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Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Nestled within the Eastern United States countryside was the quaint little town of Brookhill, known for its unique blend of traditional values and a forward-thinking approach to community development. Lush, tree-lined streets and well-preserved historic buildings harken back to its founding in the late 19th century, contrasting with state-of-the-art infrastructure surrounded by rolling hills and forests.

The evenings would see families gather at the TV for shared meals. Brookhill's work-life balance ensured parents had quality time with their loved ones, creating a nurturing environment where family ties were cherished and celebrated.

However, this wasn't strictly the case for Mia.

She and her mother, Linda, sat down for dinner in the kitchen. As they enjoyed their meal, conversation flowed effortlessly between them, touching on topics from Linda's day at work to Mia's latest ideas for her self-published novels. The aroma of food filled the air, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere in which they could share their thoughts. It was a delightful evening, for the most part, as one topic in particular was always brought up eventually by Linda.

"I just think you could make it as a bodybuilder? You certainly have the genes for it."

Mia couldn't help but roll her eyes at her mother's suggestion. It wasn't the first time Linda's past as a bodybuilder had influenced her ideas. Linda had been a dedicated bodybuilder in her youth, sculpting her physique with determination. Her achievements in female bodybuilding were a source of pride, and she often drew upon that experience for inspiration. Mia admired her mother's dedication but sometimes found it annoying.

"This again?" Mia asked, her voice tinged with annoyance, as she leaned back in her chair and raised an eyebrow. Mia couldn't help but chuckle inwardly at the predictability of it all, knowing that her mother always managed to wedge the idea of Mia being a bodybuilder into

their conversations. She just wouldn't let it go. "You know what I said last time."

Linda let out a soft sigh, her gaze dropping to her plate as if contemplating how to explain herself. "I know, and I'm sorry," she finally admitted, her voice carrying a touch of regret. She traced her finger along the rim of her glass, a thoughtful expression on her face. "It's just that sometimes, those memories from my bodybuilding days still pop up, and I can't help but get carried away." she continued, her tone becoming more introspective.

Linda's thoughts drifted to a vivid memory from her bodybuilding days, one she couldn't help but revisit from time to time. She absentmindedly twirled a strand of her golden hair, eyes momentarily distant as she recalled standing on the stage, bathed in bright spotlights, layered in oil. She remembered the feel of the polished floor beneath her feet and the roar of the audience's applause. The nostalgia washed over her, and for a brief moment, she smiled faintly, her eyes sparkling, before returning to the present.

Mia gently nudged Linda with an affectionate grin. "You were doing it again," she teased, her tone light.

"I was?" Linda's brow furrowed, touched with surprise. She didn't want to admit it, or perhaps she wasn't aware, but the reminiscing had been more frequent lately.

Then, an unexpected and slightly awkward silence descended upon Mia and Linda. The clinking of cutlery against their plates became the only thing to pierce the stillness. It was one of those moments when words seemed insufficient to express the complexity of their relationship. Yet, in that quietness, an understanding passed between them. It was unspoken yet deeply felt. They continued to enjoy their meal, each lost in their thoughts.

But Mia had to let her voice be heard all the same.

"You know me, Mum," she began, her voice slightly more argumentative, "I'm all about books and fantasy worlds, not heavy iron." Her words now carried an undertone of disagreement, emphasising the clear divide in their interests. Mia wanted her mother to understand that while she appreciated Linda's history as a bodybuilder, her passions lay in entirely different realms, and she wasn't willing to let those interests be overshadowed.

Linda nodded. She understood her daughter's perspective and respected her interests, but there was a twinge of sorrow in her heart. It reminded her to start taking a backseat to Mia's growing independence and changing priorities. She was, after all, also thinking about moving into an apartment of her own.

As Linda continued eating dinner, her eyes suddenly lit up. She paused mid-bite, a forkful of pasta suspended in the air, as her mind raced with a new idea. It was one of those moments when realisation struck like lightning, and Linda couldn't contain her excitement. She leaned forward, her expression a mix of enthusiasm and intrigue.

"The money from the shows you'd win," she explained, her voice carrying a touch of formality, "You could put that towards that apartment you found on Greenview Avenue." Linda's words were filled with genuine care. She knew that Mia had been eyeing that apartment for weeks and now saw a way to help make that dream a reality. "You don't have a job yet, so that could work."

Mia knew her mother's suggestion was well-intended. She couldn't deny the idea's practicality; it made perfect sense, and Linda's support was touching. Yet, a hint of annoyance lingered. Mia had always been fiercely independent and deeply immersed in her creative pursuits, and the feeling of being gently pressured into taking on bodybuilding, even for a good cause, grated on her.

"If not for the apartment, maybe towards your first self-published book?" Linda added.

Mia's annoyance simmered, and as Linda continued to press the idea of bodybuilding, Mia felt the weight of her mother's expectations bearing down on her. With a deep breath to collect herself, she pushed her chair back and stood up from the dinner table. Her tone carried a hint of frustration as she spoke. "Let's not make dinner about this tonight. I'll consider it, I promise," she added, trying to reassure Linda while also setting a clear boundary. With that, she left the table.

In the living room, Linda sat amidst her gleaming bodybuilding trophies. As she gazed at the awards, cherished memories of her past flooded her mind. She traced her fingers along the polished surfaces of the medals, feeling the weight of the years gone by. It was a bittersweet moment, filled with nostalgia for the days when she graced the bodybuilding stage with power and grace.

Among Linda's collection of trophies, one stood out prominently: that from the "Titan Pro" of '08. It was a striking masterpiece of craftsmanship with a sleek, muscular figure in the iconic double bicep pose, with every muscle meticulously detailed in polished bronze. The trophy's base was a rich mahogany. It reminded Linda of her youth. Each time she looked at it,

she couldn't help but feel pride as this win propelled her to success.

Linda's heart swelled, yet there was also a tinge of regret in realising how much life had changed since then. Her love for bodybuilding remained, but it was now mingled with the realities of parenthood.

Looking back at the shelf, one conspicuous space told a different story. It was the reserved spot for the prestigious "Miss Mass" trophy, a contest Linda had always aspired to win but had narrowly missed, as Vanessa Steele emerged victorious at the Miss Mass of '10 instead. The rivalry between Linda and Vanessa had been quietly simmering over the years, only to explode with Vanessa's victory at the Miss Mass contest.

Linda's loss at the Miss Mass contest wasn't due to a lack of talent or potential but rather because she couldn't muster the willpower required to push herself further, unlike Vanessa. The demands of the sport were already taking a toll on Linda physically and mentally, and she had decided to prioritise her well-being, a decision especially compounded by her later pregnancy with Mia.

With parenthood easing up as Mia grew more independent, Linda saw the potential in Mia carrying on the legacy she had established years prior, especially concerning the "Miss Mass" contest that slipped through her fingers. Linda postulated the idea of grooming Mia, sharing her expertise and passion for the sport, hoping that her daughter might vie for victory in Linda's stead. It was a way for Linda to bridge the gap between her aspirations while giving Mia the money needed for her new apartment.

Linda's gaze inevitably drifted towards the cherished photograph of her deceased husband displayed on the fireplace mantel. Though he was no longer physically present, the memory of his encouragement was imprinted on Linda.

"Wish you were here," she murmured, her voice filled with longing, her words holding the weight of loss. Brian had been her rock, her confidant, who understood her like no one else could. Linda paused, her eyes misting, before continuing, "You'd always know what to say."

Mia's heart sank as she scrolled through the images of the new apartment she eyed on Greenview Avenue. The spacious rooms, large windows, and modern decor promised a space where she could nurture her creativity. But the price was a stark reminder of the harsh reality of real estate in the city. Dejection washed over her as she realised her aspirations were out of

reach. It was a sick joke.

As Mia pondered her future, her phone buzzed with a text message from her boyfriend, Jack:

How's your day going?

A small smile tugged at Mia's lips. Despite what had been on her mind, Jack's message reminded her that she wasn't facing them alone. His simple message was comforting. Mia quickly replied, sharing the ups and downs of her day, particularly about her mother making the same suggestion again.

It can't be that bad to at least entertain your mum for a bit. She's right, too. The money would help with getting that apartment.

Mia sighed in frustration, her annoyance growing as she thought about Jack's message. She couldn't help but acknowledge that he was right. Mia was poised to reply but then hesitated. She decided against responding immediately, realising she needed more time to sort through her feelings.

Mia stared at the real estate listing for the Greenview Avenue apartment for a moment longer, her desire for that space burning fiercely. But then, with a sigh, she closed the browser tab. The reality of the steep price was still too fresh, and she needed a break from the weight of it all. Instead, she opted for casual internet browsing, hoping to find a distraction.

As Mia scrolled, her eyes landed on a local news report that instantly piqued her interest. The headline read, "Renowned Bodybuilder Vanessa Thorne Opens New Gym in Town." The name Vanessa Thorne sounded oddly familiar, and then it clicked. Mia vividly remembered her mother discussing Vanessa as her fiercest rival from her bodybuilding days. The irony of the situation was not lost on Mia as she read about Vanessa's new gym venture. It was a sudden and unexpected connection to the bodybuilding world, which felt like a twist of fate.

Oddly curious, Mia's intrigue got the best of her, prompting the young woman to click on the live news report to learn more about Vanessa Thorne's venture.

With a graceful smile, Vanessa flexed her sculpted biceps for the cameras, the muscles rippling beneath her skin like works of art. The flashes of the photographers' cameras illuminated her, capturing the essence of her beauty. It was a mesmerising display that showcased not only her physical prowess but left an indelible mark on the minds of those

watching, including Mia through the computer, who couldn't help but admire the woman.

Vanessa Thorne was a striking figure. With a physique that seemed chiselled down to the bone, she embodied the essence of strength and determination. Her jet-black hair was framed on a face with piercing blue eyes. Vanessa was dressed in sharp and professional attire, wearing a tailored charcoal grey pantsuit that was quite tight across the shoulders. Her charisma was magnetic, drawing people toward her.

Amidst the flurry of camera flashes, one journalist raised a question that resonated with everyone. "Vanessa," he began, his voice projecting above the crowd, "your transition from bodybuilding champion to entrepreneur is quite a departure. Can you tell us where the idea for this venture came from?"

Vanessa's gaze remained steady as she replied, "Well, you see, my years in bodybuilding taught me the value of discipline and self-improvement. I wanted to create a space where people in our community could tap into that potential within themselves. This gym is not just a place to work out; it's a hub for personal transformation, where anyone, regardless of their fitness level or age, can become the best version of themselves. I've always believed in pushing boundaries. And now, coming home after living in the States for so many years, I want to help others do the same."

Vanessa's focus shifted momentarily to her calves. With playfulness, she decided to give the photographers a closer look. The reporters eagerly snapped away, capturing her calf muscles' sinewy definition and sheer power. Vanessa's display was a testament to the dedication and hard work she'd put in over the years.

Amidst the excitement, another journalist inquired, "Vanessa, your bodybuilding career has been remarkable. Can you tell us how that's been going alongside your new venture?"

"Thank you for asking," she began, "My bodybuilding journey has been a profound part of my life, and it continues to be. While my focus has changed to supporting the community, I still train diligently and stay connected to the sport. Sponsorships certainly help with that. It's about balance and evolving, and I'm excited to see where the future takes me, both in bodybuilding and as a gym owner."

A reporter seized the opportunity to get a more personal perspective and asked Vanessa, "You've had such an impressive career. Could you tell us how you balance your family life with your professional pursuits?"

Vanessa's expression softened. "Family has always been a cornerstone of my life. While my career demands dedication, I prioritise quality time with my family. My husband and I are a team, creating moments that matter for us all. It's about finding that balance and cherishing the support and love we provide one another. I have my oldest daughter with me right now."

The press was taken aback when Vanessa's oldest daughter, Sarah, suddenly appeared from off-camera. She couldn't have been much older than Mia. Sarah's presence was a surprise, and she stood confidently by her mother's side, her sculpted physique and radiant smile drawing curious glances from the reporters. Athleticism and strength ran deep in Vanessa's family, and the unspoken suggestion of Sarah's potential involvement in bodybuilding intrigued the press even further.

Guilt tugged at Mia's heart as she watched Vanessa and her daughter Sarah share the screen and their evident connection. She couldn't help but feel inadequate at that moment, knowing that she had not pursued the same passions as Sarah, who seemed to share the same hunger for bodybuilding with her mother. Mia questioned herself, wondering if she was somehow letting her own mother down by not embracing the same path.

A mix of awe and curiosity clashed as Mia observed Sarah's impressive musculature through the computer screen. "Holy fuck, her physique is incredible."

Another reporter, intrigued by Sarah, inquired, "Sarah, your physique is amazing! How long have you been training to get this big?"

Sarah's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she responded. "I've been training seriously for about five years now. It's been a journey of discipline and perseverance, and I owe much to my mum's guidance and support. Oh, and her genes, too, I guess."

The reporters and Sarah shared a chuckle.

"She's been my mentor and biggest inspiration," Sarah said, smiling at Vanessa.

"Do you have plans to compete professionally like your mother did?"

Sarah's eyes gleamed with ambition. "Competing at that level is a goal of mine. I've been working hard and making strides in my training."

Vanessa chimed in, a hint of maternal protectiveness in her tone. "Sarah's got incredible potential, but we believe in honing her skills and developing her physique before diving into

the pro circuit. She's on her way, but there's still room for growth and refinement. Plenty of it. Now, that will be all for today.”

"Sarah, could you flex for the camera?"

Sarah smiled and gracefully flexed her biceps. Her sculpted muscles rippled beneath her skin, creating a striking visual display that amazed the photographers. The camera shutters clicked rapidly, capturing the raw power and dedication that had sculpted Sarah's physique. Mia couldn't help but feel admiration and inspiration as she witnessed the display through the computer.

With a sigh, Mia shut her computer down, determined to find solace and inspiration in her writing. She needed some distance from the world of bodybuilding and the complexities of independence. Unbeknownst to her, Linda sat in the living room, engrossed in Vanessa's interview on the television. As Vanessa's interview continued to play, Linda's gaze remained fixed on the screen, lost in her thoughts and memories of her competitive days.

A few days later, Mia strolled down the streets of Brookhill. As she walked, Mia couldn't help but notice the growing crowd of people converging on Vanessa Thorne's new gym, Fitness Palace,” which had already become a hub of activity, attracting fitness enthusiasts from all walks of life. It was clear that Vanessa's influence extended far beyond the interview Mia had watched earlier in the week.

As Mia observed, Mia couldn't help but notice Sarah, Vanessa's daughter, was the centre of attention. Her physique was fully displayed in workout attire, taking selfies with excited fans and signing autographs. Her smile drew admirers eager to connect with a champion in the making.

As Sarah posed for another selfie with one fan, another excitedly asked, "Sarah, can you show us your favourite pose?"

"Of course!" Sarah chuckled warmly; her enthusiasm seemed genuine as she flexed her impressive biceps for the eager crowd. "Here's the classic double bicep pose." The onlookers looked on in awe, their cameras clicking away as they captured the moment.

A fan in the crowd couldn't contain their curiosity and called out, "Sarah, how much can you lift?" The question resonated with many, and the group fell silent as they hung without an

answer, eagerly awaiting Sarah's response.

"Well, I've been known to lift more weight than some of these guys around here." Sarah gestured playfully at some of the male gym-goers, eliciting laughter from the audience. Her comment left some men feeling good-naturedly embarrassed, their pride momentarily taken down a notch by the confident bodybuilder. "But hey," she continued, her voice filled with confidence, "it's not just about the weight; it's about the technique and the determination. Who wants to see me demonstrate some lifting techniques?" The crowd erupted into cheers, energised by Sarah's contagious enthusiasm.

Intrigued, Mia joined the crowd outside the gym. Her curiosity got the best of her as she edged closer, her eyes fixed on Sarah, who was now preparing to demonstrate. It was strange for Mia to be so drawn into the infectious enthusiasm of Sarah and the fans. A flurry of thoughts raced through her mind, a nagging question lingering: could embracing bodybuilding, even temporarily, help her secure the apartment she longed for on Greenview Avenue? It wasn't such a bad idea after all.

With a deep breath, Sarah positioned herself in front of the loaded barbell, her feet hip-width apart and her grip steady. The crowd fell silent, their anticipation mounting. The barbell slowly rose from the ground, weighed down with heavy plates. Sarah's muscles rippled as she effortlessly hoisted the weight upwards, her back straight. The raw power left the onlookers in awe, their cheers and applause thunderous as Sarah completed the deadlift with perfect form, setting the heavy barbell back down with a triumphant smile.

The admiration in one fan's gaze was what Sarah strived for from the crowd. As Sarah raised her arms, her biceps bulged, flexing them confidently yet gracefully. The fan couldn't help but gasp in amazement, her enthusiasm mirrored by the crowd's enthusiasm as they erupted into applause.

Her curiosity satisfied, Mia decided it was time to step away from the bustling crowd, moving towards a nearby bookstore, Whispering Ink. It was a place of solace and comfort for her, where the world of words and imagination provided a sanctuary from the complexities of life. As she pushed open the door, the familiar quiet ambience enveloped her. Here, Mia could retreat into fantasy and fiction, a world where her passions and creativity flourished, away from the pressures of her mother.

Ms Evelyn Wells, the shop owner, had her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun and a pair of round glasses perched on her nose. Her eyes were a vibrant, sparkling shade of green that complimented her long, flowy skirt adorned with intricate patterns. Mia entered, noticing

Evelyn peering out the window at the hustle and bustle around Fitness Palace. The shop owner sighed, shaking her head ever so slightly, hinting at her disapproval toward the events outside.

"All these muscle-building shenanigans will someday rot people's brains. They need to pick up a book now and then." Her tone was gentle but tinged with concern. "Though I suppose they'll just lift those too."

