with satisfaction.

“Stop counting. Go downstairs and put the kettle on so there’s hot water for my tea when Caleb drops me off. And make sure you’re back upstairs in your own bed before our car pulls into the driveway. I don't want you underfoot when I say goodnight to my boyfriend.”

A shaky exhale traveled the line. “Yes, Tabby. I'll go put it on right now.”

Tabitha’s thumb ended the call. In the sudden quiet of the car she rested her forehead briefly against Caleb’s shoulder, while far below the overlook the town lights continued their steady glow.

Chapter Four: The Rearview Mirror

At six-fifteen on Saturday evening, the rain that had threatened all afternoon finally began to fall in a fine, cold drizzle against the windows of the Coats house.

Melanie stood in the hallway downstairs in a soft navy jumper and flats, holding a freshly pressed umbrella for her sister, her eyes shadowed with the quiet fatigue of a girl who had barely slept. Every time she had closed her eyes the night before, the sound of her own voice counting steadily to eighty in the dark—and the ragged groan that had followed over the speakerphone—echoed in her ears.

At the top of the stairs, Tabitha emerged in an emerald-green silk halter dress that left her shoulders bare and clung to the full, shapely swell of her hips with effortless grace. She was halfway down the steps when her phone chimed in her clutch.

She glanced at the screen, then answered on the first ring. “Caleb? You’re supposed to be pulling into the driveway in ten minutes.”

A tense murmur came through the receiver. Tabitha’s dark brows drew together in a sharp, displeased line. “Your starter died? Well, you can’t very well walk us downtown in the rain, and I am certainly not riding in the back of some damp taxi on a Saturday night.”

From the living room archway, Arthur lowered his evening newspaper, his expression shifting immediately into executive problem-solving mode. Evelyn appeared beside him from the sunroom, a pair of reading glasses perched on her nose.

“Caleb’s car acting up, sweetheart?” Arthur asked, stepping into the foyer.

“The starter clicked dead in his driveway,” Tabitha said, lowering the phone from her ear with an irritated sigh. “And we have a seven o’clock patio table reserved under the heaters at Phoenicia. If we lose that table, it takes three weeks to get another weekend booking.”

“You aren’t losing your reservation,” Arthur said firmly. He reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out the leather key fob to his prized dark-blue touring sedan, and tossed it—not to Tabitha, whose manicured hands were occupied with her clutch, but straight toward Melanie.

Melanie caught the keys reflexively against her chest, blinking in surprise. “Dad?”

“Downtown parking on a Saturday night is a nightmare, Mel,” Arthur said matter-of-factly, as though the solution were the most natural thing in the world. “Your sister can’t be hunting for a space five blocks away in those heels while it’s raining. You drive Tabitha over to pick up Caleb, drop them right at the front

awning of the restaurant, and wait near the square until they're ready to leave."

"That's a wonderful idea, Arthur," Evelyn agreed warmly, looking at Melanie without a trace of hesitation. "You weren't doing anything tonight anyway, Melanie. Take your textbook with you and you can read in the car while they have their dinner. Just make sure you pull right up to the curb so Tabitha's dress doesn't catch the wet pavement."

"I… yes, Mom," Melanie whispered, her fingers curling tightly around the cool metal key fob. The thought of sitting three feet in front of Caleb after what she had been forced to listen to less than twenty-four hours ago made her stomach twist into a tight, cold knot—yet under the twin weight of her father's expectation and Tabitha's watchful gaze, protest was unthinkable.

"Tell Caleb to be waiting under his porch light in three minutes," Tabitha said into the phone before ending the call. She stepped off the bottom stair and looked squarely at her twin. "Go pull the car out of the garage and turn the rear seat heaters on high, Melanie. I'm not sitting on cold leather."

"Yes, Tabby. Right away."

Four minutes later, the dark sedan glided to a halt at the curb in front of the Vance house. Melanie kept both hands wrapped tightly around the leather steering wheel, staring straight ahead through the rhythmic sweep of the windshield wipers. In the backseat, directly behind the front passenger chair, Tabitha sat with her legs crossed at the ankle, checking her lipstick in a compact mirror.

Caleb hurried down his front walk under an umbrella, wearing a charcoal sweater beneath his blazer. Out of sheer habit, he reached for the front passenger door handle—only for the rear window to hum downward two inches.

"In the back, Caleb," Tabitha called out smoothly over the patter of the rain. "Melanie is driving us tonight."

Caleb paused, his hand dropping from the front handle, and pulled open the rear driver-side door instead. As he folded his umbrella and slid onto the wide leather bench beside Tabitha, his eyes lifted instinctively to the rearview mirror.

Melanie's hazel eyes were waiting there in the rectangular glass.

For a fraction of a second, the air in the car seemed to stall. Caleb's face flushed a deep, guilty crimson as he looked at the soft, heart-shaped symmetry of Melanie's reflection—remembering, with sudden, dizzying clarity, the sound of her quiet, trembling voice counting out seconds in the dark the night before. Melanie dropped her gaze immediately to the speedometer, her cheeks burning.

"Hi, Mel," Caleb said, his voice tight and overly polite. "Thanks for… for driving us out tonight. My dad's mechanic can't look at the starter until Monday."

“You’re welcome, Caleb,” Melanie murmured, shifting the sedan into drive.

“She didn’t have any plans anyway,” Tabitha purred, sliding effortlessly across the leather to tuck her arm through Caleb’s and rest her head against his shoulder. “Eyes on the road, Melanie. And take Elm Street—I don’t want to hit the stoplights on Main.”

For the next two hours, after dropping the pair beneath the glowing brass heaters and canvas awnings of Phoenicia, Melanie sat alone in the parked sedan half a block down the street. She tried twice to open her history book under the dim amber dome light, but the words swam together on the page. Mostly she watched the rain trace silver paths down the glass and glimpsed, through the restaurant’s tall front windows, the occasional flash of Tabitha’s dark hair tossing back in laughter as Caleb leaned across the table toward her.

At nine-twenty, the restaurant doors opened and the two of them stepped out under the awning. Melanie started the engine at once and glided smoothly up to the curb.

As Tabitha settled into the backseat, Caleb lingered for a moment by the front passenger door. In his left hand, he held a white paper takeout bag stapled shut and fragrant with the warm, savory scent of roasted garlic, saffron rice, and honeyed pastry. He pulled the front passenger door open just wide enough to lean in toward Melanie.

“Hey, Mel,” Caleb said softly, offering her an earnest, almost apologetic smile as he held the warm bag out toward her across the console. “I felt awful about you sitting out here in the cold for two hours waiting on us. I asked the kitchen to pack up a fresh order of lamb skewers and warm baklava before we paid the check. It’s still hot.”

Melanie looked up at him, genuinely startled. After everything that had happened since Thursday night, the small, unexpected gesture of kindness caught her completely off guard. A shy, fragile warmth touched her lips as she reached out to take the paper bag from his fingers.

“Caleb, thank you,” Melanie breathed, her hazel eyes softening as they met his. “That was really thoughtful of you. You didn’t have to—”

“Caleb, get in the car, you’re letting the rain blow all over my hem!” Tabitha’s voice cut sharply from the backseat.

Caleb flinched slightly, pulling back and shutting the front door before climbing into the rear seat beside her. In the front, Melanie carefully rested the warm takeout bag on the passenger seat beside her thigh, feeling a tiny, quiet ember of comfort against the chill of the evening.

In the backseat, Tabitha’s cool, unblinking gaze locked onto the white paper bag resting on the leather seat, and then shifted to the way Caleb was still looking toward the front of the cabin. Her jaw tightened. A doggie bag. A little scrap of secret sympathy between them, right under her nose.

“Melanie,” Tabitha said, her voice dropping into that low, dangerous register as the sedan pulled away from the curb. “Put that greasy bag on the rubber floor mat immediately. And do not turn toward home. Take the ridge road up to Miller’s Overlook.”

Melanie’s fingers stiffened on the wheel. “The overlook? But Tabby, it’s raining, and Mom said—”

“Did I ask you for a weather report, or did I tell you to turn onto the ridge road?!” Tabitha snapped, loud enough that Melanie’s shoulders jerked upward and she immediately clicked on her left turn signal, abandoning the route home.

