Ashcombe's TA Program

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 29

Chapter 1

The clinic at Ashcombe sat off the east cloister, past a period bell that still had a little ring left in the plaster. Lila Hale closed the door with her shoulder because her hands were busy with the strap of her bag. Eighteen. Pale gold hair down her back. White blouse pulled tight across a chest that made the cotton look borrowed. Light-wash jeans, nothing under them. The seam had been talking to her all the way down the cloister.

Dr. Wren Ellison stood with a clipboard and washed hands. White coat, navy dress, dark- blonde hair in a low clip, a small mole near her mouth. She looked kind. She looked at Lila's blouse first anyway.

"Miss Hale. You're on time. Bag on the chair. Clothes on the hook. No gown. That's the rule for Ashcombe's TA program."

Lila set the bag down. The far wall was glass. It did not give her the corridor. It gave her a faint version of herself, and behind that, motion: three women, not in white coats. She could not see faces cleanly. She could feel that they could see her.

"Is that—"

"One-way," Wren said. "Faculty observation. They don't speak in here. You look at me."

Lila looked at her. Wren's voice was ordinary doctor. That made it worse.

"You've been named a candidate," Wren said. "If you place, you fetch work and you stand in class and you make a teacher's hour easier. Today is the prequalifier. I take a baseline so they know what they're assigning. Stop is available. You won't need a speech about it. Blouse first."

Lila's fingers found the little buttons. The blouse was already doing too much. When the first two opened, the high, independent line of her chest stepped forward as if it had been waiting for permission. Wren did not look away. Lila felt the glass look too. She worked the rest of the buttons and shrugged the cotton off her shoulders and hung it on the hook. Cool air found her nipples at once. They were already tight from the walk. They tightened further, pale pink going a shade darker while she was still standing there with her arms not quite sure where to go.

"Jeans."

The zipper sounded too loud for the tile. Lila pushed the denim down, stepped out, and hung the jeans beside the blouse. Bare feet. Bare everything. The architectural fact of her arrived all at once: the waist drawn in as if someone had taken a pencil to it, the hips rounding without heaviness, the long legs, the flat

belly, the chest that did not need the rest of her in order to be the first thing in the room. Standing still made her look arranged. She could not help that.

Wren made a mark on the clipboard.

“On the table. Sit up. Hands on your knees. I need the chest in good light.”

Lila crossed the tile. The paper roll was cold under the backs of her thighs. When she sat, her breasts settled high and full and separate, the nipples gathered into small points that made her want to fold her arms. She did not. Wren set the clipboard aside and washed her hands again, slowly, in Lila’s sight.

“Ashcombe doesn’t guess,” Wren said. “If a teacher is going to have you in a classroom, I need to know how this tissue behaves. Color at rest. Color under pinch. How long a hold takes you up, and whether you come down when I let go. You may make noise. You may not cover yourself. Understood.”

“Yes.”

“Miss Hale.”

“Yes, Dr. Ellison.”

Wren’s hands were clean and cool and then not cool. She lifted the weight of Lila’s left breast as if she were judging fruit, thumb along the underside, fingers spreading to take the full curve. Lila’s breath snagged. Wren wrote nothing yet. She only looked, close enough that Lila could see the mole and the exactness in her mouth.

“Good color at rest. A little flushed already. That’s the walk or the glass. Doesn’t matter.” She took the right breast the same way, weighing, comparing. “Symmetric. High set. They don’t need the waist, do they.”

Lila’s ears went hot. Wren’s thumb found the left nipple and rolled it once, professionally, and the sensation went through Lila’s belly as if a string had been tied there.

“Tell me what you feel.”

“It’s—sharp. Then it goes low.”

“Low where.”

Lila’s thighs pressed and opened again because pressing did nothing. “Between my legs.”

“That’s the note I want,” Wren said. She pinched, not cruel, not kind, a measured close of finger and thumb on the gathered peak, and held. Lila’s mouth opened. The pinch did not become a twist. It just stayed, a bright coin of pressure, while Wren watched the nipple darken and swell against her fingers.

“Six seconds. Eight.” Wren’s voice stayed clinic-flat. “You’re blooming. Don’t look at my hand. Look at the glass if you have to look somewhere.”

Lila looked. The glass gave her a nude blonde girl on a table with a doctor at her chest, and three still shapes behind the shine. Someone back there shifted. Lila’s nipple pulsed in Wren’s pinch as if the shift had a temperature.