"Yeah," Mia began before her tone faded. "Say, do you have the new book from Isabella Turner? Been waiting to get my hands on it." Her voice held a layer of anticipation, eager to immerse herself in science fiction once more, hoping it would wrap her up and distract her.

Evelyn smiled and pointed behind Mia. "Second shelf on the right," she said, her eyes twinkling. Evelyn knew she could always trust Mia to keep her head down and immerse herself in books, committed to nourishing her mind rather than getting caught up in the latest trends.

Surrounded by a stack of old photo albums from her competitive years, Linda sat on the chair in the living room nearest the fireplace. Each photograph remembered her victories and the camaraderie she shared with fellow competitors. Flipping through the pages, Linda's fingers traced the lines of her sculpted physique in the black-and-white images.

Among the mountain of photographs Linda was carefully sifting through, one, in particular, stood out from the edges. It was a faded but still vivid image of Linda herself and Vanessa Thorne, taken decades prior, during Linda's last contest before her prep for Miss Mass, which she would eventually lose to Vanessa. In the photograph, Linda and Vanessa stood side by side, their physiques in prime condition, glistening with sweat under the stage lights. What made this picture significant was the history behind it. It had been taken just before Vanessa revealed she, too, was prepping for the Miss Mass contest next, which would see the girls' camaraderie evolve into an intense, bitter rivalry.

As Linda gazed at the photograph of her and Vanessa, a mixture of emotions welled within her. While it held cherished memories, it also reminded her of the sacrifices that had strained their relationship. Linda carefully placed the photograph back into the album and closed it, deciding not to delve further into the past, not wanting to dredge up any more memories that might reopen old wounds.

The doorbell rang just as Linda was putting the old photo album away. She furrowed her brows, not expecting any visitors at this hour. "Who could that be?" she mused aloud, her

voice tinged with surprise and went to the door, her curiosity piqued by the unexpected interruption.

Linda opened the door, her surprise quickly giving way to astonishment as she found herself face-to-face with—

“Vanessa.”

Vanessa stood tall and confident, her physique as impressive and powerful as ever. Her muscles rippled beneath her tight-fitting professional attire.

Vanessa's arrival was unexpected, and Linda's thoughts raced as she tried to make sense of the situation. At the same time, Linda had a sense of bitterness about Vanessa's sudden appearance at her old friend's doorstep. In truth, Linda was surprised that Vanessa still remembered where she lived after all these years.

With a hint of genuine surprise in her voice, Vanessa said, "Linda. I didn't think you still lived here." Her words conveyed a sense of nostalgia and curiosity.

Wordlessly, Linda took a moment to study Vanessa's impressive musculature, her eyes tracing the contours. Vanessa's shoulders were broad and robust; her arms boasted sculpted and veined biceps, showcasing raw strength and aesthetic perfection. The muscles in her legs, sculpted by countless hours, weeks, months, and years of intense workouts, were taut. Even in her presence, Linda couldn't escape the undeniable allure of Vanessa's physique.

"Well?" Vanessa asked, breaking the momentary silence. Her tone was casual but carried a hint of warmth. "Are you going to let your old friend in?"

Linda hesitated for a moment, her gaze meeting Vanessa's. She knew all too well that Vanessa's unexpected visit was likely motivated by something more than a simple reunion, especially after all these years. Sighing, she finally stepped aside, inviting Vanessa into the house.

"Come in," Linda said, her voice tinged with caution and resignation. She knew that Vanessa's presence here was undoubtedly tied to their rivalry. Linda couldn't help but brace herself for the possibility that Vanessa was here to boast about her successes and accomplishments over the years.

Vanessa stepped into Linda's modest home, her eyes sweeping the interior. It was a far cry

from the luxurious villa she owned in Los Angeles, the decor simple and functional.

“Everything’s just how I remember it.”

“Why are you here, Vanessa?” Linda couldn't help but detect condescension in Vanessa's comment. She felt a twinge of annoyance, eager to understand the purpose of Vanessa's visit. Her words were polite but carried an undercurrent of impatience. “I can't imagine you're here just to reminisce about old times.”

“I’ll get straight to the point, then. You are aware of my new venture?”

“The new gym in town, yeah. What about it?”

Vanessa removed her coat and settled into the chair nearest the fireplace. As she did, the chair creaked and groaned, audibly protesting the unexpected weight of her muscular frame. Vanessa, however, seemed unfazed by the chair's protests as she leaned back comfortably, her sculpted physique occupying a significant portion of the seating.

Vanessa couldn't help but study Linda, her eyes briefly scanning her once-formidable rival. She couldn't help but feel a mixture of surprise and, in a way, disappointment. The contrast in size between the Linda of today and the powerhouse competitor from years ago was stark. Inwardly, Vanessa found herself appalled by how much smaller Linda had become; her physique had significantly changed from their days of fierce competition.

Vanessa leaned forward, her tone softening as she spoke. "Listen... I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, Linda," she said, her voice hinting at sincerity. "I know how much you hate me for winning Miss Mass years ago, but that's exactly it. Years ago. So much has changed since then." Her words were an attempt to extend an olive branch, suggesting it was time to move past the bitterness of their rivalry and find common ground.

“For you, you mean,” Linda shot back.

It seemed Linda's resentment was an immovable object. With a subtle growl of annoyance, Vanessa was irked by Linda's inability to let go of the past and embrace friendship once more.

Vanessa's frustration lingered. “I'm here to offer you an opportunity," she said, her voice tinged with a hint of exasperation. "I want you to run Fitness Palace with me." She was extending an offer for collaboration, a chance for them to work together in a new capacity—an opportunity for them to just...be friends again.

But Linda wouldn't budge. Nor could Vanessa hide her disappointment any longer.

"Linda," she began, "Did losing the Miss Mass contest mean that much to you?" Her words were both a question and a plea for understanding. Vanessa had hoped they could find common ground and move forward, but Linda's bitterness seemed a barrier she couldn't easily overcome. Vanessa thought hard about what might be offered as a last-ditch olive branch. "If you want, you can have my trophy. It doesn't mean anything to me anymore."

"It wouldn't be the same, and you know that. You've earned so much more since. You have no idea what I would give to be on that stage again to win fair and square." Linda wasn't doubting the legitimacy of Vanessa's win by any means; she knew that Vanessa had rightfully earned her victory in the Miss Mass contest. But taking Vanessa's trophy and claiming it as her own didn't sit right with her. It wouldn't give her the same satisfaction as earning her title. To Linda, it would feel like a hand-me-down, a second-rate acknowledgement of her abilities, talent and dedication. She couldn't help but hold onto her desire to succeed on her terms rather than simply inheriting Vanessa's past glory. "Think I'll come out of retirement, you know?"

"Come out of retirement? Linda, I don't think you know how much bodybuilding has changed over the past twenty years." Vanessa leaned forward, expression flat, as she explained, "It's not just about the competitions anymore. It's about building a brand, a lifestyle. It's commercialised. You'll be turning your body into a franchise. Fitness Palace is a break away from that. We can inspire and empower people to transform their lives. I believe we can make a real impact together."

As Vanessa spoke further, she conveyed the darker changes to the bodybuilding industry since Linda's retirement. In recent years, the industry had witnessed a disturbing shift towards extreme practices, where competitors were pushed to unhealthy limits to pursue an idealised physique. It was no longer just about competitive sportsmanship but had morphed into a culture marred by excessive steroid use, body dysmorphia, and questionable ethics.

"I don't know what bodybuilding will be like next year, but I know I won't like it," Vanessa concluded fearfully. "The things I've heard down the grapevine—"

"Not *my* body. Mia's," Linda quipped with a dark undertone. Her words held a tone that suggested she knew no boundaries. "I'm going to teach her everything I know, push her to the limit and further." There was a hint of cruelty in her voice, suggesting that Linda would go to dark lengths to mould her daughter into something extraordinary, regardless of the potential risks or consequences.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," Vanessa said softly.

Linda's tone grew more intense as she continued, "I said the same about your Sarah. She better watch out, though. I will do everything to ensure she's tiny compared to Mia." Her words carried a competitive edge, hinting at a rivalry between their daughters. Linda's determination to see Mia succeed was unwavering, and she was more than willing to challenge and surpass the achievements of Vanessa's child.

With a nod, Vanessa rose, signalling her intent to leave. Vanessa's voice held sympathy as she responded, "I think losing the Miss Mass contest did a bit more than break your heart, Linda." Her words hinted at defeat's profound impact on her old friend, suggesting that it had left deeper scars than Linda was wary of.

Vanessa made her way to the door, her departure marked by lingering tension. As she stepped out of Linda's home, it was evident that their meeting had brought a complex mix of emotions and unresolved issues to the surface. With a final glance back, Vanessa said, "For what it's worth...I am sorry."

Mia sat in a cosy corner of Whispering Ink, clutching the new book she had bought. The bookstore had always been her sanctuary, a place to escape into fantasy worlds. But, her mind was far from the pages she longed to read. The weight of her mother's pressure to pursue bodybuilding hung heavily. To make matters worse, the crowd's noise outside Vanessa's new gym seeped in through the windows.

Sighing, Mia closed the book. She reached into her bag and pulled out her phone. With a few taps, she opened her social media apps, seeking a distraction that would filter the noise out for just a few minutes and peer into the lives of others who seemed to have it all figured out.

As Mia scrolled through her feed, a promoted ad from Vanessa Thorne's brand of workout supplements grabbed her attention. The video featured Sarah, Vanessa's daughter, showcasing her impressive workout routine, demonstrating various exercises. The ad then focused on a named product from Vanessa's line, MuscleMax Pro, emphasising its role in Sarah's fitness journey.

As she read through the slog of comments, Mia's eyes widened in surprise as she noticed one came from Isabella Turner, the female author whose book she had just been reading.

Isabella asked whether Sarah was open to taking on new clients for fitness training.

The comment triggered a whirlwind of thoughts in Mia. It made her wonder if Isabella was embarking on an entirely new chapter in her life or considering a significant career change. Mia couldn't help but question whether the world was changing so rapidly that not embracing bodybuilding would eventually seem out of place and whether she should consider expanding her horizons. Seeing someone she had admired for her writing prowess take such a different direction in life left Mia feeling torn.

Mia couldn't help but compare the social media accounts of Sarah and Isabella. Sarah's page was a whirlwind of activity, boasting tens of millions of followers and a thriving engagement. Her posts, filled with workout routines and glimpses into her journey as a budding bodybuilding champion, garnered likes and comments by the minute. In contrast, while still impressive, Isabella's account seemed more subdued. Her book-related content received appreciation from a dedicated fanbase, but the numbers paled compared to Sarah's fitness-centric fame. The contrast left Mia feeling an intensified pressure to consider bodybuilding, just as her mother had hoped for the past year.

Sighing, Mia picked up her phone and began to compose a text message to her mother. Her decision felt heavy, as if she were surrendering to a destiny she had long resisted. Her fingers trembled as she typed the words, committing to the predetermined path. The message was brief, with only a few short words: I'll do it — a reluctant acceptance of the pressure that had been mounting for so long. Mia pressed send, feeling tight, as though she had just stepped towards a daunting and uncertain future.

When Linda received Mia's text, she couldn't help but feel a surge of happiness. She quickly replied with a series of emojis that conveyed her joy—a triumphant flexing muscle emoji, a clapping hands emoji, and a heart emoji. It was a simple response, but it carried so much weight.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

The several past weeks ushered a transformative period in Mia's life. The once-cosy living room had been rearranged into a makeshift training ground to create a functional space for Mia's bodybuilding journey. The plush sofa now stood pushed against the wall, making room for a modest set of free weights, resistance bands, and a sturdy training bench. Linda, Mia's mother, now acted as her training mentor, guiding her through the intricacies of form, technique, and the disciplined routines that defined the sport. Her voice carried both encouragement and a relentlessly authoritative drive for perfection, with Mia's focus unwavering as she absorbed her mother's teachings with each lesson.

Countless tubs of protein powder, neatly arranged in a kaleidoscope of flavours and sizes, claimed their territory atop the kitchen's sleek granite countertop. The shelves that once housed culinary delights now boasted an array of supplements—protein bars, pre-workout blends, and a medley of vitamins—all meticulously organised in a symphony of labels and colours. The refrigerator shelves, typically stocked with everyday essentials, now cradled neatly aligned rows of meal-prepped containers, each meticulously portioned and labelled with the precision of a seasoned athlete. Linda personally strategised and prepared this array of fitness-fueled provisions, counting every calorie thrice over every day for the past six weeks.

Linda manoeuvred a cardboard box from the hallway into the kitchen. With careful but determined steps, she balanced the box, its weight seemingly inconsequential in the hands of a woman accustomed to lifting. The grunts of Mia's exertion provided the backdrop as Linda, wearing an encouraging smile, gently placed the box onto the kitchen island. She retrieved a sharp utility knife from a drawer, slicing the cardboard's taped seams. Linda's smile widened into delight as the box's contents were unveiled.

"Perfect." Linda's hand reached into the open box, retrieving one of the dozens of small unmarked pill bottles. A satisfied nod followed as she scanned the fine print. "Thanks, Max. Knew you'd come through."

Linda carefully sifted through the remaining contents of the cardboard box, her fingers

skimming over a small, sealed envelope tucked beneath a layer of neatly arranged paperwork. Her heart quickened as she recognised Max's distinct handwriting on the front of the envelope. She delicately pulled out the letter, its surface slightly creased from its travels. The envelope bore no stamp, suggesting its discreet delivery.

Intrigued, Linda broke the seal and unfolded the letter, revealing Max's meticulously penned words:

Dear Linda,

I hope this package finds you well. Enclosed are the “supplements” you asked for. This batch has been tailored precisely to your specifications — the information you sent about Mia, including blood samples, helped tremendously.

I, however, must stress caution in their usage. The dosage and schedule outlined on the labels are precise. As discussed through prior correspondence, these drugs are experimental, and the effects might surpass conventional expectations. I trust your discretion in this matter and have every confidence in it.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any queries or observations.

I wish you and Mia success in your endeavours.

Warm regards,

Max.

As Linda absorbed the contents of Max's letter, a smile played at the corners of her lips. With a swift motion, Linda folded the letter precisely, her smile lingering, and then, without hesitation, she deposited it into the kitchen bin.

Her gaze shifted back to the array of pill bottles, and she methodically rearranged them, aligning the containers in a slightly different formation atop the kitchen island. A glance at the clock prompted Linda to pick up her phone, swiftly tapping a message to Mia:

Could you come to the kitchen for a moment?

As she awaited Mia's arrival, Linda cast a discreet glance over her shoulder, ensuring no remnants of the letter or trace of her correspondence with Max remained visible. The coast was clear — good.

As Mia descended the stairs, the firmness of her calf muscles gracefully rippled beneath the fabric of her leggings with each step. The sinewy definition, subtly etched along the length of her leg, spoke volumes of the intensity she'd poured into her lower body workouts. The contour of her thighs revealed an artistry crafted through countless lunges, deep squats, and relentless leg presses. The supple fabric of her leggings wove snugly around her quadriceps and the taut lines of her hamstrings, painting an intricate picture of strength.

As she continued her descent, the fabric of her fitted t-shirt hugged her deltoids, showcasing a muscularity that hadn't been as apparent before. Her sleeves outlined her biceps and triceps. The toned lines were more evident with each passing day while not yet prominently muscular.

As Mia moved into the kitchen, her steps lightly echoing, standing at the kitchen island, Linda turned at the sound. Her eyes traced Mia's physique. Pride shimmered in Linda as she admired her daughter's progress—the sculpted lines defining Mia's arms, the faint but noticeable definition in her shoulders—all of it.

"Is that what I think it is?" Mia's eyes widened as they landed on the assortment of pill bottles on the kitchen island.

"The delivery from Max? Yes." Linda's voice carried a note of certainty as she gestured subtly toward the array of bottles, inviting Mia to inspect them closer.

Mia approached the kitchen island, her gaze fixed on the assortment of pill bottles. Each container held a promise, a carefully crafted amalgamation of compounds that guaranteed progress. Her fingers grazed the surface of one bottle, tracing its label with curious eyes. Each bottle hinted at a meticulous regimen, each pill a fragment of a larger, grand plan mapped out by Linda, shrouded in a veil of thorough preparation.

"The supplements Max prescribed for your progress. They're part of the plan." Linda's words were a gentle reassurance, a subtle attempt to alleviate Mia's growing uncertainty. She watched her daughter closely, gauging her reaction with a mother's acute intuition, ready to address any unease that may have arisen from the unexpected sight of the supplements. "Tailored specifically to you."

Mia's eyes scanned the kitchen, lingering on the neatly arranged containers and the pill bottles. The puzzle pieces were beginning to fit together, the revelation dancing at the edge of her mind. Mia's mind rewound through the past weeks, recalling the meticulous measurements

Linda had taken, attributing them, at the time, to her mother's disciplined approach to fitness. Her gaze returned to Linda, who stood by the kitchen island. "Ah, that's why you took all those measurements a few weeks back."

"These supplements are experimental, Mia. They're designed to aid your progress but require careful handling." Linda's tone was firm, emphasising the importance of caution. She gestured toward the bottles on the kitchen island. "We'll start with a minimal dosage and gradually increase it."

Mia's expression shifted, apprehension etched across her face as she absorbed Linda's words. "Experimental?"

"They're meant to enhance performance and aid in muscle development," Linda explained, her voice steady despite the weight of her explanation. "But, they're not without risks."

Mia's brow furrowed, her concern growing. "So, are they safe?"

"I'll be closely monitoring your progress." Linda's words held a note of caution. "We'll proceed slowly and stop immediately at the first sign of adverse effects. I know it's a lot to take in, Mia."

"You got that right," Mia scoffed.