Ten minutes later, the sedan climbed the winding, pine-shadowed grade of Miller’s Overlook and came to a stop in the exact same gravel turnout where Caleb had parked the night before. Tonight, the viewpoint was completely deserted, shrouded in mist and the steady drum of rain on the roof. Far below, the town lights blurred like wet watercolors through the windshield.

Melanie shifted the transmission into park. Her heart was hammering so violently against her ribs that she felt lightheaded. Knowing why they were here—and desperate to escape the suffocating confines of the car—her left hand went instinctively to the driver’s side door handle to let herself out into the rain.

“PUT YOUR HAND BACK ON THAT STEERING WHEEL, MELANIE!”

The roar detonated inside the closed cabin with such concussive force that Melanie cried out, her hand snapping back to the leather wheel as if the metal handle were red-hot. Beside Tabitha, Caleb pressed back against the seat bolster, his breath catching at the sheer, terrifying authority in Tabitha’s voice.

“T-Tabby, please,” Melanie stammered, her chest heaving as tears of panic sprang to her lashes. “I’ll stand over by the trees under the umbrella! I won’t go far, I promise, just let me wait outside—”

“YOU WILL NOT MOVE ONE INCH OUT OF THAT SEAT!” Tabitha thundered, leaning forward between the front headrests so that her voice struck the back of Melanie’s neck like a physical gale. “You think you can sit up there batting your eyes over a bag of leftovers and then run off to hide when it’s time to do your job?! Put both hands on the wheel at ten and two!”

Melanie’s trembling hands flew to the top of the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the leather. “I’m sorry, Tabby! They’re on the wheel!”

“Now take your right hand, reach up, and tilt that rearview mirror down until you can see the entire backseat!” Tabitha commanded, every syllable crisp and merciless. “And turn on the amber map light above your head!”

“No, Tabby, please don’t make me—” Melanie’s voice broke into a tiny, desperate whimper.

“ADJUST THAT MIRROR RIGHT NOW OR SO HELP ME GOD, MELANIE, WE WILL SIT HERE UNTIL DAWN!”

Conditioned obedience won out before the echo of the shout had even faded. Sobbing once under her breath, Melanie reached up with shaking fingers, clicked on the faint amber overhead light, and tilted the rectangular mirror downward until the wide leather backseat—and the two figures sitting upon it—filled the frame of the glass. Immediately, she tried to drop her eyes to her lap.

“Eyes up!” Tabitha barked instantly. “Lock your eyes on that glass, Melanie! If I see your eyelids drop or your head turn toward the window for a single second, you will wish you had never been born!”

Melanie’s gaze snapped back to the mirror, wide, shining, and trapped.

In the backseat, Caleb swallowed hard, his pulse visibly hammering at the base of his throat as he looked from the terrified, exquisitely pretty face framed in the mirror to her twin sitting beside him. “Tabitha,” he breathed, his voice rough and uncertain. “She’s right there—”

“I know she’s right there,” Tabitha murmured, her fury vanishing in an instant, replaced by a slow, intoxicating smile of total dominion. Without breaking eye contact with Melanie’s reflection in the mirror, Tabitha reached behind her own neck and unhooked the single gold clasp of her emerald halter dress.

Slowly, deliberately, she slid the hidden side zipper down her ribs and peeled the silk dress completely off her body, tossing it carelessly onto the seat beside them. She wasn’t wearing the ivory lace tonight; beneath the silk she wore only a wisp of black satin, and within five unhurried seconds, she had slipped out of that too, kicking her heels to the floorboard until she knelt on the leather cushion completely nude.

In the soft amber glow of the cabin, the sight was dizzying. Tabitha’s body was the exact, living mirror of Melanie’s own—the same creamy skin, the same slender waist flaring into lush, full hips, the same soft, generous swell of her breasts tipped with dark rose, framed by the glossy brunette waves tumbling past her shoulders. Yet while Melanie sat hunched and trembling in her modest navy jumper in the front seat, Tabitha displayed their shared form with regal, shameless power.

Tabitha reached out, unfastened Caleb’s belt and jeans with practiced ease, and swung one bare thigh over his lap to straddle him directly in the center of the backseat—right where the rearview mirror captured every inch of her skin.

When Caleb looked up at the naked perfection of the girl poised above him—and caught, just beyond her bare shoulder in the slanted mirror, the wide, stunned hazel eyes of the twin who had blushed over his takeout bag ten minutes earlier—his last shred of resistance evaporated in a rush of blinding heat. His hands came up to grip the bare, full curves of Tabitha’s hips.

“Look at the mirror, Caleb,” Tabitha whispered, resting her palms on his shoulders as she positioned herself above him, her dark eyes fixed squarely on her sister’s reflection in the glass. “Look at her watching us. And you, Melanie—don’t you dare blink.”

Tabitha settled her weight onto Caleb’s lap with deliberate slowness, the bare heat of her settling against the rigid length of him. In the mirror Melanie’s eyes stayed wide and fixed, the amber light catching the sheen of tears along her lower lashes. Tabitha rolled her hips once, letting the slick head of him drag through her folds, then reached down and guided him to her entrance.

“Eyes on the glass, Melanie,” she said, voice low but carrying. “Watch.”

She sank onto him in one unbroken glide. The stretch pulled a sharp breath from her; Caleb’s hands clamped hard on the full curves of her hips. For a moment she held still, seated to the hilt, the identical line of her waist and the soft swell of her breasts fully visible above the mirror’s lower edge. Then she began to move—slow, rolling lifts that kept him deep, each descent grinding her clit against the base of him. The wet sound of it filled the cabin. Caleb’s head tipped back; his thumbs pressed into the soft flesh just above her hipbones.

“Not yet,” Tabitha told him, breath already shortening. She braced her palms on his shoulders and rode with tighter, shorter strokes, chasing the friction she wanted. “You stay still until I say.”

Melanie’s knuckles had gone white on the wheel. Every small shift of Tabitha’s body was framed for her: the way the glossy brunette waves spilled forward, the flush rising across the same creamy skin Melanie saw in her own mirror each morning, the dark rose of Tabitha’s nipples drawn tight. Tabitha’s pace quickened. Her thighs flexed. A low, broken sound left her throat as the first orgasm took her—hips stuttering, inner muscles clenching hard around him in rhythmic pulses. She rode it out without lifting off, grinding down until the last tremor passed, then opened her eyes and found Melanie’s reflection again.

“That was one,” she said, voice rough. “Count the next with me if you want, but do not look away.”

She started moving again before Caleb could answer, deeper now, lifting higher so he almost slipped free before she took him all the way back in. The second climb was faster. Tabitha's hands slid into his hair; she tugged his head forward so his mouth closed over one nipple, then the other. Caleb groaned against her skin. His hips began to buck despite her earlier order. She let him. The wet slap of their bodies grew louder. Melanie's breathing had turned shallow and audible; a single tear tracked down her cheek and she did not wipe it.

Tabitha's second climax built on the edge of his. She ground down hard, circling, and came with a sharp cry just as Caleb's control broke. He thrust up into her, thick and pulsing, the hot spill of him flooding her while she clenched through her own release. The mirror caught every detail—the arch of her back, the grip of his hands on her ass, the way her mouth stayed open against his temple until the last shudder left them both. For several seconds the only sounds were the rain on the roof and their uneven breathing. Tabitha stayed seated on him, still joined, one hand idly stroking the damp hair at his nape while she watched her sister's trapped, shining eyes in the glass.

When the rhythmic creak of the leather seat finally subsided into the quiet patter of the rain on the roof, the windows of the sedan were fogged thick and opaque with heat.

In the backseat, Tabitha lifted her head from Caleb's damp neck, her bare shoulders rising and falling in slow, languid breaths while her chestnut hair clung in dark ribbons to her cheeks. Without the slightest hurry—and without covering herself—she reached across the seat, retrieved her emerald silk dress, and slipped it smoothly back over her head, fastening the gold clasp behind her neck before stepping back into her heels.

Up front, Melanie hadn't moved a millimeter. Her fingers were still cramped around the top of the steering wheel at ten and two, her tear-streaked face pale in the amber light, her eyes still fixed obediently on the mirror just as she had been commanded.