“Twelve.” Wren released. Blood returned in a sweet sting. She did not give Lila a rest. The right nipple received the same hold, same count, same inspection of color. Lila’s hands tightened on her knees. Her chest was lifting too fast. Wren’s knuckles brushed the inner curve while she pinched, an accident that did not feel like one.

“Responsive. Both sides. You don’t take long.” Wren leaned in so that her talk landed on Lila’s skin. “A teacher who likes a visual is going to stop hearing her own lesson. That’s useful information. Not a compliment. Sit up straighter.”

Lila straightened. The pose got worse. Wren used the pads of both thumbs now, circling the areolas, then flicking the peaks in small exact taps that made Lila jerk. Each tap sent the same low pull. The paper under her had gone warm. She was wet enough to feel it when she shifted, a slick seam against the roll, and Wren glanced down once as if she had expected that from chest work alone.

“Don’t close your knees. I’m not at your sex. I’m reading what the nipples do to the rest of you. If you hide the reading, I have to start over.”

Lila left her knees apart. Air found her. She sounded, a small broken noise, when Wren pinched both peaks at once and lifted just enough that the weight of each breast hung from the hold. The stretch was clean and filthy without a filthy word in it. Lila’s pale gold hair slid forward over one shoulder. Wren blew once, lightly, across a wet-tight nipple, and Lila’s hips answered without being invited.

“There,” Wren said. “That’s the map. Chest to hip, no layover. I’m going to take you up on this and only this. If you finish, I log it as nipple-only. That’s a strong prequalifier. If you don’t, I log the time you stall. Either number is a number.”

“I—” Lila’s voice thinned. “I think I can.”

“I didn’t ask you to think. I asked you to sit.”

Wren’s mouth was close enough to the left breast that Lila felt breath again, but Wren did not kiss her. She used fingers: pinch, roll, a short pull, a pause that was worse than the pull, then both hands working in a rhythm that had a clock in it. Lila watched the nipples turn dark and glossy from handling, swollen past pretty into obvious. Her waist looked even smaller under that chest. She felt the glass on her profile, on the long bare legs, on the place she was not allowed to touch.

A second bell tried to ring somewhere and died. Class changing. Ashcombe going on being Ashcombe while Dr. Ellison milked heat out of a candidate’s nipples

with washed hands and a calm sentence.

“You’re shaking,” Wren said. “That’s fine. Stay on the table. I’m holding through the next thirty. You don’t have to be quiet. The glass isn’t going to help you.”

Lila came on the hold.

It gathered under Wren’s fingers and dropped straight down, a sudden hard bloom that had nothing to hold onto except the pinch. Her back tried to arch. Her chest pushed into Wren’s hands as if it could get more of the thing that was already too much. Sound left her, not a word, wet and startled. She clenched on empty air between her open knees and shook while Wren kept the peaks trapped and watched her face the way she had watched color.

Wren held until the shakes broke, then eased off, then brushed each nipple once with a flat thumb as if wiping a mark. Lila flinched. Aftershock. Wren picked up the clipboard.

“Nipple-only. Full response. Time from first pinch to finish is on the sheet. Color change marked. She did not cover. She did not use stop.” Wren was speaking to the board, and also through the glass. “Miss Hale. Breathe. Then the floor.”

Lila got off the table on long unsteady legs. Standing made her a pose again, flushed, nipples dark and wet-looking, a shine on the inner thigh she could not pretend was anything else. Wren handed her nothing to wrap in.

“Hook. Dress. You may be sore through lecture. That’s expected. If you’re called back, you come back the same way you came today. Dressed. Then not.”

Lila took the blouse. The cotton dragged over the used peaks and made her bite the inside of her cheek. Jeans next, the seam finding her wet and exact. She looked once at the glass. The three shapes were still there. One of them had a clipboard tilt, or a head tilt. Lila could not tell.

“Thank you,” she said, because she had sat in classrooms that required it.

Wren’s mouth almost smiled. The mole made it look like a secret.

“Don’t thank me yet. That’s a baseline, not a place. Go to class, Miss Hale. Ashcombe’s still in session.”

Lila took her bag. The cloister air hit the blouse and reminded every nerve what Wren’s fingers had done. Behind the one-way glass the watchers did not speak. On the hook her empty hanger turned once and went still. She walked toward the sound of seniors and bells with her chest sore and obvious under white cotton, and the prequalifier sat in her nipples like a stamp that had not cooled.

Chapter 2

The sundress had been a mistake for a cloister with a breeze.