Linda's eyes held a glimmer of hope as she glanced at Mia. Despite the caution she'd just expressed, there was an underlying eagerness. Linda said, her voice carrying a touch of urgency, "But I still plan to have you stage-ready by Winter."

"But that's only weeks away!" Upon hearing her mother's goal, Mia's eyes widened in apprehension. Her voice carried a tinge of panic at the daunting timeline. Her mind raced through a whirlwind of thoughts, trying to reconcile the magnitude of the impossible task. Her heart fluttered, a knot forming in her stomach.

"And this," Linda began, her eyes fixated on the pill bottle, fingers curling around its smooth form before she clasped it firmly. With a decisive nod, she shook it lightly, the contents swishing within, "This is where these little wonders come into play."

Mia's heart raced; the rhythm was an echo of her thoughts. Her breaths came in shallow, uncertain gasps as she grappled with the weight of her decision. "Maybe... I should've talked to Max first," she murmured, her voice a fragile whisper. The room felt smaller, suffocatingly so.

As Linda's frustration simmered, she straightened her posture. "Commitment and determination, Mia," she uttered intensely, eyes locking onto Mia's. "I've learned that the only way to triumph is through sheer dedication and perseverance. That involves committing yourself to these, too. It's about wanting to win more than anything else in this world. To stand at the peak and know you've given your all, left every drop of sweat, every ounce of strength in pursuit of that victory. You still want the house on Greenview—right?"

"Sure."

With a stern tone, Linda firmly placed the pill bottle into Mia's hands. "Then take three now," her voice held an edge, leaving no room for debate. "Repeat daily," she continued, her words a directive rather than a suggestion. "And up your dose every time you gain four pounds." Her gaze bore into Mia's.

Mia held the pill bottle, its smooth surface cool against her palms. Her eyes lingered on its silhouette, tracing the label's edges, absorbing every detail with an intensity born of curiosity. A glint caught her eye as she scrutinised the container, drawing her attention to a delicate cursive 'M' etched near the base. It was no doubt Max's trademark. Mia's gaze remained fixed on the symbol.

Linda's bedroom served as the heart of her aspirations for Mia's journey. In her private space, Linda sat at her mahogany desk, with only the soft glow of a desk lamp for company. The laptop screen glowed as she sat.

As Linda busied herself with the myriad spreadsheets, a familiar ping sounded from her laptop—a notification from the Iron network, a forum she frequented. Her gaze darted to the screen, and her eyes flickered with anticipation. She clicked on the message, revealing an ongoing eighty-page-deep thread filled with people discussing their thoughts on the future of bodybuilding. The forum buzzed with speculations and the latest updates regarding these hearsays from fans and seasoned competitors.

As Linda delved deeper into the forum thread, the discussions ignited a flurry of thoughts in her mind. The varying opinions on pushing boundaries in bodybuilding swirled around her, some advocating for cautious growth while others championed radical methods to achieve unprecedented results.

Lost in the discourse, Linda's fingers paused over the keyboard, her gaze distant as she weighed these conflicting perspectives. She leaned back, the glow from the screen casting a faint hue on her face, and she sighed softly. The room's stillness amplified the weight of her indecision.

Elena, known in the forum as "Nebula78," was a revered figure in the bodybuilding community. Her contributions were not just respected; they were anticipated, so everyone read and took it to heart whenever she had something to say. Today, Elena stirred excitement by mentioning the whispers she'd encountered within the bodybuilding grapevine, hinting at a revolutionary shift in the landscape—creating a new division within the sport, one designed for colossal bodybuilders. The talk swirled around the potential replacement of the famed Miss Mass division if this experimental category proved successful.

Her words carried weight, drawing attention from enthusiasts and seasoned competitors alike. Elena's insights framed this rumoured development as a groundbreaking opportunity and a potential turning point in the sport's history. She recounted snippets of conversations, mentioning whispers of rule changes, different judging criteria, and the buzz surrounding athletes who might have their eyes set on conquering this new division.

"Yeah, I can see Sarah Thorne on that stage. She's got the genes for it," one of the forum members said, his username "IronWitness ." His comment sparked throughout the thread, rippling and igniting a series of responses, each member adding their perspective.

Sarah Thorne's name, mentioned only once, became the focal point of an animated exchange. Descriptions of her physique, her disciplined training regimen, and the remarkable genetics she possessed through her mother, Vanessa, echoed through the digital space. Mentions of her thick arms, broad shoulders, and how her muscles seemed to carve definition effortlessly drew admiration from the forum members.

Linda's reaction to Sarah's mention in the forum wasn't just a mere pang of sadness but a deeply rooted bitterness. As the discussion about Sarah's potential in the speculated division continued, Linda's composure masked a smouldering resentment. She hovered over the keyboard, her fingers poised to respond to Iron. Her keystrokes were sharp and deliberate, each word etched with the weight of a thousand hammers.

Linda's finger lingered over the "Send" button, poised to release the emotions in her message to Iron. The cursor blinked rhythmically, but as she hovered on the brink of sending her passionate response, a clarity cut through the haze of anger.

Linda withdrew her finger from the mouse, allowing her hand to fall away from the keyboard. The message remained unsent. Then she closed the tab.

Linda spun her chair away from the closed laptop, revealing a meticulously organised whiteboard dominating the wall behind her. It was a more tangible representation of Mia's future, a canvas of meticulous planning and data collection. Rows and columns sprawled across the expanse, each section adorned with colourful markers and neatly written headings.

The upper left corner boasted a calendar outlining Mia's meticulously planned workout routines. The vibrant markers traced the progression of exercises, intensities, and targeted muscle groups. This was for just the current week.

Adjacent to the calendar, a “Nutrition “ section showcased a complex web of macronutrient ratios, calorie counts, and dietary plans meticulously curated for Mia's optimal performance and muscle growth. Each meal plan was precisely outlined, down to the last gram of protein, carbohydrates, and fats. Again, for that one week.

Further down the board, a “Progress Tracker” section displayed a series of graphs and charts mapping Mia's physical development. Measurements of arms, thighs, waist, and shoulders were recorded at regular intervals, and the data were plotted to illustrate the incremental growth and progress Mia had achieved.

Her eyes traversed the organised columns, evaluating each milestone Mia had reached. Thoughts swirled, contemplating potential adjustments and enhancements to elevate Mia's trajectory within the sport further. Mia had come surprisingly far these first few weeks, but it wasn't enough, at least for Linda.

"There's always room for improvement," she murmured, fingers dancing across the keyboard as she analysed each plan segment. She could optimise Mia's routines, refine her diet, and increase her dosages. Maybe it was better to start the drugs Max gave Mia by upping her intake to four pills from the get-go. After all, Linda was committed to ensuring Mia would get noticed.

Mia's bedroom had transformed dramatically over the past six weeks. Once a space that one could easily have mistaken for a bookshop, it now bore the marks of her newfound obsession with bodybuilding. The fantasy, science fiction and thrillers that once stacked high on her bookshelf were almost entirely replaced by an assortment of autobiographies by

renowned bodybuilders and guides outlining intensive training regimens. They lined her shelves alphabetically by subject, their pages highlighted and bookmarked for swift reference.

One corner of the room had undergone a particularly remarkable change. On the wall, resistance bands hung from hooks, each designated for various resistance levels and different exercises. Neatly organised on a specialised rack stood a set of dumbbells, ranging in weights and sizes. Nearby, a yoga mat sprawled across the floor.

Once adorned with vibrant posters of fantastical landscapes, the walls now exhibited a different inspiration. Motivational quotes in bold, confident fonts were prominently displayed, interspersed with images of legendary bodybuilders. Each poster captured a moment of sheer dedication and raw strength.

Beads of sweat cascaded down Mia's skin, catching the light and refracting it into a dazzling display that almost blinded her. Yet, her focus remained unyielding. With each passing moment, each rep, her breathing grew ragged, the exhales escaping her in bursts of effort and strain. Undeterred, she pressed on. Her sinewy arms strained against the resistance with each repetition, the controlled motion almost a battle, The struggle evident in her movement. Shimmering with sweat, her eyes held a focus bordering on the edge of obsession.

As the soft glow of her phone illuminated the room, Mia's heart skipped at the sight of Jack's name flashing on the screen. It wasn't often Mia's focus on her workout was broken, but Jack always did it. She traced her finger across the screen, revealing the message.

How's your workout going?

Mia approached the mirror, the soft glow of the moon cascading through her window. With a playful smirk gracing her lips, she adjusted her stance, raising her arm in a proud, deliberate motion. Her bicep swelled. The sinewy muscle danced beneath her taut skin, each fibre defined and every curve accentuated. As she angled her phone, the light caught the contours and sharply defined peak split, veins snaking across the surface. The camera clicked, freezing the moment of confidence.

I dunno. You tell me, Mia replied with a smirk, sending the photo over to Jack. Mia impatiently adjusted her sports bra, the fabric straining against her muscles. Despite only six weeks of training, her physique had rapidly outpaced her wardrobe, leaving almost everything she owned feeling too tight or too small.

She couldn't help but wonder, a flicker of worry igniting within, what would Jack think of

her transformation? She'd intentionally kept it hidden from him until now. Would he find her too muscular, or maybe not muscular enough? The uncertainty gnawed at her. Where would Jack draw the line if he deemed Mia not big enough? Would his expectations continue to escalate, pushing her towards an unreachable standard? She had read about female muscle fetishists who felt that way. The fear left Mia questioning whether she'd ever meet Jack's expectations.

As the trio of dots danced on Mia's phone screen, signalling Jack's impending response, a pang of regret gripped her. Doubts flooded—had she made a colossal mistake? *He's going to accuse me of looking like a man*, she thought, anxiety coursing through her veins at the anticipation. With each passing second, the absence of Jack's reply stretched into an agonisingly long minute. Mia couldn't comprehend the delay. Why the hesitation? A single word would suffice, or so she believed. The silence only amplified her anxiety, leaving her grappling with uncertainty.

Upon seeing the duo of emojis—an eggplant followed by a splash—Mia's face lit up with a relieved smile. It was a peculiar but unmistakable sign, one she interpreted as Jack's approval. The six weeks of relentless training she had paid off. "Oh, thank God," she exhaled.

Seeking solace in the half-drunk banana-flavoured protein shake perched on her bedside table, Mia took a sizable gulp, hoping its familiar taste would ease the stress following Jack's reply. However, the appearance of the three blinking dots on her phone shattered her brief respite. "Fuck, don't tell me he's having second thoughts." she pondered aloud, her anxiety resurfacing at the prospect of more uncertainty from him.

Far from it, actually. Instead, Jack asked just how far Mia was willing to take her bodybuilding journey and how eager she was to grow. The prospect of their shared future at the Greenview apartment flashed in her mind, an aspiration driving her relentless pursuit. She hadn't considered the extent of her growth beyond that, torn between stopping at that stage or continuing further.

Jack's unexpected encouragement caught Mia off guard, prompting a surprisingly welcome shift in her perspective. She found herself remarkably open to the idea, a thought that hadn't crossed her mind until now. His comment triggered a deeper contemplation of her future as a bodybuilder, extending beyond the immediate goal of securing the apartment. As Mia glanced back at the mirror, striking a suggestive pose, a smirk curved on her lips. The veins snaking up her bicep seemed to affirm a newfound realisation—maybe Jack was onto something after all.

You think? Mia texted back.

Have you looked at that Sarah Thorne? Jack's question brimmed with an unexpected fervor, hinting at a passion he hadn't fully disclosed before, even to Mia—an evident admiration for muscular women. *Do you think you could surpass her if you push yourself hard enough?*

Is that a challenge? Mia retorted playfully.

Jack replied with a laughing emoji before mentioning his intention to turn in for the night, asking if he would see Mia tomorrow. Her heart wrestled with conflicting emotions—weeks had passed without Jack's comforting presence, yet every gruelling workout and relentless repetition felt crucial to her. She left Jack's question unanswered as she turned to the mirror again.

Mia embarked on her nightly ritual, a series of bodybuilding poses that served as a personal mantra before retiring. With deliberate precision, she began with a front double bicep pose. Her feet grounded firmly, slightly apart, toes gripping the carpet. Every muscle fibre flared, she raised her arms, elbows bent, showcasing the myriad of sculpted sinew. Her biceps bulged proudly, peaks emerging beneath the taut skin, each vein tracing a distinct path. Applying more precise control, she accentuated the separation between each muscle, the twin peaks taking centre stage as they surged upward. Her chest lifted synchronously, highlighting the chiselled lines delineating the separation of muscles. A subtle twist of her torso accentuated the rippling abdominal muscles, etched like intricate patterns in a marble sculpture.

Mia transitioned seamlessly from the front double bicep into her favourite quad flex pose. With purposeful grace, she adjusted her stance, legs spread wide, weight distributed evenly. As she flexed, sinews danced beneath the surface of her smooth skin. Each muscle seemed to vie for prominence, straining against the confines of her skin, yearning to push themselves upward.

Starting with her left leg, she tightened the muscles, drawing out every fibre precisely. The vastus medialis, vastus lateralis, and rectus femoris emerged, each defined and pronounced, creating a landscape of definition. Sinews twitched and rippled, showcasing the intricate network of power concealed within. Moving to her right leg, she replicated the movement, muscles responding with a similar symphony of controlled tension. The sheer definition and separation between each muscle became a mind-numbing sight.

As Mia withdrew from her poised pose, her gaze wandered across the room and settled on the pill bottle her mother had given her. It sat perched on the windowsill where she had left it. The faint moonlight casting a subtle glow that outlined the cursive 'M' on its surface appeared like a strange allure silhouetting the bottle, almost as if it were teasing her, tempting her.

Mia unscrewed the bottle lid with a decisive yet hesitant hand, its faint click resonating in the quiet room. She tilted it slightly, coaxing not just four but five of the purple, iridescent pills into her palm. The weight of the extra pill lingered, a choice that diverged from her mother's suggested dosage.

A hunch tugged at Mia—an intuition that her mother's earlier advice might have been more a facade. Despite the feigned suggestion, a part of Mia believed her mother wouldn't honestly mind the deviation from the prescribed count.

“Fuck it.”

In a swift move, Mia swallowed all five pills in one gulp, negating the wisdom of taking them with water. The sensation of their iridescence sliding down her throat was eclipsed by the anticipation that followed. Now, she braced herself, poised on the cusp of uncertainty, waiting with bated breath, hoping her mother's mysterious friend hadn't duped her.

Mia's anticipation had reached a crescendo, an eager heart beating in sync with the passing seconds. However, as moments stretched into minutes, a disheartening truth began to settle—a profound sense of disappointment and betrayal. Like a promise unfulfilled, the weight of dashed hopes gnawing at her like a persistent hound on a bone. With each passing minute, the reality of their failure became increasingly evident.

“Useless.” Mia's frustration erupted, boiling over like a storm. She hurled the pill bottle to the floor, its descent echoing a professional baseball player's precision. The container ruptured upon impact, its contents—the once alluring iridescent pills—now scattered across the carpet.

Seated on the edge of her bed, shoulders slumped, Mia grappled with a sinking feeling of despair. The anticipation of those pills propelling her towards victory in the Miss Mass contest had been a beacon of hope and assurance in her pursuit. Now, with the pills scattered and their promises shattered, a disheartening sense of uncertainty engulfed her. The data she had eagerly supplied to her mother's friend, staking so much on the anticipated success of those pills, now felt like a futile effort. The weight of potential disappointment from Linda loomed heavily over her. Mia's mind raced with the impending fallout.

Then, faintly in the stillness of her disappointment, Mia perceived a subtle sensation beginning to unfurl, like a whisper. Once dormant and resigned to disappointment, her muscles tingled with an awakening vigour. It was like an invisible hand gently coaxed her muscles to attention.

Her biceps seemed to pulsate. A warmth accompanied the sensation, like a gentle heat swathing over every tendon and ligament. Her thighs responded in kind. Her muscles didn't grow as initially hoped, but the feeling was unlike any other Mia had thought she'd feel. Her quadriceps announced their presence more boldly. The separation between muscle bundles became more pronounced, delineating a detailed landscape of meat. Once delicate and unassuming, her veins now appeared as thick cords pulsating beneath her supple skin. What was once a subtle network now emerged prominently, tracing intricate paths across the surface.

"Woah!" Mia's breath caught as she extended her hand, delicately tracing the thickened veins with a finger. The pronounced ridges that now rose from beneath her skin elicited excitement. Each bump seemed to pulse, creating an intricate roadmap tracing her body. Fascinated, she watched intently as one prominent vein seemed to casually give birth to another, a mesmerising sight as it snaked its way down her bicep. It was as though an elaborate dance was unfolding before her eyes.

As Mia's gaze shifted downward to her quads, she witnessed a similar spectacle unfolding. Veins she hadn't been aware of—or even considered possible—seemed to materialise effortlessly, weaving a complex network across her thighs. These newfound veins, each thicker than the last, emerged almost spontaneously, akin to weeds sprouting after a sudden rainfall. The once-unseen pathways now writhed, each vein pulsating with a nearly organic life. They resembled serpents twisting as they unrelentingly traversed her quads. "It's like my body's playing a game of 'spot the new vein.' Seriously, where did all these come from?"

As Mia's attention shifted to her calves, she couldn't help but notice an intense vascularity that seemed to dominate them. Veins snaked across the surface with prominence, creating a tableau where the veins appeared to outweigh the flesh. It was an unexpected and slightly unsettling sight, a freakish display of pulsating movement that gave Mia a moment's pause. Despite her initial wariness, Mia pressed on, determined to move beyond the oddity of the situation. Tentatively, she squeezed her calf. Mia's laughter bubbled up as she attempted to knead her calves. She encountered an unexpected solidity that made her muscles feel akin to immovable objects, to rocks.