Tabitha picked up her compact, checked her hair, and snapped the case shut with a sharp click that broke the silence. She met Melanie's eyes in the glass, her expression cool, composed, and utterly triumphant.

"You can look at the road now, Melanie," Tabitha said evenly. "Turn off the map light, start the defroster, and drive us back home. Once you've dropped Caleb at his porch and pulled the car into the garage, you can take your cold leftovers into the kitchen and eat them at the counter—after you've wiped the condensation off these rear windows."

A tiny, shuddering breath escaped Melanie's lips as her hands finally loosened on the wheel. "Yes, Tabby," she whispered, reaching blindly for the ignition key. "I'll

wipe them down as soon as we get home.”

Chapter Five: The Fitting Room Mirror

The boutique sat three blocks off the square, its black awning lettered in restrained gold. Evelyn had dropped them at the curb with a list folded into Melanie's hand and a single instruction: "Tabitha knows what will photograph well for the spring formal. Let her choose." She had already driven away before either twin answered.

Inside, the air was cool and faintly scented with cedar and new wool. Tabitha moved through the racks with the same unhurried authority she used at the sideboard, lifting a hanger, dismissing it, lifting another. Melanie stayed half a step behind, hands clasped loosely at her waist, the soft knit of her navy jumper brushing her wrists.

"This one," Tabitha said at last, and held up a slip of black silk so fine the light passed through it. The neckline plunged to the waist; the skirt was little more than a bias-cut suggestion of fabric that would end high on the thigh. "Caleb likes the line of a back. This will show him everything he already wants to see."

Melanie's fingers tightened on the strap of her bag. "Tabby, that isn't… it's almost transparent."

"It's formal enough for the photographs Mother wants," Tabitha answered, already walking toward the fitting rooms at the rear. "And it is exactly what I am putting you in."

The attendant smiled and unlocked the last door in the row. "Room six is the large one. Take your time." She did not wait to be thanked. Tabitha stepped inside, waited until Melanie followed, and closed the door. The lock turned with a soft, decisive click.

The room was narrow—barely wider than the length of an outstretched arm—and lined on three sides with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. A single padded bench ran along the fourth wall. Overhead, a row of bright bulbs threw even light that left no shadow. Their reflections multiplied at once: two identical girls with the same glossy brunette waves, the same heart-shaped faces, the same modest curves, standing so close their shoulders nearly touched.

Tabitha set the black silk on the bench. "Off with the jumper."

Melanie hesitated, fingers at the hem. In the mirrors she watched her own hands tremble. "I can try it on over what I'm wearing. It will show the shape just the same."

Tabitha's head turned. The movement was small, but the room caught it and threw it back from every angle. "I said off."

Melanie’s thumbs hooked under the knit and drew it upward. The jumper came free; she folded it with automatic neatness and laid it on the far end of the bench. Beneath it she wore a plain cotton camisole and the soft, high-waisted briefs she preferred when no one would see them. The air of the room was cooler against her bare arms. Every mirror showed the same picture: the gentle slope of her shoulders, the soft weight of her breasts beneath thin cotton, the faint flush already rising at her throat.

“Those too,” Tabitha said.

“Tabby—”

“Now.”

Melanie’s hands moved before the word finished. The camisole lifted over her head. She set it aside. The briefs followed, a small, careful slide down her thighs. She stepped out of them and stood with her arms crossed tightly beneath her breasts, palms pressed flat against her ribs as if she could make herself smaller. The mirrors refused the attempt. From every direction the same body faced her: creamy skin, the modest, natural swell of her hips, the dark-rose tips of her nipples drawn tight by the chill and by the fact of being watched. Her own face looked back at her, wide-eyed and already close to tears.

Tabitha lifted the black silk. “Arms down.”

Melanie shook her head once, a tiny motion. “I don’t want to wear this. Not for him. Not in front of everyone. Please.”

The word had barely left her mouth when Tabitha stepped in.

The shout came from less than a foot away, aimed straight at Melanie’s face.

“PUT YOUR ARMS DOWN!”

The sound detonated inside the hard-walled room. It struck the mirrors and came back doubled, tripled, a physical concussion that rattled the glass in its frames and rang through Melanie’s skull. Her ears filled with a high, bright whine. The air left her lungs in a single startled gasp. Both arms dropped of their own accord, hands falling open at her sides. Tears sprang instantly, hot and uncontrolled, spilling down her cheeks before she could blink them back.

Tabitha did not raise her voice again. She simply stepped closer until the front of her hunter-green blouse brushed Melanie’s bare skin. “Turn around.”

Melanie turned. The motion was slow and unsteady. In the mirrors she watched her own back, the long line of her spine, the soft curve where waist met hip. Tabitha gathered the black silk and lifted it. The fabric whispered over Melanie’s head, cool and weightless, then settled. It clung at once—barely there across her breasts, open nearly to the base of her spine, the hem ending so high that the

lower curve of her bottom was visible in every reflection. The silk was sheer enough that the color of her nipples showed through as darker shadows.

Tabitha’s hands settled at Melanie’s waist, cool and firm, and turned her until she faced the central mirror again. “Shoulders back. Chin up. Look at yourself.”

Melanie looked. The girl in the glass was her, and yet not: the same face, wet with tears, framed by the same dark waves, but the body displayed without the soft knit or the cotton that had always covered it. The dress left almost nothing unshown. Every mirror repeated the image so that she stood at the center of a dozen versions of herself, all of them exposed, all of them waiting.

Tabitha’s fingers moved with deliberate care. She drew the silk a fraction tighter across Melanie’s ribs so the fabric molded more closely to the underside of each breast. She smoothed a palm down the open back, tracing the line of the spine until her hand rested just above the cleft. In the glass Melanie watched the hand—identical in size and shape to her own—adjust the hem so that it sat higher still. A single fingertip brushed the outer curve of her hip, then withdrew.

“Caleb will see this,” Tabitha said quietly, her mouth near Melanie’s ear. The words were ordinary, almost conversational, yet they carried in the small room. “He will see the way the silk clings when you move. He will see that you are wearing nothing under it. And he will know I chose it for him.”

Melanie’s breath shuddered. A fresh tear tracked down her cheek and caught at the corner of her mouth. She did not lift a hand to wipe it away. Her arms stayed at her sides exactly where the shout had left them. In every mirror the same tear shone, the same body stood offered, the same obedient stillness held.

Tabitha stepped back half a pace and studied the full effect. The light caught the sheer silk and turned it almost liquid against Melanie’s skin. “Stay exactly like that,” she said. “Do not move your hands. Do not look away from the glass. I am going to open the door and have the attendant bring the matching heels. You will stand here until I tell you that you may step out of them.”

Melanie’s throat worked. The only sound that left her was a thin, broken “Yes, Tabby.”

The lock clicked open. Cooler air from the corridor touched the bare skin of her back and the tops of her thighs. In the mirrors she remained centered, shoulders squared by her sister’s last adjustment, eyes fixed on her own reflection, tears drying slowly on her face while the black silk clung and shifted with every shallow breath she took. The ringing in her ears had not yet faded. Neither had the certainty that, inside this room, her body belonged entirely to the voice that had filled it.

Chapter Six: The Mannequin’s Lesson

On Wednesday evening, the grandfather clock in the foyer chimed seven as Arthur helped Evelyn into her evening wrap. The two of them were headed downtown for the annual hospital benefactors’ banquet—an affair of three-course dinners and long speeches that never concluded before midnight.

"We’ll have our phones on silent during the keynote, Tabby," Evelyn said, pausing by the mirror to check her pearl earrings. "Caleb is still coming over at seven-thirty to help you narrow down the dresses for the Spring Formal?"

"He’s on his way now, Mom," Tabitha replied smoothly from the bottom step, already dressed in a plush burgundy silk robe over her lounging clothes. "I want to make sure whatever I choose coordinates with his tuxedo before the return window closes on Friday."

"Smart girl. Always thinking ahead," Arthur said approvingly, reaching for the doorknob. He cast a brief, instructional glance toward Melanie, who stood quietly near the hallway radiator in a loose cream sweater and pleated skirt. "Mel, make yourself useful to your sister tonight. She has three garment bags upstairs and shouldn't have to spend the whole evening zipping and unzipping herself just to see how a hem falls."