Yellow flowers, orange flowers, a thin tie between Bridget Donnelly’s breasts that kept asking to be redone. Copper hair piled up and already escaping. Freckles. Green-hazel eyes. She was eighteen and she walked like the floor was in on a joke. The skirt moved when she moved. She had not given it a slip. She had not given it anything.

Wren did not start with the program. She had a page already open.

“Miss Donnelly. You’re the two o’clock. The last girl is on the sheet. You’re not. Dress off. You can talk while you do it. I suspect you will anyway.”

Bridget grinned as if that had been a compliment and reached behind her own neck for the first strap. The clinic tile was cold. The glass wall held three shapes she refused to study. She looked at Wren’s hands instead, washed, waiting, no clipboard for a moment.

“Do they always watch?”

“When they want the number,” Wren said. “Strap.”

The first strap slithered. The second. The tie at her chest was theater; Bridget pulled it and the bodice loosened and the dress came down her body in one long floral slide. Real chest, not a small one, freckles scattered down onto the upper curves. Athletic seat. Strong thighs. A waist that only showed when the dress had been tight, and now was just there. She stepped out of the puddle of yellow and orange and hooked it with a finger, careless, and the hanger took it because Wren pointed.

“Table. On your back. Feet up. I need access, not a pose.”

Bridget laughed under her breath and then did it, copper strands sticking to her mouth. The paper crackled. Her knees came up. Wren set a light and sat on the stool between them as if this were a throat exam.

“Manual baseline,” Wren said. “No tool. My hand. I want to see whether you can stay on a table when something starts. The note from faculty is that you don’t stay anywhere. Prove them wrong or don’t. Either way I write it down.”

“I’ll stay.”

“Mm.”

Wren’s palm settled on Bridget’s inner thigh first, high, a warm weight that was not yet the test. Bridget’s muscle jumped. Freckled skin. Heat. Wren did not comment on the jump. She slid inward and found Bridget already slick, and the sound Bridget made then was small only because she bit it in half.

“That’s early,” Wren said. “Was it the dress or the walk.”

“The dress.” Bridget’s voice had gone lower. “And you looking. And them. I don’t— I don’t do still.”

“I noticed.” Wren’s fingers opened her with an ease that felt practiced and unsentimental, two fingers pressing in while the heel of her hand rested over the swollen peak, not rubbing yet, just present. Bridget’s hips lifted an inch off the paper. Wren’s other hand landed on the front of Bridget’s hip and put her back down.

“There. That’s the assignment. You stay down. I work. You may get loud. I would rather you didn’t start at the ceiling.”

Bridget nodded, fierce, and then Wren began.

It was not a kind rhythm and it was not a mean one. It was counting dressed up as a doctor’s curiosity: in, press, a slow curl that found the place that made Bridget’s athletic thighs shake, a pause, again. The heel of Wren’s hand finally moved, a firm circle on the clit that matched the curl inside, and Bridget’s mouth opened on a sound she swallowed so hard her throat clicked.

“Don’t swallow it if it hurts you,” Wren said. “Do swallow it if you can. I need to know which kind of loud you are. School closets have doors. Tables don’t.”

“I can—” Bridget’s hips fought the pinning hand and lost, then fought again. Her real chest moved when she breathed, nipples tight, freckled tops rising. “I can be quiet.”

Wren added a third finger because there was room and because Bridget’s body had asked for it without asking. The stretch pulled a noise out of her that was not quiet. It hit the glass. One of the shapes behind the shine went still.

“That,” Wren said, mild, “is not quiet. Again.”

She did not speed up. She deepened. Bridget’s hands found the edges of the table and the paper tore a little under her heel. Copper hair came fully down on one side. She tried to keep her seat on the roll and her seat would not negotiate. Every curl lifted her. Every circle of Wren’s palm put her down wrong, wet, sloppy with wanting, the kind of wet that made Wren’s wrist gleam.

“Talk,” Wren said.

“What.”

“Tell me what the hand is doing so I know you’re in the room.”

Bridget laughed once, wrecked. “It’s— inside. And on me. It’s like you’re winding something. I keep trying to give it to you faster and you won’t let me lift.”

“Correct.” Wren’s thumb replaced the heel of her hand for a tighter, meaner circle. “A teacher who takes you somewhere with a door is going to need this information. You buck. You make noise. You get wet before I have even been unkind. Hold still through the next set or don’t. I’m not stopping to wait for manners.”

Bridget did not hold still. Her hips rolled in short helpless beats against Wren’s pinning palm, athletic, greedy, the seat of her coming off the table in little lifts she could not stop. Sound kept breaking from her: bitten-off at first, then not. A moan she tried to turn into a breath. A higher one she did not try. Wren’s fingers worked her through it, exact, a doctor following a reflex.