The fading of the sensation was as sudden as its arrival, the pronounced veins gradually retreating to their original size. Mia watched in mild surprise as the once-prominent pathways seemed to subside, almost returning to their former state. "Ah shoot. Well, it was fun while it lasted. Who knows? Maybe they'll come back for a sequel?"

Something had shifted, too; Mia sensed it keenly—a sensation she couldn't quite articulate

but unmistakably felt—a change in her.

“Urgh, seriously?” As Mia discovered the scattered pills on the carpet, a realisation dawned upon her—their influence on her body had been more profound than initially assumed. Acknowledging this unexpected impact, she consciously retained them for future use. Methodically, she retrieved each pill, carefully placing them back into the bottle.

Mia opted for a hollowed-out book as her secret repository for the bottle. She carefully selected a book from her collection that held sentimental value—a novel she had cherished since childhood, the one book she wouldn’t ever give away. Beneath Mia’s notice, her calves casually grew as she reached to put the book back. The growth barely added an inch in size. “There we go, Mr Lewis; back where you belong.”

The clock struck eleven as Mia went from the bookshelf to her bed, with an early leg day on the horizon, which she relished. As she reached to switch off the bedroom lamp, unnoticed by her, her quadriceps lightly expanded, echoing the earlier growth experienced with her calves. Nothing but a slight twitch heralded the half-inch growth filling both quads.

Chapter 3

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As she dove deeper into the dark, body image-obsessed world of competitive bodybuilding, guided fiercely by her mother Linda, Mia's physical and mental well-being began to crumble beneath the pressure of expectation. The rigorous training regime that Linda insisted upon left Mia with pain day after day. But she pushed on regardless, determined not to let her setbacks hinder her ultimate goal: dominance on the stage.

The strain between Mia and her mother became increasingly apparent as the competition drew nearer. Linda's expectations were suffocatingly high, and every misstep or perceived failure sent Mia spiralling. She felt trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and anxiety. Yet still, she persisted, driven by an almost manic need to succeed. As the days ticked closer to the big event, the Miss Mass contest, Mia teetered precariously on the brink, both physically and mentally.

Linda stood before Mia, needle in hand. Mia flinched slightly as her mother inserted the syringe into her bulging bicep, but she didn't protest. They had been working towards this for months - the final push to ensure Mia's victory. Linda pressed down firmly on the plunger, sending the steroid coursing through Mia's veins. A surge of energy flooded Mia's body, making her feel invincible for a fleeting moment. It was a feeling she had grown accustomed to over time.

Linda stepped back, satisfied, and watched Mia flex, admiring her size and definition. "You're going to kill it out there," she said.

Mia turned away from her mother and approached the full-length mirror propped against the wall. With each step, her muscles rippled and bulged, the effects of the steroids evident in every curve and line of her body. She ran her hands over her pecs, marvelling at how far she had come. With a deep breath, she assumed a pose, lifting her arms above her head and arching her back, showcasing her bloated abs and chiselled obliques.

"I can't wait to own that stage, Mum," she declared, her voice low and gravelly from the steroids.

Linda gazed at Mia's muscular form in reverent awe. From the broad expanse of her shoulders to the sharply defined ridges running the length of her abdominals, Linda could see the culmination of countless hours spent sweating in the gym hadn't gone to waste. But as much as Linda admired Mia's physique, she couldn't help but feel satisfied at having played such a pivotal role in shaping it. Over the months, she had become increasingly fixated on pushing Mia further and further beyond what she thought was possible, driving her relentlessly toward ever-greater feats, reshaping what it meant to be a bodybuilder.

Deep down, Linda knew that her single-minded focus had warped her perspective. She saw other competitors as weaklings, lacking the raw power and unflappable determination she possessed in spades. This distorted viewpoint made it easy for her to overlook the risks of such extreme measures to build bulk and manipulate Mia.

Watching Mia strike another dramatic pose before the mirror, Linda allowed herself a momentary smile, savouring the thrill of seeing her daughter transform into a true muscle monster. Linda stared intently at Mia's reflection in the mirror, studying every contour and vein visible under the harsh fluorescent lights. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed a slight imperfection in one of Mia's trapezius muscles, causing her to frown.

"What's wrong?" Mia asked, sensing her mother's disapproval.

Linda hesitated briefly before answering. "Your trap needs some work. You'll lose points if you don't tighten it up."

Mia groaned internally. Another area to obsess over. But she nodded dutifully, knowing that arguing would only make matters worse. She squeezed and stretched the muscles in her neck and upper back, trying to coax them into submission.

"Enough," Linda interrupted her. "Stop wasting your energy. You've got everything else down. Don't forget to keep your diet strict, too. No slacking off now."

As Linda observed Mia's immense frame reflected in the mirror, she knew her daughter had already surpassed all the competitors who would soon hit the stage next week. It was almost unfair, like a one-sided match in Mia's favour from the get-go. The stark contrast between Mia's biceps and tapered waistline compared to the others was enough evidence for Linda to know Mia already had the trophy. But Linda was already thinking bigger, further ahead...

Mia walked diligently into the kitchen the following day, her footsteps echoing against the tiled floor. She sighed as she stood over the countertop cluttered with containers filled with different coloured liquids and powders. This was where her daily routine began: prepping her meals for the week ahead.

She pulled on a pair of latex gloves and grabbed a mixing bowl of protein powder. Into it went water, milk, and an assortment of steroid pills. Mixing vigorously, she added bananas, almond butter, and spinach until the mixture thickened to a smooth consistency. Pouring the concoction into a tupperware tub, she labelled and stacked it neatly.

Next came lunch, a mix of brown rice, steamed broccoli, and grilled chicken breasts. More pills were layered into the food. Dinner consisted of sweet potatoes, green beans, and beef strips cooked in olive oil. Again, more pills were mixed in.

Her mind wandered back to her mother's words: "Don't forget to keep your diet strict, too. No slacking off now."

Mia caught sight of herself in the mirror, examining her muscles with critical eyes. Despite the impressive size she had achieved through months of gruelling training, a rigorous diet and obsessive hormone intake, her mother still didn't think she was big enough. The veins in her arms seemed too shallow, her chest not quite wide enough. Would she ever reach the level of mass she needed to stand out among the competition? And more important than that, would she ever measure up to her mother's expectations?

Her mother had been obsessed with building Mia into the perfect bodybuilder for months. She had pushed Mia harder than anyone else, demanding nothing less than perfection. But Mia also feared disappointing her mother, afraid that any deviation from the course she had set would result in failure or rejection.

Mia hesitated for a moment, staring at the pile of steroid pills lined up on the kitchen counter. Then, a voice inside her head: *More. Take more.*

Mia swallowed a handful of the pills, barely bothering to chew them properly. She could feel her throat constricting around each pill as she forced them down, but the thought of falling behind her peers or letting her mother down proved too strong.

Mia's phone buzzed loudly on the counter. She rolled her eyes as she saw a string of missed calls and texts from her boyfriend, Jack. He hadn't heard from her in days, yet the constant barrage of messages was starting to annoy her.

"Can't this fucking wait?" she muttered under her breath, ignoring the vibration of her phone once again. She knew Jack wanted to meet up tonight, plans they'd made weeks before, but her focus was solely on her preparation for the upcoming contest. Jack was starting to get in the way of that. Mia couldn't help but wonder why Jack acted so needy lately. He knew about her dedication to bodybuilding and how much it meant to her — getting that apartment in Greenview would be a nightmare otherwise.

Then, without taking even a moment to think, she blocked Jack's number.

Mia turned towards the television mounted above the refrigerator. A familiar face appeared on screen — that of news anchor Mindy Lawson introducing a segment about the upcoming Miss Mass bodybuilding contest. She spoke enthusiastically, highlighting the fierce competition and anticipating record-breaking numbers of participants as the contest celebrated its 23rd anniversary.

Mia scowled, irritated by the attention being given to her rivals. Her focus should have been on her preparations, not watching other women's interviews on how they prepped. Yet there was a nagging feeling deep within Mia, a doubt that crept into her thoughts despite her best efforts to quell it. What if they were better than her? What if her mother's high standards weren't enough? What if someone else was thinking bigger still?

Mia's hands trembled slightly as she stared at the pills in front of her. Fear gripped her tightly, threatening to suffocate. She knew what her mother expected of her and that anything short of absolute perfection would mean disappointment. But something inside her urged her forward, pushing her to take even more pills.

A small voice in her head whispered, urging her to push past her limits. To become the biggest, most muscular woman in the world. It sounded like her voice but somehow distorted, twisted by the weight of expectation. Mia took another handful of pills, swallowing them dry. They burned a trail through her stomach, leaving her gasping for air.

"Mia!" Linda raised an eyebrow, a coffee cup in hand. She noticed Mia fixated on the television screen. "Shouldn't you be practising instead of watching others?"

Mia was startled by her mother's voice, her cheeks reddening slightly. "Oh, Mum. Just...watching," she replied nervously, flickering her gaze between the TV and her mother, who was flashing a judgmental glance.

Linda narrowed her eyes, sensing something amiss. "Are you comparing yourself to others again?"

Mia shrunk visibly under her mother's scrutiny. "No, no, I'm just..."

Linda approached Mia slowly, her hands twitching with anticipation. Without warning, she reached out and ran her fingers over Mia's bulging biceps, eliciting a shudder from her daughter. Mia winced internally at her mother, feeling suffocated.

"Your biceps could be bigger," Linda said. "Your quads need more definition, more symmetry."

Mia rolled her eyes internally but forced a polite smile. "Thanks for your input, Mum. But I think I have a good handle on my training regime."

"A regime *I* made for you," Linda pointed out.

Mia clenched her fists, trying to contain her frustration. Her mother's constant pressure to achieve a certain level of muscularity felt suffocating. No matter how big she got, it just wasn't enough. However, she also couldn't deny the thrill of lifting heavier weights and seeing visible progress in her physique. It was a delicate balance between satisfying her desires and pleasing her mother.

Linda turned away, leaving Mia alone in the living room. As she sat on the couch, Mia couldn't help but wonder if there was any other way to please her mother besides following her strict regimen.

Picking up her phone, Mia scrolled mindlessly through the endless feed of muscle-bound women on Instagram, her thumb moving almost automatically as her eyes devoured every image. She stopped abruptly when she saw a video featuring a woman whose chest seemed to defy gravity. Her pectoral bulged outwards, jutting against her tight sports bra like two enormous headstones. Mia's mouth fell open as she realised the woman's arms looked thicker than her legs.

Mia continued scrolling, encountering more and more women. One woman boasted massive trapezius muscles that stretched upwards towards her neck, while another had shoulders broader than a football player's torso. Mia felt a mix of emotions wash over her: envy, admiration, fear...lust. She had never thought about pushing past the boundaries of human anatomy, but looking at these women, she began to question whether she should aim

higher. What if she could be just as big? Would her mother finally see her worth then?

Midway through her doomscrolling, Mia stumbled upon a post from Whispering Ink, the local bookstore she frequented regularly before dedicating herself fully to bodybuilding. The caption announced that the store might shutter permanently due to dwindling business. But something inside Mia shifted; she barely registered the significance of the news. Instead, her thoughts quickly returned to her own goals. She had bigger priorities to focus on. Her mother's words echoed in her ears, boring into her skull...

Weeks passed. Mia's anxiety grew with each mile driven towards the hotel where she and her mother would stay in during the Miss Mass contest. Her palms sweated profusely, and her breath came out shallow and rapid. This was the performance that represented the culmination of months of rigorous discipline and sacrifice. Failure was not an option—she needed to excel.

The silence in the car was oppressive, broken only by the sound of tyres humming over the motorway. Mia glanced nervously at her mother beside her, her lips pressed firmly together. Her piercing gaze held nothing but expectation, making it clear that this contest meant everything to her.

Suddenly, Mia felt a hand on her shoulder and turned her head to face her mother. "Remember what we discussed," Linda said sternly.

Mia nodded numbly, feeling the weight of her mother's expectations bearing down on her. The next few days would determine not just the contest's outcome but also their relationship's future. Mia *had* to win.

Mia's fingers trembled slightly, trying to steady her nerves. Her mother's rigid posture exuded a sense of high-strung anticipation. Her jaw clenched so tightly that Mia could hear the grinding of teeth. Despite being seated side by side, Mia felt immense pressure from her mother's presence. Mia tried to suppress the mounting anxiety, focusing instead on her breathing. But her thoughts drifted back to the competition, imagining worst-case scenarios and doubts creeping into her mind. Was she strong enough? Big enough? Good enough?

Linda sensed Mia's agitation and broke the tension. "You need to believe in yourself, Mia. You're ready for this. Remember, you've worked tirelessly for months, sacrificing your social life and hobbies to grow so much. Breaking up with Jack should've happened sooner than it did. Don't let doubt undermine all your efforts now."

Mia forced a smile, nodding at her mother's words. She wanted to trust in her abilities, but her self-doubt lingered stubbornly. She fought a battle constantly, torn between her passion for bodybuilding and her insecurity about meeting her mother's unrealistic expectations.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the sleek, glass-fronted hotel, Mia's heart raced faster. Its contemporary design showcased clean lines and geometric shapes above the surrounding buildings. A row of electric cars lined the entrance. Mia took note of the pristine landscape and lush greenery adorning the grounds. Inside, the lobby glowed under soft lighting, plush armchairs inviting guests to relax. The reception desk was made entirely of polished wood and marble.

Paranoid, Mia couldn't help but feel like a mouse as she watched the other contestants check in and chat at the bar and lounge. Their muscle mass seemed almost indecent, bulging and rippling beneath their skin. The veins pulsed ominously underneath the surface, twisting and turning like serpents. One woman, in particular, caught Mia's attention. As she flexed her biceps, they seemed ready to burst through her skin, drawing curious looks from the others.

Mia flinched, wishing she could disappear into thin air. She thought she didn't stand a chance against these women. She always thought she wouldn't ever be big enough. Now, surrounded by these monstrous goddesses, Mia couldn't shake off the feeling the voice in her head was right. Mia tried to distract herself from the sea of muscular bodies by observing the hotel's luxurious amenities. Every detail was carefully crafted, from the sparkling chandeliers overhead to the velvety rugs beneath her feet.

She noticed her mother speaking animatedly to another woman, smiling warmly. Linda gestured toward Mia, who rolled her eyes internally. She knew her mother's attempts at friendliness were insincere. Mia suspected her mother's eagerness to network stemmed more from her desire to find potential sponsors or investors than genuine camaraderie. Mia found it hard to reconcile her mother's constant pushiness and growing resentment toward the sport she loved.

Mia approached her mother and the other woman, straightening her shoulders and squaring them confidently.

Linda gave her a small, tight smile. "Mia. We were chatting about some potential opportunities for you."

The other woman introduced herself as Claire, explaining that she owned a sports

supplement company specialising in products specifically designed for female athletes. Linda eagerly seized the opportunity, sharing details about Mia's training regimen and nutritional habits, hoping to impress Claire into becoming Mia's new sponsor. Mia listened politely, trying to appear interested despite wanting to escape the conversation altogether.

"You have a remarkable physique, Mia." Claire reached out and gently squeezed Mia's bicep, causing the muscles to ripple and contract beneath her skin. Mia tensed slightly out of instinct, unsure whether to pull away or remain still. She had never expected such brazen contact from someone like that. "I mean...you're really packing on the size here."

Mia felt unease as Claire studied her physique. Her eyes roamed over Mia's curves, pausing for longer periods on certain areas that made Mia hesitate, uncertain how to respond.

"We can take your already impressive body to the next level. I want you to represent my brand *exclusively*. Imagine the possibilities - sponsored events, photoshoots, endorsements. With me backing you, nothing is holding you back."

Mia looked around nervously.

"Come have dinner with me tonight at the restaurant here, both of you," Claire offered. "Say, eight o'clock? We can discuss everything then."

"We'd be happy to," Linda agreed, preemptively making the decision.

"It's a date then," Claire joked.

As soon as Claire disappeared into the crowd, Linda let out a satisfied sigh. She turned to Mia, her expression one of quiet triumph. "Well, well. Looks like our little girl has finally caught the eye of somebody important."

Mia's mind raced as she tried to make sense of Claire's proposal and her mother's reaction.

Linda's eyes gleamed with a perverse excitement.

Mia fidgeted with her napkin, twisting it tightly as she surveyed the crowded restaurant with other competitors in formfitting dresses and high heels. The flickering candlelight cast shadows across their faces, highlighting every bulge and contour of their sculpted forms. Mia

felt a knot forming in her gut, her nerves spiking as she realised how intimidating these women were. Her mind raced with doubts and fears. Was she strong enough to compete against them? Did she deserve to win, given her lack of confidence and self-doubt? Mia took a deep breath and steadied her trembling hands as the waiter brought out a platter of steak and vegetables.

Across the table, Claire sipped on her wine, her eyes fixed intently on Mia's plate. "How's the food?" she asked, breaking the silence.

Mia nodded mutedly.

Claire took another sip of her wine, her eyes lingering on Mia. "Your mother told me you've got bigger competitions beyond the Miss Mass event. Is that true?"

Mia's heart skipped a beat as she glanced nervously at her mother, who sat silently across from them. Linda's lips curved into a smug grin.

Claire continued, "She also mentioned a five-year plan she set up for you."

Mia's confusion only grew as Linda spoke up. "Yes, that's correct. Our ultimate goal is for Mia to participate in the prestigious Iron Queen competition within the next few years. Winning Miss Mass will help build up her reputation, but I believe greater opportunities await."

Claire seemed impressed by Linda's ambition. "The Iron Queen is certainly something someone like Mia should strive towards."

Mia struggled to keep up with the rapid exchange. She felt increasingly alienated, lost in a sea of conversations that left her feeling small and insignificant, without an opinion. Despite her initial reservations, she now realised how deeply entrenched her mother's obsession had become. And Mia was playing along.