"Yes, Dad," Melanie murmured. "Have a nice time tonight."

Twenty minutes after the tail lights of the family sedan disappeared down the street, Caleb’s repaired coupe pulled into the driveway. Melanie let him in at the front door, her gaze dropping politely to the welcome mat as he stepped inside, before leading him up the staircase to Tabitha’s expansive bedroom suite.

Tabitha was waiting in her velvet armchair near the bay window, her legs crossed and a glass of sparkling water in her hand. Across the foot of her four-poster bed lay a single open garment bag from a boutique downtown—and resting against the white tissue paper was the same black silk dress Melanie had already stood in under the boutique’s mirrored lights. The plunging halter, the silver ring at the solar plexus, the open back, the hem that ended high on the thigh: she knew exactly how little of her it covered. The memory of the fitting-room shout still sat behind her ears.

"Sit right there on the bench, Caleb," Tabitha instructed, gesturing to the upholstered seat near the full-length standing mirror. "I need a man’s honest perspective, and I can't judge the proportions of a dress when I’m standing inside it. Melanie is going to model it for us."

Melanie’s head snapped up, a flush rising instantly from her collarbones to her hairline. "Model it? Tabby, I thought you just wanted me to steam it—"

"How am I supposed to see how the silk catches the light from ten feet away if I’m the one wearing it?" Tabitha asked coolly. "We have the exact same measurements, Melanie. Go into the bathroom, take off that shapeless sweater, and put the dress on. You’ve already worn it once."

Melanie looked at the scrap of black silk on the bed, then darted a terrified glance toward Caleb, who was watching from the velvet bench with his hands resting on his knees. "Tabby, please," Melanie whispered, stepping closer to her sister’s chair so Caleb wouldn't hear. "There’s almost nothing to the front of that dress, and you can't even wear a bra with it. I can't walk out here in front of Caleb wearing something that immodest—"

Tabitha didn't whisper back. She set her glass down on the side table with a sharp crack and rose to her feet.

"IMMODEST?!"

The shout blasted through the bedroom with such sudden, concussive violence that Melanie stumbled half a step backward, her hands flying tightly together against her chest. On the bench, Caleb straightened up as if a starter pistol had gone off behind his ear.

"Did I ask for a sermon on modesty from my little sister, or did I tell you to put that dress on?!" Tabitha roared, her dark eyes blazing as she pointed a rigid finger toward the open bathroom door. "Dad told you not twenty minutes ago to make yourself useful to me tonight! You have sixty seconds to strip off those frumpy clothes, put on that black dress, and walk back out onto this rug before I really lose my temper! MOVE!"

"I'm sorry, Tabby! I'm going, I'm going right now!" Melanie gasped, the familiar, dizzying panic overriding every ounce of her reluctance. She snatched the black silk hanger off the bed and fled into the adjoining bathroom.

With trembling fingers that barely cooperated, Melanie shed her sweater, skirt, and undergarments, slipping the cool, weightless black jersey over her head and tying the halter straps behind her neck. When she caught sight of herself in the vanity mirror, her knees nearly buckled. The dress clung like a second skin to her trim waist and the soft, generous swell of her hips, while the plunging front bared the creamy inner curves of her breasts to the silver ring at her ribs. The hem ended high on her bare thighs. It was the same reflection the fitting-room mirrors had already forced her to study.

"Ten seconds, Melanie!" Tabitha’s voice boomed through the door panel.

Melanie pushed the door open and stepped out onto the bedroom carpet, her arms instinctively crossing over her midriff while her left hand tugged desperately at the short hem.

"Put your hands down at your sides and stand in front of the mirror!" Tabitha barked instantly.

Melanie’s hands dropped as if the fabric had shocked her. She stepped onto the center of the plush rug before the standing glass, her cheeks burning a deep, helpless crimson as she stared fixedly at the wall above Caleb’s head.

On the bench, Caleb’s mouth went completely dry. For months he had admired the soft, modest silhouette of Melanie in her cardigans and school jumpers—and now she stood four feet in front of him with her glossy brunette waves spilling over bare shoulders, every lush, feminine curve of her figure sculpted in midnight silk, blushing furiously under the bedroom lamps.

"Now," Tabitha said, her voice dropping into a smooth, analytical purr as she circled slowly behind them. "It looks striking from across the room, doesn't it, Caleb? Go ahead—stand up and feel the silk along the waist. Tell me if the jersey feels too thin for an April evening."

Caleb swallowed hard. "Tabitha, I can see it fine from here—"

"Don't be shy, Caleb, you're helping me shop," Tabitha insisted warmly, nudging his shoulder until he rose from the bench and stepped up beside Melanie. "Put your hands on her waist and see how the fabric drapes."

Melanie’s breath hitched audibly as Caleb stepped into her space. Slowly, almost hesitantly, Caleb reached out and placed both of his warm palms directly against the black silk at Melanie’s narrow waist. Beneath the paper-thin jersey, Melanie’s skin was radiating heat; he could feel the rapid, fluttering rise and fall of her ribs and the trembling softness of her curves under his fingertips. A tiny, involuntary shiver ran down Melanie’s bare spine.

"It’s... really soft," Caleb managed to say, his voice suddenly thick and uneven as his thumbs brushed the swell of her hips.

"Good," Tabitha murmured, watching the two of them closely with dark, glittering eyes. "Now stand right behind her and put your arm around her waist facing the mirror, just like we’ll be standing for pictures at the formal. I want to see how your dark jacket looks against that neckline."

Melanie’s eyes widened in alarm in the mirror, her lips parting in a silent plea, though she didn't dare move an inch after Tabitha’s outburst. Caleb stepped directly behind her, sliding his right arm securely around her waist and drawing her back against his chest so they both faced the tall glass.

The contact was electric. Pressed flush against the length of Melanie’s back, surrounded by the warm, intoxicating drift of her natural scent and the sight of her bare breasts rising and falling in the plunging halter just inches below his chin, Caleb’s composure frayed completely. His breathing turned heavy against

the bare skin of Melanie’s shoulder. Melanie’s eyes fluttered half-shut from the overwhelming heat of his body against hers—and then she felt the unmistakable, rigid pressure of Caleb’s arousal swelling hard against the front of his trousers, pressing firmly into the curve of her lower back through the thin silk.

In the mirror, Caleb’s face was flushed dark red, his jaw tight with strained desire, and even through the front of his slacks as he shifted his stance, the outline of his erection was impossible to miss.

Tabitha didn't miss a single detail. She stopped a few paces away, looking from the flushed, breathless expression on Melanie’s face to the visible bulge straining against Caleb’s trousers. A slow, wicked smile curved Tabitha’s lips.

"Well," Tabitha said softly, the single word cutting cleanly through the heavy tension in the room. "Look what happened to you, Caleb. And here I was just trying to pick out an outfit."

Caleb tried to step back half an inch, his chest heaving, while Melanie stood frozen in mortified silence.

"Stay right where you are, both of you," Tabitha commanded. While they watched her in the mirror, Tabitha reached down to the sash of her burgundy silk robe and untied it with one smooth pull. She let the robe slide off her shoulders and pool onto the carpet at her feet, kicking off her slippers until she stood before them completely nude.

She didn't cover an inch of herself. In the warm lamplight, Tabitha stood with her shoulders back and her chin high, displaying the exact same creamy skin, trim waist, full hips, and dark-tipped breasts that the black dress was currently framing on her sister—except completely bare and unhidden.

"Actually, this brings up a very interesting question," Tabitha purred, stepping closer to the pair as Caleb’s eyes locked hungrily onto her naked form. "Melanie was whining to me two minutes ago that this little black dress was far too revealing. Practically naked, she thought. So let’s put it to a real test, shall we? Looking at the two of us right now, Caleb... would you rather be touched and stroked by the girl wearing the dress, or by the nude girl?"

Caleb’s breath came out in a ragged gasp as he looked from Melanie—trembling in the sleek black halter—to Tabitha standing bare and radiant three feet away.