“Louder than Miss Hale’s file,” Wren said, almost to the clipboard, almost to the glass. “Hips won’t park. That’s the finding. Stay with my hand, Miss Donnelly. I’m taking you all the way on this. No other instrument. If you finish on fingers, they know what you are in a closet.”

“Please—” It was not stop. It was please keep. Bridget’s green eyes had gone wet and furious with concentration. “I can’t— I can’t not move.”

“I know.”

Wren curled hard and did not tease the last inch. Bridget came with her whole body, a sharp loud cry she would have been ashamed of in a hallway and could not swallow in time. Her thighs clamped on Wren’s forearm and then flew open again. She bucked through it, seat slapping the paper, chest shaking, freckles lost in flush. Wren rode the spasm with her fingers and did not look away from Bridget’s mouth, which had gone slack and noisy and honest.

When it eased, Wren slipped out and reached for gauze as if this were bloodwork. Bridget lay there panting, copper hair a wreck, sundress a bright heap on the hook, a wet mark on the paper that Wren flipped over without comment.

“Manual complete. Full finish. Volume high. Elevation of the pelvis throughout. Note for faculty: do not expect a quiet room.” Wren glanced at the glass, then at Bridget. “You can sit. Your legs will feel used. That’s the point of a baseline.”

Bridget sat up on her elbows. Her chest was still moving. She looked like she might apologize and then she didn’t.

“I told you I’d stay.”

“You didn’t,” Wren said, and there was no sting in it, only ink. “Hook. The dress ties in front. You knew that when you chose it. Next time wear something that doesn’t argue with a breeze. Go on. You’ll hear the three o’clock bell if you don’t dawdle.”

Bridget stood. The athletic lines of her took the weight unevenly for a second. She stepped into the sundress and pulled the straps up and tied the bow between

her breasts with fingers that were not quite clever yet. The skirt clung where she was still wet. She did not look at the glass this time. She looked at Wren’s mouth, at the mole, at the kindness that had never once made the hand kinder.

“Same time tomorrow if they want me back?”

“If they want you back, you’ll get a slip. Not a time you invent.” Wren was already writing. “Shoes, Miss Donnelly. Ashcombe isn’t a beach.”

Bridget found her sandals, laughed once more because her body was still ringing and laughter was what it knew to do, and opened the clinic door on a cloister full of ordinary seniors. The floral dress went down the hall like a warning. Behind the one-way glass nobody had spoken. On Wren’s page the word *loud* sat beside a time, and the table paper would need changing before the next candidate sat down.

Chapter 3

The wand was already on.

Amy Fonté heard it through the clinic door before she heard her name: a low, expensive hum, not a toy-aisle buzz. She stood in the corridor in a black ribbed tank and worn jeans, thick chestnut-brown hair doing what it wanted, fair cheeks already pink from the stairs. Eighteen. Medium chest making the tank honest. Soft hips. A full lower lip she kept biting without noticing.

Wren opened the door with the thing still in her hand, running it once against the inside of her own wrist as if checking a thermometer.

“Miss Fonté. Come in. That’s the instrument. You can look at it while you undress. I’m not going to hide it in a drawer and then surprise you.”

Amy stepped in. The hum filled the small room. Glass on the far wall, live, three dark shapes. She did not ask. She reached for the hem of the tank.

“Slower,” Wren said. “I want the flush on record before the tool ever touches you. You’re already pink. Is that stairs or anticipation.”

“Both.” Amy’s voice sat low for her age. She drew the tank up. Medium, round breasts, nipples already tight against the sudden air, a flush starting at her throat and heading south. She dropped the tank on the hook. The jeans took a shove at the hips; she had nothing under them. Soft hips, strong smooth legs, dark hair at the juncture she did not try to hide. The wand’s pitch seemed to change just because she was naked in front of it.

Wren killed the switch. The silence was worse.

“On your feet first. Back to the table, hands behind you. I apply it. You don’t take it from me and help. Faculty who like devices need a time that isn’t contaminated by a girl chasing her own finish.”

Amy turned, sat her seat against the edge of the table without hopping up, and laced her fingers at the small of her back. The pose pushed her chest forward. Wren noticed and did not say pretty. She said,

“Good. That’s a body that answers from the hips. I read the last two files. You’re not a chest case and you’re not a volume case. You’re a conduction case. Vibration on the clitoris, steady, one setting until I change it. I log onset, peak, and whether you try to take over the angle. Ready.”