Claire raised an eyebrow as Linda continued speaking, sensing something off about her eagerness. "But why stop there? From looking at her, I already know Mia has potential far beyond what even the Iron Queen could offer. Have you considered entering her into the Mass Goddess instead?"

Linda's expression faltered briefly before regaining its composure. "Mass Goddess? Can't say I've ever heard of that one. Is it new?"

Claire nodded, a hint of intrigue creeping into her voice. "It's relatively new, held annually

in the States.”

Linda's eyes widened in excitement as Claire explained the concept of the Mass Goddess competition. This was exactly what she had been looking for – a way to elevate Mia's status to a new level. She leaned forward eagerly, her hands clasped together.

"That sounds... Quite interesting," Linda murmured, trying not to betray too much enthusiasm. "Tell me more about this competition, please."

Claire launched a detailed explanation, describing the rigorous training required to prepare for such a competition, the intense focus on muscle mass rather than aesthetics, and the reverence with which the participants approached the sport, grown to literal hulks. When Claire finished speaking, Linda was wet, and her mind was racing. She saw dollar signs flashing: sponsors clamouring to associate themselves with Mia's name, lucrative contracts pouring in, and accolades piling up. Money and fame flooded her as she visualised Mia's name splashing across billboards and TV screens.

Claire's voice was smooth and seductive as she continued speaking. "With my support, Mia, you won't have to wait five years to make your mark at the Mass Goddess competition. I can get you there by the end of the year.”

Linda's eyes lit up.

"Most people here only care about sponsoring the next upcoming great athlete,” Claire pointed out. “They want quick results, instant gratification. But there's more to bodybuilding than that. I want to elevate the sport itself." Claire said, leaning back in her chair. Her tone was urgent, almost desperate.

“What do you mean?” Linda said.

Claire's smile turned wicked. "I mean pushing the boundaries of human potential beyond its limits. Going beyond what it means to be a bodybuilder.”

Mia recoiled slightly, taken aback by Claire's radical ideas. She hesitated momentarily before asking, "What do you mean?"

Claire leaned forward again, her eyes shining with anticipation. "Genetic engineering. Most sponsors here have no idea what it can do to enhance performance, boost strength and endurance, and speed up recovery times. With all of that, you'll be growing more, faster. All

these things are possible if we approach bodybuilding as a scientific discipline, not just a physical pursuit."

Mia sat quietly, Something inside her rebelled against the thought of becoming a lab experiment, subjected to genetic manipulation.

As Claire wrapped up her pitch, Mia finally found her voice. "Are you saying you want to turn me into a lab experiment? It seems like... Too much. I don't know if I'm ready for that."

Claire regarded her appraisingly. "Of course not! Think of it as laying down the brickwork before taking your first steps towards literal godhood. Genetic engineering provides precisely that. Trust me, once you experience its benefits, you won't look back. In any case, take some time to consider."

Linda shot a cold glare at Mia...

Linda took a deep breath before responding. "Thank you, Claire. That's very kind of you. Losing him was devastating, but he lives on in Mia."

Claire smiled sympathetically. "You're a strong woman, Linda. I admire that about people."

After thanking Claire for her kindness, Linda couldn't help but feel curious about the successful woman sitting opposite her. How long have you been working in the industry?" Linda enquired, attempting to gauge whether their business dealings would extend beyond Mia's participation in future competitions.

Claire responded with a small laugh. "Oh, let's just say I've been around for quite some time now. My husband introduced me to bodybuilding when we were both young. Since then, we've steadily grown and built a brand around it."

Linda leaned forward in her seat, captivated by Claire's story. "Your husband must be incredibly supportive of your career."

A faint smile crossed Claire's lips. "Jerry is retired now. He played a significant role in developing our business initially, but he eventually wanted to focus more on his interests. Our eldest daughter, Lily, is also involved in the family business; she manages our social media accounts and helps us scout new talent. As for our son, Matthew, well..."

Claire swiped through her phone until she came upon the desired image. She handed the device over to Linda without hesitation, grinning widely as she did so.

The picture showed a teenager standing proudly with his fists clenched by his sides. His arms bulged with an impressive definition display, showcasing rippling biceps and triceps. Linda gasped softly as she gazed at the photograph.

"He's already showing promise," Claire remarked smugly. "We've started him on a strict regimen since he was twelve."

Linda's gaze lingered on the photograph, studying every inch of Matthew's muscular frame. It wasn't until she reached the bottom of the image that she realised the true extent of Matthew's development: an unmistakable bulge between his legs.

Claire grinned and casually slid her foot beneath the table, nudging Mia's inner thigh with the sole of her shoe. The contact made Mia uneasy, causing her to squirm slightly in her chair. Claire caught sight of this reaction and chuckled lowly, savouring her power over her potential protégé.

"He recently beat out all the boys in his college during a weightlifting contest? And he lifted double his weight in the gym last week!" Linda listened intently, impressed by the youngster's feats of strength. "But honestly, he's still got much catching up to do compared to...others."

Mia felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment as she caught onto Claire's subtle hint. She tried to discreetly shift in her chair, hoping to avoid unwanted attention. But Claire seemed to relish in making her uncomfortable.

"I can't thank you enough for this opportunity, Claire. Mia has always shown tremendous potential."

Mia's heart sank as she heard her mother's words. She had never considered herself special or superior, merely driven and determined. However, it seemed like her mother saw something within her - something she deemed worthy enough to exploit. She didn't know what to make of it all.

Feeling overwhelmed and confused, Mia hesitated before speaking. "Uh, Mum, are you really okay with—"

"This *is* happening!" Linda shot back.

As Linda spoke, Mia could see the steely determination in her eyes. It was clear that her mother had made up her mind, no matter what Mia thought. Mia pushed her chair back abruptly, sending it scraping against the floor. Her face twisted into a snarl of frustration as she glared at her mother.

Linda stood up slowly, her expression hardening. "You have to win, Mia."

Mia shook her head vehemently.

Linda bristled defensively. "Don't be dramatic, Mia. You're far from perfect."

Mia rolled her eyes and stomped out of the restaurant, slamming the door behind her. Linda watched her go, her own emotions churning inside her. Sighing heavily, Linda turned back to Claire. "Sorry about that. Steroids."

Claire nodded understandingly, although Linda could sense a flicker of amusement in her eyes.

"I'll be right back," Linda said, hurrying to catch up with Mia.

Mia paced back and forth along the hotel's dimly lit corridor, her heart racing as she grappled with her feelings. There was an undeniable unease gnawing at her stomach, stemming from her mother's insistence that she accept Claire's offer. A decision that seemed made for her.

Mia stiffened as Linda appeared around the corner, her shoulders tensing in anticipation. Mia couldn't help but deeply resent her mother.

Linda narrowed her eyes, clearly displeased with her daughter's attitude. "You know Claire's offer is too good to pass up. Think about how this could benefit you in the long run."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Is that all you care about, Mum? How big I get? Money and success?"

"I want more than just money and success for us, Mia. I want you to have everything your

father and I could never give ourselves growing up. Opportunities we weren't fortunate enough to experience. The kind of opportunities that come with prestige and influence."

Linda stepped closer to Mia, looming over her daughter with a stern look on her face. Her tone became colder and more commanding.

"Listen, Mia," Linda began, her voice barely above a whisper. "Do you honestly think you have what it takes to succeed without guidance? *My* guidance?"

Mia crossed her arms defiantly. "Of course I do. I don't always need someone else to tell me what to do. I can figure it out myself."

"And what happens when you fail? When you hit a roadblock and don't know which way to turn? Will you crumble under the pressure? You're already sweating before you hit the stage tomorrow. You *can't* succeed without me."

Mia's thoughts raced as she tried to process her mother's words. The idea of needing constant guidance and support from her mother left her feeling suffocated and trapped. She remembered how Claire had rubbed her foot suggestively during their meeting earlier, making her uncomfortable and uneasy. But Linda didn't seem to care. She mentioned casually that she would happily whore Mia out if it meant securing her daughter's success as a bodybuilder.

Mia felt sick to her stomach. This wasn't what she wanted. It seemed like her mother was willing to sacrifice anything, including her dignity and morality, to push her forward.

Linda's breath was hot against Mia's skin. "Think about it, Mia. All that training, sweat, and tears will finally pay off. Imagine standing on stage, watching the judges' faces light up as they marvel at your physique. That's the moment you've been working towards, right?"

Mia hesitated. Linda noticed the conflict written plainly across Mia's face.

"There comes a time when you have to make tough decisions. This is one of them, and I can't trust you to make the right choice."

Linda gently touched Mia's arm, drawing her attention to the bulging limb. "Look at yourself, Mia. Do you want to waste these muscles? This power? You could be so much greater than any of these other girls."

Mia's eyes hesitantly followed her mother's groping, gazing intently into the nearby mirror

hung up near the fireplace adjacent to the hotel's reception desk. She eye-fucked the rippling veins and bulging sinews beneath her skin. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, a mixture of excitement and trepidation coursing through her veins.

"Imagine being a literal muscle goddess on that stage. You could stand head and shoulders above the competition with your size and strength. If you sign with Claire, there's no telling what heights you could reach."

As Linda continued to paint a picture of Mia's limitless potential, Mia was swaying ever closer to the brink of acceptance. But even as she considered signing on the dotted line, a small part of her knew that something essential would be lost forever.

"I'll do it," she said softly. "For you."

Linda smiled smugly as Mia nodded her agreement. She tenderly touched her daughter's cheek, her fingers lingering on Mia's smooth, sculpted jawline.

"You won't regret this, Mia."

Mia felt a knot form in her gut.

Suddenly, Linda leaned close to Mia, lowering her voice to a hushed whisper. "Remember: there are favours you might owe to those who will help."

Mia understood the implication. Linda implied that Claire expected some sexual favour in return for her sponsorship. "You mean let Claire fuck me?"

"Or you fuck her, whichever is her preference. She seems more like a dom to me, though."

Mia's mind reeled as her mother's words sank in. The thought of compromising herself sexually made her skin crawl, but the allure of success was too strong to ignore. She couldn't bear letting all the blood, sweat and tears shed be for nought, especially after everything her mother had put into moulding her into the perfect athlete.

With a sigh, Mia gave in. "Fine. I'll sleep with her."

Her mother's grin widened triumphantly, and she patted Mia's hand reassuringly. "That's my girl. Now go get ready. She's in room 508."

Mia watched in horror as her mother walked out with a smug grin. Mia collapsed onto the nearest couch, feeling drained and defeated as she watched other competitors and sponsors arrive...

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Claire sat nervously in her luxurious hotel suite, surrounded by plush carpets, sleek furniture, and glittering chandeliers that illuminated every corner. She glanced around anxiously, meticulously checking each detail before settling on a leather sofa. The air carried the scent of expensive perfume mixed with a rich oakwood aroma. On the centrepiece of a glass-topped coffee table lay the contract signed between Linda and Mia, waiting to be signed. A bottle of red wine rested beside it.

Now and then, Claire's gaze strayed to the door, anticipating Mia's entrance. Claire heard a faint knock at the door as the clock struck seven-fifty-five. Her pulse quickened as she rose from the chair. With a deep breath, she strode confidently toward the door, eager to seal the deal with Mia.

Mia stood outside Claire's hotel room, feeling both nervous and excited. She took a deep breath and straightened her posture, adjusting the straps of her dress to ensure they showcased her bulging arms. It was a form-fitting gown made of shimmering silver fabric, hugging her thick glutes like a second skin while revealing just enough muscle definition for anyone to appreciate. As she stood there, Mia couldn't help but wonder if signing this contract with Claire would do more harm than good. Even then, she could hear her mother's overbearing words in her head.

When Claire opened the door, she greeted Mia with a warm smile. "Welcome, Mia!"

Mia nodded slightly. She followed Claire into the room, taking in its opulent décor. Mia felt mixed emotions swirling inside her as she sat down opposite Claire. Part of her was thrilled at the prospect of securing such a lucrative deal, but another part worried about losing control over more important things: her autonomy. As Claire poured them both glasses of red wine, Mia tried to push aside her doubts. This was an opportunity too good to pass up. But she knew what had to be done to secure it.

The silence hung heavily as Mia sipped the full-bodied red wine provided by Claire. She

couldn't shake off the nagging doubt creeping into her thoughts. Her eyes wandered around the extravagant surroundings, taking in the intricate details and fine furnishing. Mia noticed how different Claire's physical appearance was from hers. While Mia's almost hulking musculature screamed power and strength, Claire's lithe frame hinted at a delicate beauty that belied her steely professionalism.

However, Mia needed to thoroughly read the contract, ensuring every clause aligned perfectly with her values and beliefs. Only after thorough analysis should she consider signing on the dotted line. This moment represented a turning point in Mia's life in many ways. However, as much as she craved success, Mia refused to sacrifice her integrity. The question was whether Claire shared similar sentiments.

Of course, Mia knew Claire wanted more than just business from her. She saw potential, raw energy, and untapped desire. Mia couldn't ignore that Claire had a significant influence, and she understood exactly what was required to make progress. That realisation came with a heavy price tag that involved giving Claire what she wanted most. As much as Mia hated admitting it, she knew sleeping with Claire was necessary to secure the partnership.

Linda's voice echoed in Mia's mind, reminding her of her duty to succeed. "And what happens when you fail? When you hit a roadblock and don't know which way to turn?" Linda said sternly. "Will you crumble under the pressure?"

Mia gritted her teeth, trying to block out the sound of her mother's voice. She couldn't believe she was considering sacrificing her morality to please someone else. But the lure of fame and fortune was too strong to resist. Mia closed her eyes, taking a deep breath.

Their fingers intertwined as Claire reached across the table to take Mia's hand. Mia hesitated for a beat, unsure of what to do next. Claire leaned forward. "I have to say, Mia, I'm impressed. You're not only beautiful but also incredibly talented. I feel lucky to have the chance to work with someone as gifted as you."

Mia was grateful for the compliment but wary of where this might lead. "Thank you," she replied softly.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Finally, Claire broke it. "Look, Mia, I know we haven't known each other long, but I want us to get to know each other better. Maybe we should start light with a little chat."

Claire's eyes lingered on Mia's lips as she spoke, Mia nodding softly.

As the conversation continued, Claire asked about Mia's personal life, delving into her relationships, desires, and goals and discussing her past interest in writing fantasy novels. Claire gave a soft chuckle as if derisive of the prospect. In truth, Claire felt Mia's potential was being wasted by writing such nonsense, but she didn't say that.

Claire leaned back in her chair. Mia saw the black panties peeking out from beneath Claire's business skirt. Unnerved, Mia looked away quickly, feeling a flush rise to her cheeks. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, swallowing nervously as a knot formed in her gut.

"I just want someone to support my ambitions," she said.

"And to be the perfect bodybuilder—is that what you want?"

Mia took a sip of her wine, trying to gather her thoughts. Memories flooded her mind, transporting her back to simpler times. She remembered curling up with a good book, getting lost in the pages as she explored faraway lands and met fascinating characters. She recalled lazy afternoons spent lounging in the park with her boyfriend, Jack. Life used to be so simple.

Her mother's voice rang loudly in her ears once again, demanding perfection and obedience above all else. Mia carried a weighty burden everywhere she went, suffocating her spirit and stifling her true self. She could hear her mother's words echoing like a mantra, urging her never to give up or lose sight of her ultimate goal. But at what cost? Was success worth sacrificing her identity and happiness?

Mia sighed deeply, closing her eyes for a brief moment.

"Absolutely. Being the best drives me," Mia lied smoothly, opening her eyes to meet Claire's piercing gaze. She could see the scepticism in her eyes, but Mia steeled herself against any further questioning. Her mother had drilled into her the importance of appearances and image, and Mia wouldn't let Claire undermine that.

The conversation veered towards more practical matters as they discussed the logistics of their collaboration. Mia listened carefully, eager to impress Claire with her knowledge and expertise. She knew this opportunity could change everything for her, and she wasn't willing to jeopardise it by appearing weak or indecisive. But as the meeting drew to a close, Claire's demeanour changed. Mia felt her heart rate quicken as Claire leaned closer, her eyes fixed intently on Mia's. The tension thickened like a fog, making it difficult for either woman to breathe. Mia squirmed slightly in her seat again, her nerves fraying at the edges. She knew what

was coming next but wasn't sure if she was ready.

"Before we sign anything official, there's something else I need to ask of you, Mia." Claire's voice was low and husky.

Mia's chest tightened.

"What is it?" she managed to choke out.

Claire smiled. "I want to see all of you, Mia. Everything. Before we commit ourselves fully to this project, I think it's important that we understand each other completely."

Mia felt her stomach twist painfully. This was it—the final test. She would earn Claire's trust and the coveted partnership if she passed. But failing meant losing everything she had worked so hard for.

"Simply put, I want to see what I'm investing in, what I'm helping to grow."

Mia's throat tightened. With each swallow, a wave of nerves threatened to overwhelm her. Her mind raced, desperately searching for the right words, but they never came. Every muscle in her body tensed, and her breaths came in short, shallow gasps.

Claire leaned back in her chair again, her smile turning predatory. "I trust you know what to do. I want to see every inch of you and know who you are underneath all those layers."

Mia stared down at her hands, trembling slightly. She couldn't believe Claire was asking her to bare it all, both physically and emotionally. She felt exposed already, vulnerable to the powerful woman sitting across from her. But then she considered the alternative—giving up her dreams and settling for mediocrity. She couldn't afford to fail now. She swallowed heavily, steeling herself.