"Melanie," Tabitha said, her voice hardening into iron. "Turn around, get on your knees in front of him, and open his trousers."

The color drained completely from Melanie’s face. "T-Tabby, what? No—I can't—"

"DID YOU JUST TELL ME NO IN MY OWN BEDROOM, MELANIE?!"

The ear-splitting roar shook the framed pictures along the bedroom wall. Melanie flinched so violently she nearly lost her balance in her bare feet, her hands flying up to her ears as tears sprang instantly to her lashes.

"Get on your knees in front of my boyfriend right now and put your hands on him before I scream loud enough to wake the entire street!" Tabitha thundered, towering over her sister in fierce, terrifying majesty. "You wanted to stand there getting him worked up in my dress—now you are going to do exactly what I tell you to do without another pathetic peep out of your mouth! KNEEL!"

Sobbing once under her breath, her mind completely shattered into reflexive obedience by the sheer volume of her sister’s fury, Melanie sank to her knees on the plush rug in front of Caleb, reaching upward with shaking hands.

“Open them,” Tabitha ordered. “Both hands on him. Stroke him. Now.”

Melanie’s fingers worked the belt and zipper. She drew him free, the length of him already hard and flushed against her palm. At Tabitha’s next sharp word she wrapped both hands around him and began to stroke—slow, uncertain pulls that quickly tightened under the force of the command. Caleb’s breath caught. His hips shifted forward into her grip. In the mirror Melanie watched her own hands move on him while the black silk still covered her, the plunging neckline and short hem framing the exact body Tabitha had already forced her to display in the fitting room.

Caleb’s thighs tensed. A low sound left him. Tabitha watched the rhythm for only a few seconds longer, then stepped in.

“Stop.”

Melanie’s hands froze at once. Tabitha moved between them, nude, and closed her own fingers around him just above Melanie’s. She stroked once, firm and sure, then took over completely. The difference was immediate. Caleb’s head tipped back; his hand found Tabitha’s bare hip. She worked him with steady, deliberate pulls, thumb sliding over the head, her free hand resting on his chest so he could feel the warmth of her skin. Melanie remained on her knees, empty hands in her lap, watching.

Tabitha kept her eyes on him. “This is what you wanted,” she said, voice low. She tightened her grip and quickened the pace. Caleb’s control broke. He came hard across her fingers and wrist, thick pulses she stroked through until the last of it left him. When he sagged back against the bench, still breathing hard, Tabitha lifted her hand and looked down at Melanie.

“He didn’t finish with you,” she said. “He finished with me. Nude. While you stayed in the dress.”

When the final shudder left Caleb’s frame and he sank back onto the edge of the velvet bench to catch his breath, the bedroom was dead silent save for the hum of the hallway clock.

Melanie knelt a few feet away on the carpet, her hands clasped tightly in the lap of the black silk dress, her head bowed and her cheeks streaked with silent tears while her chest rose and fell in shallow, trembling breaths.

Standing directly between Caleb’s knees, still completely nude and glowing with languid triumph, Tabitha reached for a tissue from the vanity, calmly wiped her fingers, and tossed it into the wastebasket. Then she turned and looked down at her twin.

"Look at me, Melanie," Tabitha said—not shouting now, just speaking with crisp, unchallenged superiority.

Melanie lifted her tear-bright hazel eyes.

"Now tell me," Tabitha said, gesturing lazily down her own bare body before pointing at the black silk covering her sister. "After watching your sister stand here without a stitch of clothing on—and seeing just how quickly Caleb chose me over a girl wearing a full dress—aren't you embarrassed for making such a ridiculous fuss over that neckline?"

Melanie swallowed hard, her throat dry and aching. "I... I don't know, Tabby."

"There was nothing immodest about that dress at all, was there?" Tabitha pressed smoothly, stepping back to slip her arms lazily into her burgundy robe without tying the belt. "In fact, compared to me, you were practically bundled up like a nun. Which means from now on, when I tell you what to wear—whether you’re modeling something for me or dressing to go out in public—there is zero reason for you to ever question my judgment or complain about a hem being too short. Isn't that right, Caleb?"

On the bench, Caleb looked from the breathtaking sight of Tabitha’s open robe to Melanie kneeling in the black silk. His face was still flushed from the climax Tabitha had claimed from him, his mind thoroughly rewired by the intoxicating reality of a world where Tabitha made every rule.

"She’s right, Mel," Caleb said, his voice rough but completely certain as he fastened his belt and rested a hand on Tabitha’s bare hip. "The dress looks completely fine on you. You really shouldn't argue with your sister—Tabitha always knows what looks best."

"You heard him," Tabitha said coolly, looking down at her twin. "Now go take that dress off, hang it carefully on the padded hanger without stretching the straps, and bring Caleb a fresh glass of ice water from the kitchen before you go to your room."

"Yes, Tabby," Melanie whispered, rising slowly on trembling legs and smoothing the black silk down over her thighs before retreating silently toward the bathroom door.

Chapter Seven: The Charity Case and the Flashbulb

If there was one virtue Arthur and Evelyn Coats prized nearly as much as Tabitha's executive leadership, it was her boundless civic charity.

On Friday evening, that charity had arrived on the front porch in the form of Aunt Clara's seventeen-year-old son, Cousin Arthur.

Known to the family as "Little Artie"—despite outweighing his uncle by a solid forty pounds—Cousin Arthur was a round, heavy-breathing boy with thick spectacles, a perpetual sheen of nervous perspiration across his forehead, and a rented tuxedo that strained heroically at every satin-covered button. He had never been invited to a school dance in his life, a tragedy that Tabitha had generously offered to remedy earlier that week by volunteering Melanie as his date for the Spring Formal.

"It's just so thoughtful of you, Tabby," Evelyn beamed in the foyer, dabbing at the corner of her eye while Little Artie stood by the coat tree, clutching a crushed box containing a lukewarm wrist corsage. "Clara was beside herself on the phone. Most popular girls wouldn't give a second thought to their shy cousin, and here you've arranged a double date so he gets the full senior prom experience."

"Family comes first, Mom," Tabitha said smoothly from the bottom of the stairs. She looked regal in a floor-length sapphire satin gown that swept the floorboards, her arm tucked securely through Caleb's tailored tuxedo sleeve. "Besides, Melanie wasn't going with anyone, and she told me on Wednesday night that she wanted to be more outgoing."

At the top of the staircase, Melanie stood frozen with one hand on the banister, wishing the oak steps would open up and swallow her whole.

She was wearing the little black dress.

After the lesson Tabitha and Caleb had administered in the bedroom on Wednesday night, Melanie hadn't dared breathe the word immodest when Tabitha laid the scrap of sheer black silk across her bed an hour ago. Beneath the chandelier light, the bias-cut jersey clung like liquid shadow to every curve of her bust and hips, held together at the solar plexus by the single silver ring, while the open back bared her skin to the base of her spine and the hem hovered scandalously high on her thighs.

"Melanie, stop dawdling on the landing and come pin your cousin's boutonniere!" Arthur Sr. called out briskly, checking his watch. "You're holding up your sister's schedule again."

"Yes, Dad, I'm coming," Melanie whispered.

As she descended the stairs, keeping her knees pressed tightly together so the short skirt wouldn’t ride up any higher, Little Artie looked up—and his jaw dropped so hard his spectacles slid half an inch down his nose.

Whatever paralyzing shyness Cousin Arthur usually suffered around girls evaporated on the spot, replaced by the dazed, slack-jawed euphoria of a boy who believed he had just won a sweepstakes. By the time Melanie reached the bottom step, Artie was breathing through his mouth like a winded pug, his eyes glued to the plunging halter neckline.

“Gosh, Mel,” Artie wheezed, stepping forward and immediately stepping squarely onto the toe of her black stiletto heel. “Aunt Evelyn said you were dressing up, but… wow.”

Melanie swallowed a wince as she extracted her foot from beneath his heavy Oxford shoe. “Hi, Artie. Let me just put your corsage on—”

Before she could reach for the plastic box, Artie bypassed her wrist entirely and threw both meaty arms around her in a damp, enthusiastic bear hug. His hands landed squarely on the completely bare skin of her lower back, his sweaty palms sliding with an audible squelch against her spine while he mashed her chest flat against his ruffled shirtfront.