“Yes, Dr. Ellison.”

Wren thumbed the wand on at a mid setting. The note came back, denser up close. She did not start on the obvious place. She set the rounded head against the inside of Amy’s left knee, then higher, a line of buzz walking up the smooth

thigh, and Amy’s mouth opened on a breath that had sound in it.

“Stay behind your hands.”

“I’m trying.”

The head kissed the soft hinge where thigh became hip. Amy’s knees wanted to close. Wren’s free hand kept one knee where it was, not rough, not negotiable. Then the wand settled directly on Amy’s clit, a firm, even press, and Amy’s whole pelvis tried to have an opinion.

“Onset is immediate,” Wren said, as if Amy were a graph. “Don’t roll to get more. More is my job.”

Amy’s hazel eyes went darker. The flush had reached her breasts; the medium curves looked warmer, lived-in. Hair stuck to her lip. She kept her hands behind her and the effort of that made her stomach shake. The vibration was not kind and was not a tease. It was a held note. It went into the clit and then into the hips and then up into her teeth.

“Talk.”

“It’s— thick,” Amy said. “Not sharp. It sits. I want to tip forward.”

“Don’t. If you tip, I take it off and we start the clock again. Someone behind that glass is going to want this number for toys in a classroom. I will not give them a sloppy time.”

Amy made a noise that was almost a laugh and then was not. Wren changed nothing for a long count. The wand hummed. A period bell tried the corridor and failed to get in. Amy’s thighs trembled. Wetness painted the head of the tool; Wren adjusted the press by a degree and Amy’s knees sagged.

“Up.” Wren waited until Amy locked her legs. “I’m going one setting higher. Same place. You will feel like you have to move. You may breathe loud. You may not take your hands apart to hold me there.”

The pitch climbed. Amy’s head tipped back. The undone hair swung. Her breasts moved with her breathing, not architectural, just full enough that the motion was its own fact. Wren watched the clit under the cap of the wand, the way Amy’s hips kept offering a circle and then remembering the rule and going still, still, still—and failing by half an inch.

“You’re chasing,” Wren said quietly. “Stop chasing. Let it arrive.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Yes you do. You’re just used to helping. This program isn’t going to let you run the toy. A teacher will. Hold.”

Amy held. The shake moved into her low belly. She stared at the mole beside Wren’s mouth because looking down at the wand made her want to grab it. Wren’s clinic voice got softer and more exact, which was not comfort.

“There. That’s the plateau. You’re glossy. Setting is high-mid. Time is on my watch, not yours. When you finish I want you to finish without folding in half. Can you do that.”

“I don’t— maybe—”

Wren pressed a fraction firmer and stayed. Amy came standing, a low broken sound through her teeth, hips jerking in the circle she had been denied and then denied again while the wand kept its single stupid note. She did not take her hands from behind her back. She folded a little anyway, enough that her hair curtained her face, enough that Wren had to follow with the tool so the contact never broke through the first wave or the second. Amy’s fair skin had gone rose from cheek to chest. The jeans on the hook looked like they belonged to a different afternoon.

Wren switched the wand off. The quiet rushed in. Amy’s clit throbbed in the sudden absence as if the hum had left a ghost.

“Conduction excellent. Finish on device alone, standing, hands kept. Peak at—” Wren turned her wrist, wrote. “That’s the number they wanted. Sit before you drop.”

Amy sat. The paper was a shock under a soaked seat. She laughed once, helpless, and pushed hair out of her mouth.

“I can hear it. In my legs. Is that normal.”

“For you it will be.” Wren wiped the head of the wand with the same unhurried competence she used on her hands. “Tank first. The ribbed one will feel like a second device. That’s your problem on the walk back, not mine.”

Amy stood on used thighs and pulled the black tank down over flushed breasts. The cotton scraped. She swore under her breath without using anything uglier than breath, then worked the jeans up. The seam seated itself on a clit that had not gotten the message that the test was over.

At the door she paused, palm on the frame, and glanced at the glass without lifting her chin.

“Whoever wanted the number,” she said, not quite to Wren, “they can have it. I’m going to feel that through dinner.”

Wren’s mouth moved, almost a smile, the mole like a period.

“Good. Then the baseline did its work. Next.”

Amy went out into Ashcombe’s ordinary noise with the wand’s pitch still living in her hips, and the clipboard behind her carried a time that was not sloppy. The three shapes in the glass had not spoken. One of them, Amy thought, had just learned how little of her needed to be touched if the tool was honest.