Slowly, Mia stood up from the table, pulling her shirt over her head. She felt Claire's sharp intake of breath, and Mia's face flushed red. She avoided eye contact as she slipped out of her bra, revealing her bulky chest. A network of sinewy muscles defined Mia's pectorals rippled with the slightest movement, accentuating their impressive size and strength. The muscles swelled proudly as they reached towards her shoulders, perfectly sculpted and finely toned. Veins crisscrossed, adding to their rugged texture.

Mia's movements were deliberate as she reached down to unzip her pants, the fabric

parting smoothly under her touch. She slid them down her legs, revealing her thighs and calves that flexed with each step, now standing before Claire in nothing but her lacy underwear.

As Claire's gaze travelled over Mia's body, it seemed to linger on every curve and contour, tracing the lines of her physique with an almost ravenous hunger. Mia couldn't help but feel a tinge of discomfort, the weight of Claire's scrutiny pressing against her skin like an unwelcome touch. Yet, she pushed aside those feelings, reminding herself of the bigger picture.

As Claire settled back into her chair, the tension in the room seemed to thicken, each passing moment heavy with anticipation. Mia's heart raced as she watched Claire's expression shift. It felt like time had slowed to a crawl, each second stretching out into an eternity as Mia held her breath, waiting for judgment. The only sound that permeated the air was the soft rhythm of their breathing. And then—

"You have talent, Mia."

With a sudden urgency, Claire rose from her seat and stepped around the table until she stood directly before Mia. Their faces inches apart, Claire's gaze drifted slowly downward, studying every line and crevice of Mia's muscular form. There was no mistaking the desire burning behind her eyes; Claire wanted to touch Mia's flesh, to run her fingers along the rough ridges and smooth curves alike.

Without hesitation, she tentatively trailed her fingertips over Mia's bicep, marvelling at the power coiled beneath her touch. As she continued to explore, Mia felt her resolve wavering. Despite her initial reluctance, she responded to Claire's gentle caresses, relishing in the warmth spreading through her limbs. Soon enough, Claire's exploration became more confident, her touches becoming firmer and insistent as she moved lower still. Mia's skin prickled with goosebumps as Claire's hand travelled past her pecs and onto her abs, digging deep into the flesh as she searched for the most sensitive spots. Though Mia tried to keep her cool, her senses were heightening rapidly, and she was focused solely on Claire's touch.

As Claire's explorations intensified, Mia's body responded eagerly to her touch. The businesswoman traced her fingers over Mia's broad torso, marvelling at the rippling muscles that covered it. She ran her palm over Mia's chiselled abs, feeling the playful ridges, and pressed harder into the soft, warm flesh below. Mia's heart pounded in her ears as she struggled to maintain control, aware that she was exposing herself to someone else's desires.

But just when she thought she could no longer handle it, Claire made an offhanded remark that left Mia speechless. "You're certainly bigger than my husband," she said, trailing a finger

lightly over one of Mia's deltoids.

At first, Mia didn't know how to respond. Was this some sick joke? She looked at Claire, trying to gauge if there was any humour hidden behind her cold facade. But the businesswoman's expression remained impassive, seemingly unaware of her words' impact on Mia.

Claire's hands drifted lower, settling on Mia's quads as she admired the intricate web of veins etched across them. Her fingers danced over the hard, solid muscles, marvelling at their firmness. As she explored deeper, she couldn't help but whisper in appreciation, "Your legs are simply magnificent."

She continued running her palms over Mia's strong calf muscles, tracing the well-defined outline of her Achilles tendon. Claire leaned closer, taking in the sight before her: Mia's powerful legs encased in black lace panties that hugged tightly to her shapely frame. Her fingers lingered on the inside of Mia's thighs, sliding higher and higher until finally reaching the juncture where leg met groin. A shiver ran down Mia's spine as Claire's hands brushed over her inner thigh. Her core tightened, and she bit her lip.

"Ooohhh! Seems like a bit of you enjoys this," Claire cooed.

Mia hesitated, unsure whether to withdraw or give in to Claire's advances. Before arguing with her mother, she knew this wasn't what she had initially intended, but something about Claire's touch sent electric jolts through her body. She closed her eyes and let out a quiet moan as Claire's hands began to massage her inner thighs.

Claire smirked as she noticed Mia's reaction. She traced her fingers over Mia's pubic bone, teasing the edge of her mound through her delicate lace underwear. Mia gasped and opened her eyes, meeting Claire's gaze once again. This time, there was no uncertainty in her look - instead, it was pure, undiluted lust.

As Claire's fingers traversed further south, Mia's nerves reached an all-time high. She tensed up, unsure of what would come next. But Claire seemed determined to find out, and without warning, she grabbed Mia's pussy rather forcefully, pressing her thumb against her clit. Claire's breathing was hot and hard. "Well, you're certainly thick down there, girl."

Claire grinned, enjoying Mia's submission. She could see the hunger in her eyes, the way her lips parted as she breathed heavily. Mia's body trembled, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Her face twisted and contorted in pleasure and pain. It was clear that Mia craved

release, and Claire was happy to oblige—in time.

Claire leaned closer to Mia, her gaze locked onto hers as she cupped Mia's chin gently with two fingers. With a soft smile, she bent down and nibbled sensuously on Mia's earlobe. Mia felt her entire being succumb to Claire as she whispered intimately into her ear, "I want you to trust me, Mia."

Mia yielded to Claire without hesitation, allowing her to push her back onto the bed. She watched Claire slowly remove her blouse, revealing her flawlessly toned arms and shoulders. The businesswoman's bra came off next, leaving her breasts exposed, her nipples standing erect from the excitement. With a flicker of desire in her eye, Claire started removing her skirt, unveiling her long, slender legs. She paused briefly, looking directly into Mia's eyes, her fingers trailing upwards along her thighs.

Claire stepped between Mia's legs. Mia lay motionless, her chest heaving with each laboured breath she took. She watched as Claire lowered herself towards her. Claire's tongue snaked out without warning, tracing lazy circles around Mia's right kneecap. Mia squirmed slightly, feeling her skin prickle with goosebumps. Claire chuckled softly.

"Beautiful," she purred, her voice low and husky.

Her hands moved tentatively up Mia's thighs, tracing the bulging muscles with reverent fingers. Mia's breath hitched as Claire's mouth reached the tender flesh behind her knees. She groaned, arching her hips upwards as Claire worked her way up Mia's legs, occasionally pausing to run her tongue over the thick, protruding growths born from countless hours in the gym. Mia writhed beneath her, her body wracked with pleasure.

After thoroughly satisfying herself with Mia's lower half, Claire moved her attention upward, eagerly devouring every curve and crevice. Starting at the base of Mia's neck, Claire massaged firmly, working her way down Mia's shoulders. Every muscle twitched and rippled under her fingers. Claire marvelled at how perfectly sculpted they were, so symmetrical that they almost defied belief.

Mia's head tilted to one side, her expression curious but somewhat embarrassed.

Encouraged by Mia's response, Claire pushed even farther, moving her hand across Mia's collarbone and toward her pectoral muscles. Mia's heart jumped as soon as her fingertips touched the smooth flesh. She knew what would happen now; the anticipation was like steam trapped in a kettle.

Claire leaned forward, placing gentle kisses across Mia's left pectoral, then asked, "Would you mind flexing them for me? I want to...appreciate them more fully."

Mia, her cheeks flushing pink, complied. Following a preparatory breath, Mia flexed her pecs. Claire's fingers caressed them, and she gritted her teeth. Claire continued to stroke and caress, coaxing every last flex and ripple Mia could offer.

Claire's touch lingered on Mia's chest. Mia couldn't believe how turned on she was becoming by another woman's touch. It was as if the fear and doubt had melted away. As Claire leaned back whilst straddling Mia's chest and admired her muscular frame, she couldn't help but wonder about something.

"Mia, have you ever had sex with another woman?" Claire asked softly, her eyes never leaving Mia's body, gently squeezing her biceps.

Mia hesitated.

Claire smirked. "I just thought maybe..."

Before Claire could finish, Mia interrupted. "Maybe what?"

"Well, there's always a first time for everything. Right?"

As Claire's words hung unanswered, Mia felt confused and excited. She had never considered exploring her sexuality with another woman before, but something about Claire made her feel alive. Without overthinking about it, she nodded her agreement.

Claire's smile widened. She leaned down and pressed her lips against Mia's. Their tongues danced together hungrily, each woman revelling in the other's taste. Slowly, Claire pulled away, her eyes still locked on Mia's. Mia swallowed nervously, her heart racing faster than ever before. But deep inside, she knew she wanted this.

Claire positioned herself above Mia's waist, her legs spread wide apart. Her wet folds brushed against Mia's abdomen. Claire relished in the sensation, her moans muffling Mia's gasps as their bodies entangled. Mia felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness coursing through her veins. This was new territory for her, and she wasn't sure whether she was ready. However, as Claire's movements became more urgent, all doubts faded.

Their limbs twisted and intertwined, creating an erotic symphony of sweat-soaked sheets and tangled hair. Claire clung tightly to Mia's muscular form, breathing heavily as she ground her pelvis into hers. They kissed deeply and passionately, tasting the salty sweat on each other's lips. Mia felt alive and free, liberated from her mother's overbearing expectations. For once, she allowed herself to indulge in pure, unadulterated pleasure, letting go of inhibitions and succumbing entirely to the raw intensity.

As Claire continued to grind, she could feel her release building. The heat between them intensified, and soon enough, she let out a cry as her body convulsed with pleasure. Mia followed suit moments later, her entire body wracked with spasms as she cried out. They lay there, panting and sweating, as the aftershocks subsided.

Claire opened her eyes to look at Mia. She leaned forward and brushed her fingertips along Mia's cheekbone, whispering, "You are beautiful."

Mia smiled weakly, feeling overwhelmed by emotion. "So are you," she replied...

Mia stared intently at the contract laid out before her. Meanwhile, Claire sat beside her, sipping a glass of red wine and running her foot idly up and down Mia's thigh. Mia tried not to notice the blatant flirtation, focusing instead on the practicalities of their arrangement. Claire's gaze wandered up and down Mia's physique, noting every curve and bulge. There was no denying she looked good - perhaps better than any man she had ever dated.

Mia took a deep breath and scrutinised the document closely, trying to weigh the potential consequences. "What happens if I lose the competition tomorrow?" she asked hesitantly.

Claire smirked and set down her glass. "If you were to lose tomorrow, it wouldn't be the world's end. It might work in your favour. With my resources behind you, you'll have everything you need to return even stronger next year. You won't have to start from scratch or worry about funding. It will allow you to focus solely on training and improving your performance."

"And if I win?"

Claire's face lit up. "Oh, that's a whole different story. If you win, then the sky's the limit for you. Your name will be recognised worldwide, and doors will open to you."

“And my mother?”

Claire's expression softened slightly as she placed a hand over Mia's. "Your mother will be financially supported as well— for as long as you are part of the program."

Mia knew working with Claire would give her the freedom she craved, free from her mother's suffocating presence. As Claire spoke, Mia found herself daydreaming about the future. In her mind's eye, she saw herself standing tall and proud onstage, muscles rippling as the crowd roared. It all seemed perfect.

“But what do you get out of this?” Mia questioned.

Claire paused momentarily, taking a sip of her wine before responding. "I'm going to level with you, Mia. While you may benefit greatly from our partnership, I will, too. You're talented; that talent will capture everyone's attention when they see you on stage tomorrow. Winning this contest will propel you into superstardom, and it'll make me rich."

Mia raised an eyebrow, surprised by Claire's candour. "Is that all? All this for money?"

"No, Mia. That's just the surface. We'll use the money to invest in the project I mentioned to your mother. The project you agreed to be part of. We'll be using the money to improve the project and to improve you. To make you even better each time you hit the stage. You said you want to be the perfect bodybuilder. In time, you can be more than that."

Mia stared at the contract. This decision would change the course of her life forever. On one hand, she stood to gain financial security, access to top-notch equipment and trainers, and international recognition. But on the other hand, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something didn't sit right. Her gut told her that signing this contract meant giving away too much control.

Mia hesitated for a few seconds longer, her fingers tracing the edges of the paper. She knew what her mother would say—that she should trust Claire and that this was an opportunity she couldn't pass up. But a part of her still baulked at the idea of being controlled by someone else. Mia could be trading her mother for someone potentially more controlling.

In the end, however, the allure proved too strong. Mia signed her name at the bottom of the page, her hand shaking slightly.

Claire's smile widened. "Welcome aboard! Now, let's celebrate! I think we deserve another

drink or two."

Claire reached for the bottle of wine. She poured the crimson liquid into two crystal glasses, filling them nearly to the rim. With a satisfied sigh, Claire handed one of the glasses to Mia.

"Now, remember: it doesn't matter if you lose tomorrow, Mia. You're already a winner."

Mia and Claire clinked their glasses together. Something about Claire fascinated and intimidated Mia, something beyond the primal sexuality. Maybe it was the sheer force of her confidence and ambition, or it was simply that she represented a new challenge for Mia. Either way, Mia sensed their relationship would be...complex.

For now, though, Mia allowed herself to enjoy the moment. She savoured the wine, listening to Claire's voice as she talked animatedly about her plans and goals for Mia. Outside, the exhibition centre buzzed as final preparations for the Miss Mass contest were underway....

Mia woke up early the following morning, feeling excited, nervous, powerful, confident, and apprehensive. Today was the big day. She got ready, tanned, and pumped up, wearing a cute sequined bikini her mother personally made for her. After last night's conversation with Claire, Mia wasn't sure how things would play out.

Backstage, she noticed the crowds gathering outside, filing into their seats. Fans from far and wide had come to witness the Miss Mass contest spectacle. They chanted slogans and waved placards bearing images of their favourite bodybuilder. Mia felt a chill run down her spine as she realised the event's enormity. This wasn't what she had built up in her head. It was bigger, grander.

Mia couldn't help stealing glances at the other women competing alongside her. Each one was lean, bulging, and rippling under the fluorescent lights. Some sported short, spikey hair, others long, flowing locks, but they all shared a fierce intensity in their gaze. Mia could feel the tension mounting. Her breathing quickened, her palms slick with sweat, as she prepared mentally. She pushed aside any doubts or fears—the best she could.

Linda approached Mia with a determined stride. Mia tried to avoid eye contact, fidgeting nervously with the hem of her bikini bottoms. She didn't want her mother to distract her now; too many variables were at play. But Linda seemed unstoppable, her voice ringing out through

the chaos.

"Hey, baby girl," she said warmly, kissing Mia's cheek. "How are you holding up?"

Mia forced a smile, trying to mask the anxiety. "I'm good."

"I take it things went well with Claire last night? You didn't come back to our room."

Mia hesitated for a beat, unsure whether to divulge...everything. Finally, she took a deep breath and spoke softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Don't worry, I signed the deal. Claire said winning this contest would be a bonus."

Linda nodded. "I was in the toilets earlier. They had those annoying blue lights," Linda commented.

"What do you mean?"

Mia watched Linda open her handbag sneakily. Mia peered inside, and her eyes turned wide as saucers when she saw the syringe and a bottle of Anavar. Was her mother being serious right now, walking around backstage with steroids casually stashed in her handbag? Mia pulled her mother aside.

"What the fuck are you doing? You know I can get disqualified."

Linda smirked at Mia's concern, rolling her eyes as she tucked away the syringe and Anavar underneath her purse. "Oh, please. Everyone here's on gear. That blonde in the corner? You honestly think that jaw of hers is natural? Besides, what's one more shot after already taking dozens?"

As Linda sneakily slipped the needle into Mia's arm, she winced slightly at the sharp prick of pain. The steroid solution flowed slowly into her bloodstream. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the noise and chaos around them. In this quiet moment, she heard only her ragged breathing and her mother's soft, indecipherable murmurings. When she opened her eyes again, Linda smiled at her encouragingly.

Linda leaned in close and pressed her lips against Mia's. The sudden intimacy between them took Mia aback, but then she realised that this wasn't just any ordinary kiss - it was loaded with ulterior motives. Linda's tongue snaked its way past Mia's teeth, probing the depths of her mouth. For a brief moment, Mia felt violated by the taboo nature of their

encounter. Eventually, it was Linda who pulled free.

“Now go out there and win me that damned trophy.”

As Linda broke away, Mia stumbled backwards, clutching at her elbow where the syringe had been inserted. She looked at her mother with disgust and fear, leaving a bitter taste in Mia's mouth, making her stomach twist uncomfortably.

Mia moved to make her way onto the stage, her high heels echoing in the silence that followed Linda's departure. As she walked, her thoughts were consumed by conflicting emotions: anger at her mother's possession, guilt over signing the contract with Claire, and doubt over whether she genuinely wanted this life. Yet despite these struggles, Mia knew she couldn't afford to let them interfere with her performance. Not when she was so close to potentially winning.

As Mia stepped onto the brightly lit stage alongside the other competitors, her heart pounding in her chest, Linda's final instructions reverberated relentlessly within her mind.

Now go out there and win me that damned trophy.

Those words became an obsessive mantra, consuming every thought and action she made. With each step across the polished wooden boards, she heard her mother's command ringing in her ears like a gong. Winning was no longer merely a personal goal for Mia; it was a debt owed to her mother.

Now go out there and win me that damned trophy.

The spotlight shone down on Mia as she twirled and arched her body, showcasing every sculpted curve and rippling muscle. The stage beneath her feet was slick from the sweat dripping off her skin, but she paid it no heed. She held her pose, arms extended towards the ceiling as if reaching for something beyond her grasp. Before her, the audience roared in approval. It was a sound she craved more than anything else in the world. From the corner of her eye, Mia caught sight of Claire in the judges' panel. Their eyes met briefly, which both excited and terrified her. Claire had kept her involvement as a judge a tightly kept secret.