Over Artie’s heaving shoulder, Melanie caught Caleb’s eyes. Caleb was watching the way Artie’s pudgy fingers were sinking into the bare curve of Melanie’s waist—the exact spot Tabitha had adjusted in the fitting room—and a dark, appreciative flush crept up Caleb’s collar.

“Don’t be shy with her tonight, Arthur,” Tabitha purred, patting their cousin’s damp shoulder as she guided Caleb toward the front door. “Melanie is just dying to be swept off her feet. And since she’s riding up front with you, make sure you keep her warm.”

The Grand Ballroom of the Mayfair Hotel was strung with thousands of white fairy lights and crowded with two hundred seniors in formal wear. Within fifteen minutes of their arrival, Melanie realized that being trapped in a parked car at Miller’s Overlook was merciful compared to chaperoning Cousin Arthur in public.

Artie didn’t merely accompany her; he orbited her like a perspiring moon.

Tabitha and Caleb had claimed a prime velvet booth near the edge of the dance floor, and Tabitha wasted no time putting Melanie to work.

“Melanie, the line at the refreshment table is ten minutes long and Caleb is thirsty,” Tabitha commanded, waving a manicured hand before turning her attention to Artie. “Arthur, go with her so nobody bumps into her—and keep your arm around her waist so everyone knows she’s spoken for.”

“You got it, Tabby!” Artie beamed, puffing out his chest.

As Melanie navigated the crowded ballroom toward the punch bowls, Artie marched half a step behind her hip, his heavy, clammy right arm clamped around her bare waist like a damp seat belt. Every three steps, his hip collided with hers, and because his palm was resting so low on her open back, every downward slip of his sweaty fingers dragged the thin black silk jersey downward with it, threatening to pull the plunging halter right off her breasts.

“Artie, please,” Melanie hissed under her breath, desperately trying to balance four crystal punch cups on a silver tray while using her elbow to nudge his creeping thumb away from the bare curve of her hip. “Your hand is slipping—if you pull the fabric down any further—”

“Sorry, Mel, this silk is super slippery,” Artie panted happily, his spectacles fogging at the edges as he gave her bare hip a reassuring, two-handed squeeze to “steady” her right in front of the student council table. “Whoa, careful with the punch!”

When Melanie finally delivered the tray to Tabitha’s booth and tried to retreat half a step to wipe the perspiration off her lower back with a cocktail napkin, the band struck up a slow, romantic ballad.

Artie’s eyes lit up behind his thick lenses. He didn’t ask; he simply lunged forward, caught Melanie by both wrists, and tugged her toward the dance floor. “Come on, Mel! Tabby said you love slow dancing!”

“Oh—no, Artie, I really should stay here in case Tabby needs napkins, and my feet are hurting—” Melanie stammered, planting her heels at the edge of the parquet floor and trying to pull her hands free.

From the velvet booth ten feet away, Tabitha rose to her feet.

“MELANIE!”

The single, chest-deep roar sliced straight through the saxophone solo.

The lead singer actually faltered at the microphone. Two dozen couples on the nearest third of the dance floor froze mid-sway, their heads whipping toward the booths.

Melanie’s entire body locked up in conditioned terror, her hands flying to her sides as the familiar high-pitched whine rang behind her ears.

“Did you seriously bring your own cousin to the Spring Formal just to leave him standing alone on the dance floor like a wallflower?!” Tabitha thundered across the sudden hush, her dark brows drawn together in magnificent outrage while forty classmates stared. “Put both arms around Arthur’s neck right now, press up close so you aren’t taking up half the floor, and dance with your date! DO NOT MAKE ME COME OUT THERE!”

“I’m sorry, Tabby! I’m dancing, I’m dancing right now!” Melanie gasped out, her face burning brighter than the exit signs as she practically threw both arms around Little Artie’s thick neck to make the shouting stop.

Artie couldn’t have been more thrilled. Grinning from ear to ear, he planted both broad, sweaty hands flat below the base of Melanie’s bare spine—right where the black silk ended—and hoisted her tightly against his round stomach.

For four agonizing minutes, Melanie was shuffled in a tight, clumsy circle under the spotlight. Artie had no sense of rhythm whatsoever; he stepped on her right foot, then her left, all while his damp hands kneaded the bare skin at the small of her back and inadvertently bunched the wispy black skirt higher and higher up her thighs with every enthusiastic bounce. Because she didn’t dare drop her arms from his neck after Tabitha’s public reprimand, Melanie was completely helpless to tug her hem down.

Halfway through the song, Caleb and Tabitha glided past them on the floor. Tabitha looked effortless in her sapphire satin, resting her chin on Caleb’s shoulder while Caleb’s eyes stayed locked just over Artie’s damp tuxedo collar—watching the way Artie’s clumsy grip exposed nearly every inch of Melanie’s bare thighs and back under the ballroom chandeliers.

“You’re doing great, Arthur,” Tabitha murmured encouragingly as they spun past. “She’s having the time of her life. Make sure you take her over to the photographer’s arch as soon as the song ends—Mom ordered the deluxe portrait package.”

At the far end of the ballroom stood a trellis of white roses flanked by silver umbrella strobes, where a line of thirty couples waited for the official Spring Formal portraits—the very photographs that went directly into the senior yearbook and onto every mantelpiece in town.

By the time the four of them reached the front of the velvet rope, Melanie felt as though she were walking to the scaffold. Her hair had come slightly unclipped from Artie’s chin rubbing against her temple on the dance floor, her toes were throbbing from being trampled, and the thin black silk dress was clinging to her damp skin so tightly that the dark shadows of her breasts were clearly visible through the sheer bodice under the bright studio lights.

“All right, let’s get the two couples together first, and then individual portraits!” the photographer called out from behind his tripod. “Ladies in the center, gentlemen on the outside!”

Tabitha stepped gracefully onto the center mark with Caleb at her side, looking like a Hollywood starlet at an awards gala. Melanie stepped hesitantly onto the mark to Tabitha’s left, instinctively turning slightly sideways and crossing one leg in front of the other to hide how high the black hem was sitting on her hips.

“Stand up straight, Melanie, and uncross your legs,” Tabitha snapped under her breath without losing her camera smile. “And Arthur—get in close. Mom wants to see how happy you two look.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Artie wheezed happily. He crowded into Melanie’s left side, wrapped both arms around her bare waist from behind, and rested his round, sweaty chin squarely on her bare shoulder.

As he pulled her back against his tuxedo jacket, his left hand caught the bias-cut silk at her hip and hitched it a full two inches higher, leaving the lower curve of her bare bottom pressing directly against the front of his trousers while the sheer front stretched tight across her chest.

“Okay, give me a big prom smile on three!” the photographer said, raising the cable release. “Or a little romance if the gentleman wants to kiss the bride!”

Behind Melanie’s ear, Artie let out a sharp, excited snort. “You heard the man, Mel!”

Melanie’s eyes went wide with horror as Artie turned his head, his thick glasses askew and his wet lips puckered wide like a carp, lunging straight toward her face. Instinctively, Melanie jerked her chin backward to dodge him, lifting a hand to push at his tuxedo lapel.

Beside her, Tabitha’s smile vanished. She didn’t care that the photographer’s finger was on the shutter or that thirty classmates were watching from the velvet rope.

“HOLD STILL AND KISS YOUR DATE, MELANIE!”

The point-blank bark cracked next to Melanie’s ear like a whip.

Melanie’s spine snapped rigid at once, her hands dropping obediently to her sides while her head froze right in Artie’s path.

“Three!” the photographer called out.

Just as the blinding white flashbulbs detonated across the trellis, Little Artie planted a wet, enthusiastic, wildly off-center kiss squarely across the corner of Melanie’s parted lips and left cheek—his spectacles mashing her nose sideways, his pudgy hands hiked high on her bare hips in the sheer black dress, and Melanie’s tear-bright hazel eyes staring straight into the camera lens in paralyzed, crimson-faced mortification.

“Fantastic!” the photographer chuckled, lowering his camera as the digital preview popped up onto the large monitor beside the arch for the entire waiting line of seniors to see. “Now that’s one for the yearbook!”