Chapter 4

Nora Shen did not fill the table.

Wren saw that before the pink shirt came off. Eighteen, compact, short through the legs, black hair in a clean center part, one side tucked behind an ear as if she had done it in the cloister and then forgotten. Fair-warm skin. A mouth that looked ready to laugh and did not. She stood with her toes together on the tile and waited to be told the next small thing.

“Miss Shen. Shirt.”

Nora crossed her arms and lifted the pale pink tee. Small high breasts, neat, almost shy of the air. She folded the shirt once, twice, and only then put it on the hook. The jeans took longer because her hands were careful. Light denim. Nothing underneath. When she was bare she looked even more like a person the furniture had been built around someone else for.

The glass held its three watchers. Nora glanced that way the way a person glances at a window they have been told is not a window, and then she looked at the tray.

A cup. Clear. A squeeze-bulb. Medical, not pretty.

“Suction,” Wren said. “It seals. It pulls. I am going to put it on you and I am going to let it work until I have a color change and a finish, or until I have a stall I can write. You may be quiet. You look like you will be. If something happens in your head, you can give me one sentence. Not a speech.”

Nora nodded.

“On the table. You can lie on your side if the length bothers you. You’re allowed to look small. You are small.”

Nora climbed up. The paper made a sound that seemed too big. She lay on her side first, then, at Wren’s two fingers on her knee, rolled onto her back and let her compact legs fall open. The cup looked oversized against her. Wren warmed the rim in her palm.

“This will feel like a mouth that does not get tired,” Wren said. “It is not a mouth. Don’t confuse the two. Breathe.”

The rim kissed Nora’s clit. Cool, then the first squeeze of the bulb, a wet inward tug that sealed with a soft, obscene little pop. Nora’s face tried not to change. The round cheek stayed a round cheek. Only her dark eyes widened, and a wash of pink started at her throat and climbed.

Wren squeezed again. The cup took more of her, drawing the small peak up into the clear chamber until it looked swollen and darker, displayed. Nora’s fingers

found the paper and stayed polite.

“Color already,” Wren said. “Good seal. You don’t take up the table and you still give me a reading. That’s efficient. Stay quiet if that’s what your body does. Don’t lock your jaw. I want to see the mouth even if you don’t use it.”

Nora unlocked her jaw. A breath got out. Almost a laugh, canceled. The bulb ticked in Wren’s hand. Each draw made the cup tug in a slow pulse, not vibration, not fingers, a drinking. Nora’s small chest barely moved and then moved too fast. Her tucked hair came loose and black silk spilled over the paper.

Wren rested two fingers on Nora’s inner thigh, not to rub, only to feel the tremor.

“You’re holding a sound,” Wren said. “You can keep holding it. I am going to increase the draw. Faculty who want a quiet girl in a working classroom need to know whether quiet means empty or whether quiet means full. I think you’re full. Prove it without proving it.”

The next squeeze made Nora’s heels tick. Pink deepened across her cheekbones, down the narrow sternum, into the small breasts that had almost nothing to blush with and blushed anyway. Inside the cup her clit looked glossy and gathered, a little stolen thing. Wren tilted the chamber so the glass on the wall could see that too.

Nora’s lips parted. Nothing came out.

“Good,” Wren murmured. “That’s a usable hush. A teacher could keep a lesson over you. I’m going to hold this seal through the peak. If you finish in the cup I log it as suction-only. If you whisper the sentence, I log that too. I don’t need a story.”

The bulb held. The pull became a single thick note. Nora’s compact body tried to curl around the cup and could not get there; Wren’s hand on her hip kept her open and short and exact on the paper. A period bell sounded far away, ordinary Ashcombe, and Nora’s eyes shone as if the bell had happened inside the plastic.

She came without volume.

The shake was all inside, then in the belly, then in the thin thighs that closed on Wren’s wrist and opened again because the cup would not allow a secret. Pink everywhere. The cute face broke only at the mouth, and what came out was not a moan. It was a whisper, wrecked and precise, aimed at Wren’s mole:

“The cup is taking the afternoon out of me. Tell them the clock went with it.”

Wren’s hand paused on the bulb.

Then she released the seal. The pop was soft. Nora jerked as blood returned to the drawn peak, a sweet hurt that made her eyes wet without making her loud. Wren set the cup in a basin and wrote, not looking away from Nora’s face for a

second longer than the clipboard required.

“Suction complete. Finish in-chamber. Volume negligible. One utterance, not repeatable as data, logged as present.” Wren’s voice stayed clinic. “You can sit up. The pink will last. Don’t be alarmed if the next class feels like it is missing an hour. That’s vascular. That’s also you.”