Linda watched Mia from behind the curtain. Her moves seemed choreographed perfectly, each muscle popping and pulsating under the harsh stage lights. Linda could not help but feel pride mixed with arousal. Watching Mia perform filled Linda with a strange, almost primal sense of pleasure. Her fingers trailed absentmindedly over the syringe still hidden in her bag. A

small smile spread across her face.

Her gaze shifted back to Mia, and she observed the fluidity of her movements, the graceful arch of her spine, and the effortless lift of her limbs. Linda felt a pang of envy wash over her as she recalled how different life was before marriage and then when Mia was raised. Linda let out a low growl of satisfaction as Mia struck another pose. She was flawless, unstoppable. All that remained was for the judges to recognise her talent.

Mia continued to wow the audience. Her muscles bulged and contracted beneath her glistening tan skin, and she exuded an air of confidence and self-assurance that commanded attention. Every time she glanced up at the judges, she saw them nod approvingly, signalling their appreciation for her artistry. But amidst all this praise, Mia couldn't shake off the unease deep inside her. There was a nagging voice in her head, reminding her of the price she'd paid to be here today.

And then, suddenly, she saw her mother standing in the shadows, watching her intently. Linda's intense stare sent chills down Mia's spine, and for a split second, she froze mid-movement. Was she proud or disappointed? Mia tried to ignore Linda's presence, forcing herself to focus. But Linda's image haunted her, lurking in the corners of her vision like a dark cloud hovering above her.

The music stopped as Mia finished her routine, and the crowd fell silent. She stood there, breathing heavily, waiting for the judges to deliver their verdict. Time slowed down, stretching into an agonising eternity. Mia's nerves frayed, her hands trembled, and her heart raced like it was about to burst. What if they didn't see what she saw? She closed her eyes, trying to block out the doubts in her mind. Mia knew this was bigger than herself now. Mia straightened her posture, squaring her shoulders, and prepared herself mentally. She would wait until the end before allowing herself to hope or despair.

Before long, Mia lost track of time completely. Her mind wandered, playing tricks on her. She pictured herself losing, imagining Linda's look of disappointment. And then, the judges' faces turned abruptly, with Claire's stern...

As Mia walked through the door of her home, Linda's piercing gaze immediately zeroed in on her. Without uttering a word, Linda followed Mia's line of sight to the fireplace mantelpiece, where she placed the gleaming gold Miss Mass contest trophy. Pride swelled in Linda's chest as she saw her daughter's hard work paying off. This wasn't just any ordinary

trophy - it represented everything they had worked for together: blood, sweat, tears, and sacrifice. Mia, too, was elated as she carefully placed the trophy. For Mia, the physical toll was worth it—even the manipulation from her mother.

Mia stared intently at the sparkling trophy nestled firmly between two bouquets of fresh flowers. As she ran her fingertips along its smooth surface, her memories of her victory flashed. Mia let out a sigh of contentment, feeling fulfilled by the recognition. From behind, Linda took in the sight of her daughter's muscular form. Once petite and delicate, her body was now something to behold. Linda's gaze settled on Mia's striated shoulders, admiring how they looked under the soft light filtering through the window. She felt her pulse quicken, and her breath grew shallow as she imagined those muscles would ripple after even more growth. Linda moved closer, relishing the chance to run her fingers along Mia's flesh, to bask in the glow of her daughter's achievements.

“Well done.” Linda reached out and gently touched one of Mia's rippling shoulders, tracing the contours of the muscle with her thumb. At that moment, Linda's hand lingered for a few seconds longer than usual, conveying a deeper meaning. Mia shivered slightly. Mia wondered whether her mother was expressing jealousy or something else. Whatever the reason, Linda finally withdrew her hand. “One trophy down. Countless more to earn. Can’t wait until I get ‘em.”

"Until *you* get them? What the hell do you mean by that?" Mia's tone was firm, edged with disbelief, as she sought clarification from her mother. The words hung, unanswered. She couldn't fathom her mother's insinuation. "I'm the one who put in all the work, the sacrifices."

Linda hesitated for a moment before speaking again. Mia could sense the tension building between them. Linda turned to face her daughter fully. "All these months, I've watched you train tirelessly, day in and day out. You're talented, no doubt about that. But you would never have made it this far without my guidance.”

Linda's expression shifted, turning cold. "You know very well that your physique wouldn't be nearly as impressive as it is if not for the steroids I had you take."

Mia's cheeks burned red, feeling betrayed.

Linda continued, leaning forward ominously, "I think this trophy belongs to me more than it does you. All the training, dieting, and persuasion required to convince you to turn to bodybuilding, to use those drugs... That takes real talent, doesn't it?"

Mia recoiled, appalled by her mother's audacity. How could her mother say such things? "You're a fucking psychopath."

Linda narrowed her eyes and smirked. "I am. But I need to remind you of the results we achieved together. Your winning of the Miss Mass is proof it has its place. I helped push you beyond your limits, forcing you to realise your true potential. My obsession with control and perfectionism helped mould you into the winner you are today."

With her hands still shaking from anger and betrayal, Mia watched in horror as her mother stepped towards her, reaching out to claim the trophy. Linda's eyes glinted with a fierce intensity as she snatched it up.

"This isn't over yet," she hissed, her voice low and menacing. "There will be many more victories like this, Mia. *Many* more. Because I want you to grow even stronger, even more powerful than you already are. Claire will help with that. Think of all the records you could break, all the titles you could win!"

As Linda clutched the trophy tightly, Mia could see the sparkle in her eye—an almost fanatical zeal. Her heart raced with conflicting emotions—shock and disgust, but also an undeniably thrilling rush that came with being so close to greatness. It was a heady mix of pride and fear, fueled by the knowledge that others were striving for similar accolades.

It wasn't just about the thrill of victory anymore; it was about proving to herself and everyone around her that Mia could achieve anything she wanted. With Claire's expertise guiding her every step of the way, Mia could do that. A small part of her soul lit up with a perverse excitement.

Then came the soft, telling grin.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Mia and Linda sat in the bustling cafe, surrounded by chattering patrons and the aroma of coffee and freshly baked pastries. The cafe's interior was a mix of warm vintage and cold modernity, with exposed brick walls, wooden accents, sleek metal furnishings and high-backed, cushioned booths.

The waitress arrived with two plates of grilled chicken salad as they waited. The chicken was perfectly cooked, and the salad was a colourful mix of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and herbs. Linda's eyes lit up as she grabbed her fork and started manoeuvring the lettuce and chicken into her mouth.

Mia couldn't help but feel a twinge of apprehension. Her mother's unwavering belief in her success was a double-edged sword. Mia wanted to make her mother proud, but the pressure to succeed further was mounting.

"Mum, is it smart to start eating before Claire arrives? I don't want to be impolite." Mia asked, genuinely concerned.

Linda stopped eating, paused, and turned her attention to Mia. Her mouth was still full of salad, but she wanted to be heard. "I'm sure Claire won't mind." Linda took another bite of salad, smiling at Mia reassuringly.

Linda's eyes roamed around the room, studying other patrons intently. Mia couldn't help but notice her mother's scrutiny and wondered what she was thinking. Linda's gaze seemed to linger on each patron for a few moments longer than usual before moving on to the next. Mia couldn't shake off the feeling that her mother was silently comparing and judging them for being "normal."

Mia's attention was diverted by a young woman who approached their booth. In her early twenties, the girl had a petite figure, curly brunette hair, and bright blue eyes that sparkled with excitement. She was holding a poster of Mia in a front double bicep pose that had been made

after her win at the Miss Mass contest, along with a pen. Mia couldn't help but notice her enthusiasm as she clutched the poster tightly.

"Excuse me!" The young woman exclaimed. "You were incredible at the Miss Mass contest last week! I'm such a fan."

The sudden recognition took Mia aback. Her heart began to race, and she felt warmth spread through her body. She glanced at her mother, who was still lost in her thoughts, her expression unreadable.

"Thank you so much!" Mia replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "You want me to sign that for you?"

The young woman beamed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Yes, please!"

Mia felt her heart racing as she reached out to take the marker from the fan. She had been dreaming of this moment for years - the chance to connect with her fans and give them a memory they would cherish forever. Mia looked into the fan's eyes as she held the marker. The young girl's face was lit up with excitement and anticipation. Mia couldn't help but feel a rush of adrenaline. She had been working towards this for so long - the recognition and adoration of her fans.

Suddenly, Linda spoke up, her voice cutting through the noise of the cafe. "Excuse me, young lady," she said, her eyes never leaving the young fan, "How much are you willing to pay for Mia to sign this poster for you?"

The young woman's eyes widened, and a hint of confusion tinged her bright blue gaze. She stammered, "I'm sorry, I don't know. I'm not a collector. I admire your daughter's work and only wanted her to sign this poster for my collection at home."

Linda's eyes fixed on the young woman before her, searching for any sign of hesitation or reluctance. She knew the value of Mia's autograph and was determined to make a profit from it.

"Well," Linda said, leaning in closer, "if you're truly a fan, you'd understand the value of Mia's autograph. Not every day you get the chance to own something like this. How about a hundred pounds?"

"Mum, I..." Mia stopped herself before getting too far ahead. She swallowed nervously, her

hand shaking as the pen hovered above the poster.

The young woman hesitated. She considered Linda's offer, but a hundred dollars was a lot of money, and she wasn't sure it was worth it. Finally, the young woman made her decision. She reached into her purse and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, handing it to Linda with a smile.

"Thank you," Linda said, counting the money and handing over the autograph after Mia hesitantly signed it.

Mia's eyes darted from Linda to the young fan, and she could see the confusion and disbelief on the girl's face. Mia's heart ached for the young woman. She knew that her mother's approach was not the right one.

"Mum, what the fuck was that?"

Linda's expression remained unchanged as she leaned back in her chair, steeping her fingers together. "Mia, I already told you: Your talent, hard work, and popularity will only get you so far. To succeed in the long run, you need to be smart about the opportunities presented to you."

"And what exactly did I do that was not smart?" Mia pressed.

"You were going to give your autograph for free. I sold it to that young woman for one hundred pounds. That's just an inkling of the value of your popularity," Linda replied, her eyes never leaving Mia's face. "Take a minute to think about how many countless fans you may have, then imagine the money from each autograph."

Mia shook her head in disbelief. "Fame is one thing, but I won't exploit my fans. I want to connect with them, not treat them like wallets. I want to be a role model."

"Then you've given up before you've even started," Linda said sharply.

Mia's frustration simmered as she gazed at her mother. Just as Mia was about to argue back, the sound of the cafe door opening caught their attention. Claire stepped inside, her curly brown hair bouncing as she approached their table. Claire's entrance broke the tension. Mia's frustration momentarily dissipated, and a sense of calm settled.

"Sorry I'm late; traffic was murder." Claire noticed the half-eaten salads on Mia and Linda's

plates and smiled warmly. "You two feeling okay? You've barely eaten anything."

Mia forced a smile, still feeling the lingering frustration from her conversation with Linda. Her eyes lingered on the young woman who had just left. "I'm sorry we're not exactly sitting down for a leisurely lunch today."

Claire nodded. "I noticed. Did you two have a disagreement?"

Linda's expression was guarded, and she sipped her coffee. "No, just a difference of opinion."

"I'll be right back," she called out to Claire and Linda, her voice strained.

Mia excused herself from the table, her heart racing from the intense exchange with her mother. She needed a moment to collect herself and clear her mind. She stood up, leaving her half-eaten salad behind, and headed towards the restroom.

Claire opted to change the subject quickly. "If I remember correctly, Linda, you used to be a bodybuilder once."

Linda's expression softened momentarily, and she placed her napkin on her plate. Her eyes glinted with excitement. "Yep! Those were the days. The crowd cheers, the thrill of being on the stage in front of hundreds of people. Oh, I could do that again if I could."

As Linda's mind wandered, she couldn't help but feel a sense of unease creeping in. She knew that Claire had some very powerful connections in the industry, and if Claire could use them to help Mia achieve her ultimate potential, why not do the same for herself? Linda's eyes darted around the room, searching for any signs of encouragement in Claire's expression. She longed for someone to guide her towards the right path and help her achieve her goals and dreams. After all, she had worked just as hard as Mia once and deserved just as much chance to succeed.

"I've been thinking about how you're helping Mia; maybe you could do the same for me as well?"

"Put you in the same project, you mean? Another chance to bask in the sun, is that it?" Claire asked.

"You can do that?"

"Ah, Linda," Claire began, her tone carrying a hint of chill, "The industry has changed so much since you last set foot on the stage. Right now, my focus, and that of our investors, is on the future, innovation, and what's next."

She paused, her eyes glinting. Linda could see a subtle edge in Claire's eyes that made her realise her hopes would be shattered. In that brief moment, Linda's heart sank as she understood that the conversation would not go as planned.

"Investors want to put their money where they see growth potential and the promise of the future. Mia represents that promise, that potential. A fresh face, a rising star. It's what the public wants, what the industry demands and needs to keep itself relevant."

Claire's words were charged with an unspoken implication that seemed to weigh heavily in the air like a thick fog that refused to dissipate. Despite the silence that followed, the implication seemed to linger, leaving an unsettling feeling in the pit of Linda's stomach.

"Your desire for a comeback, while admirable, does not align with my project. We *could* help you, but it won't change what we, and then the public, know: you're old. We're not looking for someone desperate for second chances. It's a harsh reality, Linda, but those who dwell too much on past glories, like yourself, risk being left behind. If you want to make a name for yourself now, focus on Mia because your time in the sun is over."

Mia emerged from the restroom, her steps cautious as she rejoined the conversation. Then she felt the tension and sensed that something was amiss. As she approached the booth, she could see Claire's expression had grown distant, and her eyes narrowed in a way that suggested she was deep in thought. On the other hand, Linda looked uncomfortable, glancing around the cafe as though searching for an escape.

"Everything okay?" Mia asked, her voice laced with concern.

"Mia!" Claire began, rising from her seat. "I'd like to show you something. I think you'll love it."

Mia's curiosity was piqued. "What is it?"

Linda's eyes darted around the cafe, searching for a way to break free from the oppressive tension brought on by Claire. She nodded, saying, "That sounds like a good idea. I'll see you both later."

As Linda watched Mia and Claire leave, her thoughts swirled, and her heart raced. She felt a gnawing sense of disappointment, frustration, and anger. Her mind flashed back to when she was a successful bodybuilder, competing on stages packed with people, her confidence sky-high. What was she thinking? Claire was right: those days *were* long gone. The industry *had* moved on. And now, at 52 years old, the idea of a comeback, of having her name in lights again, *was* an unreachable dream.

Linda sat watching a group of young women walk past the window. They appeared so effortless with their toned bodies and flawless skin. Linda couldn't help but admire them, yet also feel envious. As she compared herself to them, a sense of bitterness crept in...

As Mia and Claire walked down the street, they turned a corner. Mia's eyes widened in recognition as she realised they were headed towards the old bookstore she used to visit, Whispering Ink. Nostalgia washed over her, and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. However, as they approached the bookstore, she noticed it had been boarded up with a Sold sign.

Mia's heart sank as she gazed at the familiar bookstore, now a relic of a bygone era. The bittersweet memories of her youth, the times she had spent there, flickered through her mind like a kaleidoscope. And the pages — some she laughed at, others she cried into. She couldn't help but feel a sense of loss as the realisation settled in—the place once a sanctuary was now nothing but a memory.

"What happened here?" Mia asked, her voice laced with a hint of sadness.

"The store was struggling financially," Claire began, her tone wistful. "It was clear that the business was on its last legs. She mentioned losing ground to online retailers, e-books, and the shifting trends in the publishing industry. So, I made an offer she couldn't refuse."

Mia's eyes widened in surprise. "You bought it?"

"Yes, I did," Claire nodded, "It'll be a wise investment, I'm sure. It is a prime location, a building with potential. Plus, I have plans for the space. I'll repurpose it for a new venture that aligns perfectly with our project."

"A gym, you mean?" Mia asked, her stomach turned to knots from excitement.

"It won't be just any gym; it'll be yours. A chain of these across the country, each bearing your name proudly. When I mentioned you'd have a brand, I meant it," Claire declared, her voice brimming with conviction as she outlined her ambitious plans.

Claire's eyes lit up, mirroring the fire that ignited within her as she delved into the possibilities ahead for Mia's future. With each idea, her enthusiasm helped paint a picture of the journey they could embark upon — together. "Think about it, Mia," she said, her voice filled with energy. "Your name, your legacy, on buildings, rolling off the tongues of the media, in the hearts of your fans and clients. It's a chance to be a trailblazer in a century-old industry. Imagine a line of branded workout gear, a signature protein shake, energy bars, and even a line of health and wellness books."

Mia's pulse quickened, her mind a whirlwind of images as Claire's words spun a tapestry of possibilities. She envisioned her name emblazoned across towering billboards, her smile gracing the covers of esteemed magazines, and her brand blossoming into a national — and then *international* — phenomenon.

"You see it, don't you?" Claire's voice was tinged with anticipation, echoing Mia's burgeoning vision. "The future is yours, Mia — if you're strong enough to take it."

Mia smiled. "When do we start?"

As Mia stepped through the front door, the faint sound of applause drifted from the living room, drawing her attention. Curiosity piqued, she rounded the corner to find her mother, Linda, seated on the couch, her gaze fixed on the television screen. There, amidst a sea of cheering spectators, played a recording of Mia's victory at the Miss Mass competition.

"Hey, Mum," Mia said, breaking the silence. "I'm home. I've got some news to share! Claire and I are gonna start a gym chain together!"

Linda's expression remained unchanged, her eyes fixed on the television screen, but her focus seemed distant. Claire's words from nearly an hour ago echoed in her head. Linda was old? Unworthy of a comeback because of her age? These questions lingered, stirring a storm of emotions within her.

"That's great, Mia," Linda said, her voice distant. "I'm proud of you."