A ripple of laughter broke out along the line of classmates staring at the screen—at the regal, flawless portrait of Tabitha and Caleb on the right,

contrasted against Melanie’s wide-eyed, lipstick-smeared humiliation clamped in Little Artie’s sweaty embrace on the left.

Tabitha looked at the monitor, her lips curving into a cool, satisfied smile as she smoothed the front of her sapphire gown.

“Mother is going to love that one,” Tabitha said evenly, turning to her trembling twin. “Wipe your chin, Melanie, and go ask the valet to bring the car around. Caleb and I are ready to leave—and make sure you let Arthur hold your hand on the walk out to the lot.”

“Yes, Tabby,” Melanie whispered, her voice barely audible over the laughter behind them as Little Artie happily laced his damp fingers through hers.

Chapter Eight: Core Conditioning

The sign hanging above the double glass doors of the Apex Rhythm & Aerial Studio promised Confidence, Core Strength, and Graceful Movement. Located in a converted warehouse district three miles from downtown, the studio featured floor-to-ceiling mirrors, polished concrete floors, and six heavy chrome poles gleaming under professional track lighting.

It was Wednesday afternoon, exactly one week after the disaster of the Spring Formal. Evelyn had enthusiastically paid the semester tuition for Melanie's "poise and posture conditioning," convinced by Tabitha that her younger daughter needed professional help breaking through her chronic shyness before college.

Melanie stood near the back corner of the studio, dressed in the required class uniform: a pair of tight black lycra boy-shorts, a cropped athletic top that exposed her trim midriff, and four-inch Lucite platform heels that made her ankles ache with every shift in weight. Her glossy brunette hair was tied back in a high ponytail, but her hazel eyes were wide with quiet panic as the instructor—a sharp-eyed woman named Roxy who wore heavy eyeliner and a leopard-print wrap—demonstrated a slow, sweeping leg extension around the chrome pole.

"Remember, ladies, it's all about leverage and fluid lines," Roxy called out over the bassline of a heavy R&B track. "Let the pole support your weight, keep your chin up, and project that energy outward. Let's see it from the top."

The other four women in the class—mostly college students and local fitness enthusiasts—moved through the routine with varying degrees of confidence. Melanie, however, remained frozen with both hands clamped tightly around her pole, her body stiff and hesitant. Every time Roxy told the class to arch their backs and execute a slow, sliding body-roll down to the floor, Melanie locked her knees and kept her movements as rigid and microscopic as possible.

Sitting near the front of the studio in a velvet armchair, sipping iced coffee and scrolling through her phone, was Tabitha.

She wore a structured ivory blazer and slim trousers, looking less like a student and more like an executive inspecting a newly acquired asset. When she noticed Melanie's frozen posture in the mirrored reflection, Tabitha's thumb stopped scrolling. She set her cup down on the floor with a sharp click, rose to her feet, and walked slowly toward the back of the room.

Roxy paused the music, raising an eyebrow as Tabitha stepped into the practice space.

"Is something wrong with her form?" Roxy asked, crossing her arms.

“She’s refusing to put any actual effort into it,” Tabitha said smoothly, her eyes fixed coldly on her twin. She stopped three feet away from Melanie, her chest expanding as she drew in a deep, preparatory breath.

“ARCH YOUR BACK AND DROP YOUR HIPS, MELANIE!”

The deafening roar detonated off the concrete walls and mirrored glass with concussive force. Melanie gasped, her hands slipping an inch down the cold chrome as the sound rattled straight through her skull.

“You didn’t come here to hug that pole like a lamppost!” Tabitha thundered, her voice ringing with absolute, public authority while the other women in the class stared in wide-eyed shock. “MOM AND DAD DID NOT PAY HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS FOR YOU TO STAND THERE LOOKING LIKE A STATUE! DROP DOWN TO THE FLOOR, ROLL UP THAT POLE, AND DO IT RIGHT NOW OR SO HELP ME GOD I WILL MAKE YOU RUN HOME IN THOSE HEELS!”

“I’m sorry, Tabby! I’m doing it, I’m doing it!” Melanie stammered, tears springing instantly to her lashes as the terror of her sister’s voice overrode every instinct of self-preservation.

Her knees shaking, Melanie dropped to the polished concrete, arched her spine in a sweeping, liquid roll, and hauled herself upward around the chrome pole—using every ounce of her natural, hidden grace to execute the spin with seamless perfection, just to make the shouting stop.

As she finished the rotation, panting and flushed, she realized they hadn’t been the only ones watching.

Standing quietly just inside the double glass doors of the studio lobby was a heavily tattooed man in a sharp grey suit with slicked-back dark hair. He had been leaning against the reception desk for the last five minutes, holding a silver business card case, and his eyes had been glued entirely to Melanie’s form during her forced rotation.

His name was Marcus Vance—no relation to Caleb, though he ran the operations for The Velvet Viper, the most lucrative upscale gentleman’s club downtown.

Marcus stepped past the reception counter as the music faded, clapping his hands twice in slow, measured appreciation. He walked straight past Roxy and stopped two paces from Tabitha, his gaze lingering on Melanie’s flushed face and the flawless proportions of her figure sculpted in the tight lycra.

“Well, now,” Marcus said, his voice a smooth, gravelly baritone. “That’s some raw talent you’ve got hiding in the back corner there. Most girls take six months of floor-work classes to move like that naturally.”

Roxy blinked, crossing her arms tighter. “Excuse me? This is a fitness and conditioning studio.”

“It’s a conditioning studio, sure,” Marcus chuckled, pulling a crisp, black-embossed business card from his silver case and holding it out toward Tabitha, recognizing instantly who commanded the room. “I run The Velvet Viper downtown. We scout athletic talent for high-end hospitality and stage performance. We pay top dollar for girls with a natural look like hers—innocent face, great lines, zero attitude. She’s got a permanent VIP audition waiting on my desk whenever she wants to walk in.”

Melanie’s blood ran cold. She stared at the black card in Marcus’s hand as if it were a venomous snake. “A… a club? No, I can’t—I’m eighteen, I’m going to college, I don’t—”

Before Melanie could finish her panicked protest, Tabitha’s hand shot out. Her slender fingers closed smoothly around the black card, snatching it from Marcus’s grip before examining the gold foil lettering with cool, calculating approval.

“How interesting,” Tabitha murmured, a slow, triumphant smile curving her lips. “Thank you, Mr. Vance. We’ll discuss it.”

An hour later, back in the kitchen of the Coats house, Tabitha laid the black business card squarely in the center of the mahogany table like a winning hand of cards.

Arthur sat in his wingback chair unbuttoning his work cuffs, while Evelyn poured two glasses of iced tea, listening intently as Tabitha summarized what happened at the studio.

“A professional talent scout?” Evelyn repeated, her eyes lighting up behind her reading glasses as she looked over at Melanie, who stood rigidly by the kitchen counter in her gym clothes. “Well, my goodness. Marcus Vance? I’ve heard of The Velvet Viper, Arthur—it’s very high-end, quite exclusive, entirely legal. Not like those grungy places on the highway.”

“Marcus runs a tight ship,” Arthur agreed, nodding approvingly as he took a sip of his tea. “And if a businessman like that sees real earning potential in Melanie, who are we to stand in the way of her developing a strong work ethic? College isn’t cheap, Mel. Learning how to project confidence and command a room in a professional environment is a valuable skill.”

“She was far too stiff and awkward at the Spring Formal to ever survive a normal college campus without supervision,” Tabitha added smoothly, leaning against the counter beside her twin. “A structured, high-demand performance job will teach her discipline faster than anything else. Isn’t that right, Melanie?”

Melanie looked desperately from her father’s approving nod to her mother’s glowing smile, and finally to Tabitha’s unyielding, dark-eyed gaze. Every instinct

screamed at her to refuse, to say the words strip club, to beg them to protect her. But the ringing of Tabitha's shout in the studio still echoed behind her ears, and the solid, heavy wall of her parents' complete compliance made any defense feel useless.

"I… yes, Tabby," Melanie whispered, staring at the floorboards as the architecture of her life shifted once more.