Nora sat. She was still tiny on the table. Black hair stuck to her lip. She tucked it behind her ear again, an old habit finding a new body, and looked at the empty cup as if it might still have the afternoon in it.

“I didn’t mean to say that.”

“I asked for one sentence. You gave me one. Shirt.”

The pink tee scraped over small, still-sensitive breasts. The jeans were worse. Nora stood in them like someone who had borrowed time and had to walk it back to a cloister. At the door she hesitated, not for a question about the program, only because her legs had not agreed to the length of the hall.

“The glass heard it,” Wren said. “That’s sufficient. Go, Miss Shen. Don’t run. You don’t have the stride for running today.”

Nora went. Quiet shoes. Quiet shoulders. Behind her the tray ticked as the cup dried, and the three shapes in the one-way glass had a sentence they had not expected to take home. On the paper Wren underlined *hush* and, after a moment, left the clock remark where it was, unscientific and true.

Chapter 5

Mina Santos had a face that made the clinic feel smaller.

She came in wearing a washed grey tee that barely troubled her chest and white shorts with a little bow at the hip, near-black hair falling long and straight, warm light-medium skin, a full mouth that looked like it knew more than an eighteen-year-old should admit. Petite. Narrow shoulders. Lean legs. Dark almond eyes that found Wren first and the glass second.

Wren did not pick up the clipboard right away.

She stood with her back almost to the one-way wall, white coat open over the navy dress, dark-blonde hair in that low clip, the small mole beside her mouth catching the light when she spoke. Twenty-seven. Washed hands, and she washed them again while Mina watched, a beat longer than soap required.

“That’s not a window,” Wren said. She did not turn to it. She tipped her chin the smallest degree, and the glass behind her held three shapes like a held breath. “From your side it is a dull mirror. From theirs it is this room. They can see where I stand. They can see your face. They cannot hear a whisper if you keep it against my skin. I am supposed to tell every candidate that. I am telling you because your face is the instrument today, and they came to look at it.”

Mina’s gaze went over Wren’s shoulder, then came back to the mole, to the exact mouth.

“Do you forget they’re there.”

Wren’s throat moved. Professional. Not quite armored.

“I remember. That’s the job. Tee off, Miss Santos. Shorts too. Hook. I’m not giving you a gown to hide in.”

Mina crossed her arms and drew the grey shirt up. Small high breasts, barely a handful, nipples already tight in the cool. The shorts slipped when she thumbed the bow. Lean legs, a slim waist, the kind of body people underestimated until they looked at the mouth. She hung the clothes. Bare feet. She did not cover herself. She stood close enough to Wren that the soap smell was personal.

Wren’s eyes dropped to Mina’s mouth and stayed a second too long. Then she remembered the glass and the file and the coat.

“Sit on the end. Not back. I need your face at my height when I start, and I need it in the glass when I finish. Hands on the edge. You don’t push my head. You don’t return the favor unless I say. Today I am the instrument.”

Mina sat. The table made her even more petite. Her knees opened because Wren stepped between them, navy dress against bare thighs, coat brushing Mina’s

skin. Up close Wren was not only kind. There was a pulse in her throat. A faint color at the cheek that the clip could not explain.

“Mouth baseline,” Wren said, quieter. “No tool. No cup. No current. I use my mouth on you until I have a finish I can write, or until I have to stop because I have stopped being useful as a doctor. I would prefer the first. You will look at me. If you look at the glass I will bring you back.”

“All right.”

Wren’s hands settled on Mina’s lean thighs, thumbs stroking once, an adjustment that was not strictly necessary. She bent. Fair hair and the navy collar. The first touch was not on the obvious place. Wren kissed the inside of Mina’s knee, then higher, a line of heat up warm skin, and Mina’s full mouth opened on a sound she tried to keep small.

“That’s your face starting,” Wren murmured against her. “Keep it. They can have the profile. I want the front.”

Then Wren’s mouth found her.

Not a peck. A doctor’s patience turned into something that had chemistry in it: a slow lick through already-slick folds, a pause on the clit, a seal of lips that made Mina’s small breasts lift on a stolen breath. Wren made a noise of her own, very low, as if the taste had arrived without permission. Mina felt it. Mina’s hands whitened on the table edge.

“Dr. Ellison—”

“Stay.” Wren said it into her, which was not how she had said stay to anyone else. Then she settled in.