Mia's smile faltered as she noticed the absence of enthusiasm in her mother's response. "Is everything okay? You seem a bit distant," Mia inquired, concern creasing her brow.

Sensing her daughter's observation, Linda struggled to push aside her inner turmoil. Linda shifted on the couch, her eyes flicking to her daughter's muscular arms. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as she gazed at the toned biceps. "Oh, everything's fine, dear. Just lost in my thoughts for a moment."

Mia stepped into the kitchen, fresh coffee filling the air. She reached for a mug from the cupboard and poured herself a steaming cup. Linda's eyes, fixed on the television, now followed Mia's form as she moved. The corners of her lips turned up, and her gaze lingered on Mia's toned legs, glutes and the curves of her muscular arms. The sight caused a familiar flutter in her chest.

Linda's eyes lingered on the photograph of Mia's deceased father on the fireplace. The familiar image stirred bittersweet memories, and her gaze shifted to her daughter drinking her coffee and looking out the kitchen window. The sight of Mia's physique filled Linda with longing and guilt. She couldn't help but feel jealous as she gazed at her daughter's muscular arms and legs.

Her gaze returned to the photograph, and she stared at her daughter's father's eyes. They seemed to hold a hidden message that made Linda feel guilty for her illicit feelings. She felt her husband's spirit was judging her for the thoughts she couldn't shake from her mind. Her hand reached out, and she turned the photograph over, placing it face-down on the mantle. Linda's heart raced, and she forced a smile as she turned to face her daughter.

"So, a gym chain, eh?" Linda said, forcing enthusiasm into her voice. "That's wonderful, Mia. I'm so proud of you."

Linda's voice trailed off as she stood in the kitchen doorway, her gaze lingering on Mia as she finished her coffee, her back still turned. As Mia turned to face her, Linda's eyes quickly darted to the down-turned photograph of her husband on the mantle, her heart racing as she struggled to keep her thoughts in check.

Mia glanced up from her empty cup, a flicker of concern crossing her face as she sensed a shift in her mother's demeanour. "Are you sure everything's okay?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Linda stepped into the kitchen, her eyes lingering on her daughter's impressive physique. "I'm just thinking about how proud your father would be if he were here. He always knew you were destined for greatness."

Mia forced a smile, grateful for her mother's uncharacteristic words. "Thanks, Mum. I think."

As Mia reached for a biscuit from a jar on the counter, her bicep flexed as she lifted her arm, and for a moment, Linda's eyes lingered on the subtle bulge. The sight of Mia's muscular arm stirred something within Linda.

The recording of Mia's Miss Mass win had shifted from Mia being crowned and onto the interviews, yet Linda's thoughts were elsewhere. She couldn't help but feel a tinge of jealousy as she gazed at her daughter's toned arm, the muscles rippling under her skin. She longed to run her fingers over those familiar contours, to feel the strength that defined Mia's body.

As Mia's hand brushed against Linda's, Linda's heart skipped a beat. She quickly pulled her hand away, her eyes darting to the kitchen window, and she forced a smile. Mia returned it, which only amplified Linda's inner conflict.

Before Mia could say another word, Linda stepped forward and kissed her. Passionately. The sudden intensity of the kiss took Mia aback. Confusion spun, her eyes widening as Linda's lips pressed against hers. The kiss was tender.

"What the fuck!"

Linda recoiled slightly, her eyes widening in shock at Mia's words. "I'm sorry, Mia. I didn't mean to do that. I just... I'm so proud of you," she stammered, her voice tinged with remorse and genuine emotion.

Mia's expression twisted into disgust, her face contorted with revulsion. She recoiled instinctively, bringing the back of her hand to her mouth to wipe away any lingering taste. The tension between mother and daughter hung palpably, their exchange fraught.

Linda's eyes darted to the floor, her posture tense as she took a hesitant step back, her hands clasped tightly. "I'm sorry, Mia. I didn't mean for it to happen like that. I've just been... overwhelmed with pride, I suppose," she admitted softly, her voice tinged with remorse.

"Uh-huh." Mia took a deep breath, trying to calm the swirling emotions within her, still

feeling the aftertaste of disgust on her tongue from her mother's kiss.

In a moment of impulse, Linda stepped forward, her hand reaching out to brush her daughter's bicep. Mia's skin was smooth and cool, and Linda's fingers traced the sinews beneath her skin. Mia didn't react as she ought to; instead, she was rather appreciative of the attention her body was getting.

Mia's confusion deepened. She pulled away, her face contorted with emotions she couldn't quite place. Linda's hand fell to her side, and she stepped back. When Linda's hand fell to her side, Mia's confusion dissipated, and her emotions shifted. In that instant, Mia's hand found Linda's cheek, her fingers tracing the contours of her mother's face. Linda's eyes widened in surprise, her lips parting in a soft gasp.

Mia's lips curved into a slow, sensual smile, and she leaned in, deepening the kiss. Linda's body relaxed against Mia's, her arms wrapping around her daughter, her hands resting on Mia's hips. The kiss was tender yet intimate, a world away from the passionate kiss Linda had initiated moments before. Mia's hands moved, tracing the lines of Linda's arms, her fingers lingering over the comparatively diminutive muscles beneath her mother's skin. Linda's eyes closed, her body melting into the embrace, and for a moment, time stood still.

Mia's grip on Linda's hips grew stronger, and with a fluid motion, she lifted her mother by the legs, her arms cradling her mother's slender frame. Linda's legs wrapped around Mia's waist, and she was carried with ease to the couch, Linda's heart pounding in her chest. Mia gently lowered her mother onto the soft cushions, her body still hovering above Linda's as if suspended in the moment. Linda's eyes drank in the warmth and safety of her daughter's embrace.

As Mia's lips brushed Linda's neck, their bodies entwined.

Linda giggled...

As the last strokes of paint were applied and the final pieces of equipment were installed into the first of Mia's new gyms, Mia and Claire stood side by side in the heart of The Iron Quarter. The spacious gym was now nearly complete.

Mia turned to Claire, a smile spreading across her face. "I can't believe it."

Claire clapped her on the back, beaming with pride. "It's only the beginning, Mia."

Amid Mia's contemplation, the clang of the gym's entrance doors shattered the stillness. All eyes turned toward the entrance as a woman strode purposefully into the vast space. With each step, the atmosphere seemed to grow heavier, laden with an unmistakable tension. Mia's heart skipped a beat as she recognised the woman who had just crossed the threshold. It was Vanessa Thorne, Mia's mother's longtime rival and the owner of the rival gym in town.

A scowl etched deeply into Vanessa's face, her steely gaze scanning the room with an intensity that sent a shiver down Mia's spine. The air seemed to crackle with the weight of unspoken animosity as Vanessa's eyes locked onto Claire's. It had been several months since her mother last spoke of Vanessa, and the woman standing before her now was far from the formidable figure Mia had envisioned.

Hiding her anxiousness behind a mask of composure, Mia subtly sized up the woman. Vanessa had shifted her focus away from raw strength and bulk, instead honing in on cultivating a physique characterised by feminine curves and shapeliness.

Mia squared her shoulders.

"Vanessa. Long time no see," were the words from Claire to break the silence.

"Wait." The word sliced through the tension in the room, causing Mia to pivot sharply toward Claire, her eyebrows furrowing in surprise at the unexpected interruption. Her body language shifted subtly, a mixture of confusion and curiosity evident in the way she cocked her head slightly to the side, her gaze flickering between Claire and Vanessa. "You two know each other?"

"That's putting it lightly," Vanessa replied, her tone laced with a hint of sarcasm as she cast a fleeting glance in Claire's direction. As Vanessa's gaze flickered toward Claire, Mia couldn't help but notice the subtle shift in her body language—a barely perceptible tightening of her jaw, a fleeting furrow of her brow. It was as if Vanessa's mere presence had ignited a dormant ember of discomfort within Claire, hinting at a more profound history between the two women.

"What's this about anyway, Vanessa?" Claire's voice cut through the tension in the room, her tone deceptively casual as she fixed Vanessa with a knowing smile. It was a subtle gesture but one that spoke volumes.

"You know exactly why I'm here," Vanessa said through gritted teeth, her irritation

palpable as she shot an evil glare in Claire's direction. The simmering anger in her voice was tinged with frustration and betrayal, a testament to the raw emotions that churned beneath the surface.

Mia watched, taken aback by the intensity of Vanessa's reaction. It was clear that her sudden appearance was not merely a coincidence but rather the culmination of a festering grievance that had been building in Vanessa's absence.

"I go on a business trip, gone for a month, and come back to *a fucking rival gym* about to open its doors literally across the street from my own."

Caught in Vanessa's wrath, Claire maintained a stoic facade, her expression betraying no hint of remorse. It was as if she had been expecting Vanessa's outburst, steeling herself for the inevitable confrontation. "It's just some competition, Vee."

"Don't you 'Vee' me," Vanessa argued, her tone sharp with irritation. "After what happened last time, I'm surprised you're still in the industry. You shouldn't be."

"Last ti—?"

"And you," Vanessa's voice sliced through the tension, her gaze drilling into Mia's, sharp and accusing. The room seemed to shrink around them. Vanessa's words were laced with bitterness, a hint of betrayal tainting the syllables. Each word carried the weight of Vanessa's disappointment, her confrontational stance leaving no room for misunderstanding. "I'm surprised you're letting Claire here manipulate you so easily. Your mother ought to be ashamed."

"It was her idea," Claire interjected, her tone smug and self-assured as if revelling in the chaos she had sown. Her words dripped with the satisfaction of someone who had just delivered a well-aimed blow. Vanessa's eyes narrowed, her lips thinning into a tight line of disdain. Claire's smirk widened to challenge Vanessa's authority, daring her to respond.

Vanessa's eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of shock dancing across her face. She hadn't expected this revelation or realized the depth of Linda's emotions tied to that long-ago loss at the Miss Mass contest. A pang of concern shot through her, a worry for her old friend's well-being stirring in the depths of her chest.

"Mia..." Vanessa's voice softened, a hint of concern seeping into her tone, "is this true?" Her gaze shifted to Claire, searching for any sign of deception, any hint that this was just

another one of Claire's manipulative ploys.

"It's true. And I can't wait to get even bigger than I am now."

"It's true," Mia echoed, her voice tinged with determination and excitement. "And I can't wait to get even bigger than I am now." Her words resonated with a newfound sense of purpose, a spark ignited by the prospect of pushing her limits even further. Mia couldn't help but drift into a daydream, her mind conjuring images of herself under the bright spotlight of the bodybuilding stage. She imagined the adrenaline rush coursing through her veins as she flexed. In her mind's eye, she saw herself towering over the competition, her physique more imposing and powerful than ever.

Claire's voice sliced through Mia's reverie, drawing her back to the present moment. "And I'll be there to help," she declared, her tone resolute and unwavering. There was a hint of determination in her words. Mia glanced at Claire. With a nod of appreciation, Mia returned Claire's gaze.

Vanessa's voice cut through the air like a knife, her words ringing like a warning. "You cannot trust this woman, Mia," she insisted, her gaze fixed firmly on Claire. Vanessa's eyes had a steely resolve, a conviction born from years of experience and intuition. She had seen the subtle manipulations, the calculated moves beneath Claire's facade of camaraderie.

"Don't you remember what happened to Lyra?" Vanessa's voice was tinged with frustration and concern as she levelled her accusation at Claire. The memory of Lyra still lingered like a bitter taste in Vanessa's mouth, a cautionary tale unique to their industry. "Or have you forgotten about her already?" Vanessa pressed, her voice dripping with disdain.

"What happened to Lyra was not my fault," Claire's voice wavered slightly, her defence laced with a hint of genuine sorrow. The mention of Lyra's name stirred a deep well of emotions, memories of a friendship that had once been close, now tarnished by tragedy.

Claire's eyes softened, a flicker of heartbreak shining through the mask of indifference. Lyra's struggle with OCD had been a burden they had both carried.

"She had a uniquely acute case of OCD," Claire continued, her tone tinged with regret. It was a painful admission.

"A case you exploited," Vanessa countered, her voice edged with accusation.

Claire's facade faltered, a flicker of guilt crossing her face before she regained her composure. The accusation struck a nerve, stirring a mix of defensiveness and remorse within her. "It's not my fault."

"It never is your fault; that's your problem."

Claire's mask of indifference slipped, revealing a flicker of insecurity beneath the surface. Vanessa's words struck a nerve, dredging up memories of past confrontations and bitter arguments. Despite her best efforts to maintain her composure, Claire felt guilt gnawing at her conscience.

Mia's voice cut through the tense exchange, her confusion evident as she sought clarification. "Who's Lyra?" she asked, her tone genuinely puzzled, a hint of uncertainty colouring her words. She felt like an outsider, caught in the crossfire of a conflict she didn't fully understand.

"I'd like you to leave now," Claire warned Vanessa, catching Mia following along. Claire's eyes narrowed, her lips thinning into a tight line of annoyance. She was aware of Vanessa's attempts to sow doubt in Mia's mind and was determined not to let her succeed.

As the door swung shut with Vanessa's departure, Mia's thoughts returned to Claire. Mia felt a twinge of uncertainty, unsure of where she stood after this confrontation. Her mind raced with the conflicting information and emotions she had just experienced.

"Who the fuck was Lyra?"

Claire's expression grew serious as she met Mia's inquiring gaze. She took a deep breath, bracing herself for the conversation to come. "Lyra was a former sponsor of mine," Claire began, her voice tinged with weariness. "Much like you are now."

Claire's memories wove a tapestry of moments throughout Lyra's life over the past decade as she spoke. Claire's voice trailed off, and for a moment, she and Mia were silent, each lost in their thoughts. Mia's mind was swirling with the weight of the revelations. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of doubt and fear, wondering where she stood in Claire's plans and if she was being manipulated.

"But then," Claire continued, her voice faltering slightly. "Eventually, what Lyra felt she was working towards wasn't enough. She wanted more. And more. And more." She paused, her words hanging heavy in the air. "And I kept giving her what she wanted. I was young then,

hard-headed and eager for success. I saw Lyra as the gateway to that.”

Mia's worried voice quivered as she asked, "What did you do?"

"I gave her what she wanted," Claire said, her voice low and heavy. "More muscle. More strength. A physical transformation that would set her apart in the industry. I gave her a very early-stage version of the genetic therapy I hope to give you, Mia. In hindsight, I realise I was so blinded by my ambition and desire for success that I didn't consider the long-term consequences.”

As the weight of Claire's words sank in, Mia's mind reeled. She found herself both shocked and saddened by the revelation. Mia's voice trembled, "Claire, I... I don't know what to say.”

Claire's expression softened, a flicker of sorrow crossing her face. She took a deep breath, bracing herself. “I wouldn’t hold it against you if you were confused. Or if you wanted to part ways in our partnership.”

“I didn’t say that,” Mia urged.

Mia's mind raced with the weight of Claire's revelations, each thought weaving into a vivid tapestry of possibility. Lost in her daydreams, she found herself engulfed in visions of transformation. She envisioned herself surpassing Lyra, admired by millions. She could almost hear the crowd’s roar, their cheers echoing in her ears as she commanded the stage.

But amidst the adulation, a familiar voice pierced through the cacophony of applause. Linda's voice, sharp and unyielding, cut through Mia's euphoria like a knife. Her mother's expectations loomed large in her mind, a constant reminder of the pressure to excel, to be perfect.

Mia glanced up, her eyes hesitant as they met Claire’s. "Do you have a picture of Lyra?"

Claire's expression softened, and she pulled out her phone, unlocking it with a quick swipe. She scrolled through her gallery, searching for the picture. Finally, her finger landed on it, and she handed the phone to her.

Mia's eyes widened as she gazed at the screen, studying the photograph of a woman who had been a distant memory for Claire. The image depicted a woman so muscular she could barely be considered human. Lyra's biceps had swelled to appear as balloons, bulging with muscle, and her thighs stretched out past the photo’s frame. Her face was angular, with high

cheekbones and a sharp, almost masculine jawline. Her hair was styled in a sleek, asymmetrical cut that framed her angular face.

“Why does she still look so—”

“Masculine?” Claire interrupted, knowing where the question was headed. “As I said, we worked with an early-stage version of the gene therapy project. A whole lotta kinks needed ironing out.”

Mia returned Claire’s phone and asked, “What happened to Lyra?”

“After receiving the therapy, she took her training to the next level. What your mother wants from you, she sought that in herself. Absolute perfection.”

Mia couldn't help but feel a mixture of emotions as she looked at the picture. On the one hand, she was horrified by the extent of Lyra's transformation. On the other hand, she felt awe and respect for the woman to push herself. She couldn't help but wonder, 'What would my body look like if Claire's therapies had worked on me?'

Claire responded with a playful lilt, 'If you're still interested in the therapy, we can certainly explore that possibility.’

As realisation dawned on Mia, her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I—I said that out loud?’ she stammered, self-conscious.

Claire chuckled softly.

Mia's heart raced as she contemplated Claire's offer. Visions of a more powerful, defined body filled her mind. For the first time, she saw the potential in Claire's therapies to reshape her into the bodybuilder her mother had always dreamed of her being. She could almost taste the sweet victory of surpassing her mother's expectations.

"No," Mia asserted firmly, her tone carrying a sense of urgency. "It *needs* to happen."

Claire's lips curled into a mischievous smirk. She knew that Lyra's tale had successfully convinced Mia to pursue genetic therapy. Seeing the fire in Mia's eyes, Claire's smirk broadened, a sick excitement birthed from the prospect. "I'm glad you've come to see the potential in what I offer," Claire said, her voice laced with a hint of excitement. "We'll make sure this journey is as safe and effective as possible, and soon enough, you'll surpass Lyra's

achievements. You'll be a force to be reckoned with."

"Let's do it," Mia said.