Two Friday nights later, the neon sign of The Velvet Viper cast a bruised pink-and-purple glow across the rain-slicked asphalt of the industrial boulevard. Inside, the air was heavy with expensive perfume, woodsmoke, and the bass-heavy throb of house music echoing off velvet-draped walls.

At a prime, circular VIP booth located right against the edge of the main stage, Caleb sat staring down into his glass of scotch, his collar unbuttoned and his face flushed a deep, uncomfortable crimson.

Seated beside him with her arm draped possessively over his shoulder was Tabitha, radiant in a structured crimson cocktail dress that caught every colored light in the room. Directly across from them, smiling warmly over a cocktail, sat Arthur and Evelyn Coats, treating the smoky, subterranean club like a sophisticated dinner theater.

"Isn't this just wonderful of Marcus to set us up with the owner's booth?" Evelyn beamed, dabbing her lips with a cloth napkin as she watched the stage. "And to think our little Melanie is already headlining the second rotation. She always was full of hidden depths once Tabitha helped her come out of her shell."

Caleb didn't answer. He swallowed hard, his throat dry, his eyes fixed reluctantly on the glossy black stage directly in front of their table.

A moment later, the house lights dimmed further, a sharp white spotlight cut through the smoke, and the announcer's voice boomed over the sound system: "Ladies and gentlemen, making her Friday night feature debut on the main stage… give it up for Melanie!"

Melanie stepped out from behind the velvet curtain.

She was wearing a custom-fitted costume of sheer crimson mesh and glittering crystals that left virtually nothing to the imagination—framing the soft, generous swell of her hips, her trim waist, and the full curves of her bust with blinding, unapologetic exposure. Her glossy brunette waves fell loose over her bare shoulders, and her hazel eyes looked out into the smoky expanse of the room with a wide, terrified innocence.

As the heavy bassline dropped, Melanie began to move around the vertical chrome pole, executing the exact choreography Tabitha and Roxy had forced her to drill at the studio. Every spin was pristine, every movement fluid and hypnotic,

driven entirely by the muscle memory of terror and obedience.

The reaction from the club patrons was instantaneous.

Within thirty seconds, a dozen men from the front rows surged forward against the brass railing, reaching out with rolled-up hundred-dollar bills clutched in their fists. As Melanie spun past the edge of the stage, her hips dipping low in time with the beat, the men frantically stuffed the cash straight into the elastic straps of her skimpy crimson bottoms, shouting praises and whistling into the dark.

From the VIP booth, Arthur Coats chuckled approvingly, shaking his head. “Well, look at that. Hard work really does pay off. She’s making more in one song than I used to make in a Saturday shift at the hardware store.”

“She’s got her sister’s discipline,” Evelyn agreed, proudly smoothing her blouse.

Beside them, Tabitha leaned over the table, sliding her fingers into Caleb’s rigid hand and pressing his palm flat against the velvet booth.

“Look at her up there, Caleb,” Tabitha murmured, her breath warm against his ear as she watched the men cram paper currency into her sister’s waistband. “You always wanted a muse who could command a room and capture every man’s attention. But tell me honestly… does she look like your art project anymore, or does she belong entirely to us?”

Caleb’s throat worked convulsively. He looked from the dazzling, exposed figure of Melanie on the stage—surrounded by strangers shoving cash into her straps—to Tabitha’s triumphant, unblinking smile, and nodded dumbly into the smoke.

Chapter Nine: The Investment

The cash from Friday night sat in a neat stack on the kitchen table beside Tabitha’s phone. Morning light came through the window over the sink. Arthur had his coffee. Evelyn was still in her robe, reading glasses on, looking at the short column of figures Tabitha had written on a notepad.

“Two hundred and eighty in tips, forty from the stage minimum,” Tabitha said. She did not look at Melanie, who stood at the counter in the same loose sweatshirt she had slept in. “I’m putting it with the rest. The consultation is at two. They’ll want the forms signed before they schedule.”

Evelyn nodded over her tea. “That’s sensible. If Marcus is already booking her for the better shifts, the photographs should match what people expect to see.”

Arthur set his cup down. “College applications aren’t going to pay for themselves. Tabitha’s right to keep the money where it won’t get spent on nothing.” He glanced at Melanie. “You’ll do what your sister says about the appointment. No dragging your feet.”

“Yes, Dad,” Melanie said.

The drive was quiet. Tabitha kept one hand on the wheel and the other on her phone, confirming the time. In the waiting room the forms were already clipped to a board. Melanie’s name was printed at the top. She held the pen above the first signature line and did not move it.

Tabitha’s voice rose without warning, clear enough that the receptionist looked up from her screen.

“Sign it.”

Melanie’s hand jerked. The pen touched paper. She wrote her name on every line the nurse had marked, the letters uneven. When she finished, Tabitha took the board, checked each page, and handed it back to the desk. The consultant’s explanation was brief: a measured increase, light work at the brow and mouth, filler at the cheeks. Tabitha approved each item in the same even tone she used for chore lists and told them to charge the card on file. Melanie sat with her hands in her lap and did not speak again until they were in the car.

That evening Caleb came by with a textbook he had borrowed. Tabitha had him wait in the living room. She brought Melanie out in one of the new stage tops bought with the previous week’s cash. The fabric was cut higher under the bust than anything Melanie had worn at the club so far. Tabitha adjusted the straps herself, fingers cool against Melanie’s skin, then stepped back.

“Stand under the lamp,” she said.

Caleb looked. The interest that had once moved across his face when he saw the shared line of their bodies was still present, but it did not stay. His eyes dropped to the textbook in his hands after only a few seconds. Tabitha watched the difference and said nothing about it. When he left she told Melanie, while she folded the top, that the changes would make the longer sets easier and that Caleb had already seen the version that used to hold his attention.

The days after the procedure were measured in ice packs and the small alarms Tabitha set on her phone. Melanie stayed on the couch. The swelling made the neckline of every shirt sit differently. When Caleb stopped in on the third afternoon, Tabitha kept the visit short. She mentioned, while she adjusted the ice, that the final shape would suit the work better. Caleb answered with something about a lab report. He did not look at Melanie for long. By the next visit he was mostly speaking to Tabitha about a class they no longer shared. Melanie heard the shorter replies and kept her eyes on the blanket across her knees.

On the morning the surgeon cleared her, Tabitha laid the new costume on the bed. The cups were cut for the altered line. She helped Melanie into it, checked the straps, and counted out the floor minimum she expected that night. In the car she stated the rule without raising her voice.

“All of it comes to me before we leave the lot. You don’t hold any of it.”

Melanie’s hands rested in her lap. The streetlights passed over the windshield. Under them the difference was already visible: the fuller shape beneath the costume top, the slight change at the mouth and brow, the way the two silhouettes no longer matched as cleanly as they once had. Tabitha checked her phone once, then pulled into the club lot and cut the engine.

“Count it when you’re done,” she said. “I’ll be at the side door.”

Melanie nodded. She opened the passenger door and stepped out into the colored light from the sign, the new proportions moving differently under the fabric, and waited for the next instruction.

Chapter Ten

The bar was the kind of place the firm used when a deal closed after hours—low light, dark wood, waiters who did not need to be asked twice. Tabitha sat with her back to the wall, one hand resting over Caleb’s on the table. Across from them two associates and a senior partner were still in their jackets, ties loosened, the conversation moving easily from billable hours to weekend plans.

Someone asked about family. The partner mentioned a sister who had just made partner at another firm. Tabitha smiled, the expression polite and finished.

“My sister fell through the cracks,” she said. “She’s an exotic dancer now. One of the clubs out on the highway.”

The table went briefly quiet in the way people do when they are deciding how much interest to show. Tabitha’s thumb moved once across the back of Caleb’s hand.

“Would you believe,” she added, still pleasant, “in the early days she tried to steal Caleb’s affection from me.”

Caleb turned his glass a quarter turn. He did not look at anyone in particular when he answered.

“She’s not my type.”

One of the associates laughed, short and relieved, and the partner raised his drink in a small, automatic toast to whatever had just been settled. Tabitha’s fingers stayed where they were. Outside, the streetlights had come on. Inside, the conversation moved on to the next harmless thing, and no one asked for the name of the club.