Mina’s face did the work the chest could not. Color over the cheekbones. Dark eyes going darker. The full mouth slack, then bitten, then slack again. Wren looked up while she licked, light eyes under the clip, and the look was professional in the way a held note is still a note. Mina could see the mole, the wet shine on Wren’s lower lip, the fact that Wren’s ears had gone pink.

The glass watched a blonde doctor on her knees in a white coat with a petite dark-haired girl open around her mouth. Wren knew that. She did not stop. She drew Mina’s clit between her lips and sucked in a rhythm that had a clock and also had want in it, and Mina’s lean legs began to shake against Wren’s shoulders.

“You can take it,” Wren said, lifting just enough to speak, breath on wet skin. “You can also give. That’s in the room. I can feel you wanting to put your hands in my hair. Don’t. If I let you give today I will not write a clean page.”

Mina’s fingers twitched. She left them on the edge. Her hips tipped forward anyway, a small helpless offer, and Wren met it with her mouth as if the offer had been an order she wanted. Another sound escaped Wren, unclipboarded. Mina heard it and almost came from that alone.

“Look at me.”

Mina looked. Wren’s mouth shone. The kindness in her face had gone thin over something hotter. She went back down. Tongue flat, then pointed, then a suck that made Mina’s head fall back until Wren’s hand climbed, two fingers under Mina’s chin, and brought the face forward again so the glass and Wren both got it.

“That’s the event,” Wren whispered, wrecked-clinic. “Not the chest. This. A teacher who wants a girl who gives is going to see what you look like when you receive. Hold.”

Mina held. Her small nipples were tight enough to ache. Warm skin everywhere Wren’s coat dragged. The lick went filthy without a filthy word, precise and hungry, and Mina’s mouth shaped nothing and then a plea that was only Wren’s name.

She came on Wren’s tongue.

It ran up through her in a long, face-first wave, almond eyes wet, full mouth open, a sound that was not quiet and was not Bridget-loud, just broken and pretty. Her lean thighs closed on Wren’s ears and opened because Wren would not be denied the last of it. Wren stayed through the shake, drinking, and for one unprofessional second her hand on Mina’s waist squeezed as if she had forgotten the three shapes in the glass.

Then Wren pulled off. She stayed on her knees a breath longer than data required. Her mouth was wet. Her clip had slipped. She stood, turned half away, and found gauze and composure in that order.

“Mouth complete,” she said to the board, and her voice had to be rebuilt. “Finish on oral only. Facial response primary. Candidate attempted to reciprocate and was stopped. Note: chemistry present. Logged as observer-relevant.”

Mina sat on the end of the table, small breasts rising, hair stuck to her lip, looking like the kind of girl who could have put Wren on her back if the glass had been a wall.

“You felt it too.”

Wren met her eyes. The mole made the almost-smile dangerous.

“I am still the doctor in the room, Miss Santos. Shirt. The shorts tie. You knew that.” She washed her hands again, twice. “If they assign you to someone who

likes a mouth, they have the picture. If they assign you to me again, they will have to send a different instrument. I used the one I had.”

Mina dressed. The grey tee fell over nothing and still felt like a hand. The white shorts clung. At the door she paused, close enough that Wren would have had to step back to stay only a physician.

She did not kiss her. She let the almost-kiss hang, which was worse.

“They saw your ears turn pink,” Mina said, very softly.

Wren looked at the glass at last, a clean professional glance that fooled no one who had been on the floor.

“Good. Then the baseline is complete. Next.”

Mina went out into the cloister with Wren’s mouth still living on her and her own unused mouth hungry, and the three watchers had a file that would not read as cold no matter how neatly Wren wrote it. Behind her the doctor stood with washed hands that were not quite steady, and the one-way glass kept its secret only in one direction.

Chapter 6

Hana Park unbuttoned the oxford as if it were a citation.

White shirt, sleeves already rolled. Dark jeans. Thin-rim glasses. Long black hair tucked behind both ears. Eighteen, Korean, the inward face of a girl who filed papers for pleasure. Slim through the ribs. Fine-boned. A chest that did not announce itself. She hung the shirt. She pushed the jeans down. Then the mistake showed: a scrap of pale cotton, a tiny bow, cute in the way a footnote is cute when it does not belong on the page.

Wren looked at it the way she looked at a wrong time on a chart.

“No.”

Hana’s hands hovered. Heat crawled up under the glasses. She had read the slip twice in the dorm and still put the bow on, a private negotiation with tile she had not admitted to herself.

“I thought— for walking over—”

“Every candidate was told. Nothing under the clothes. I don’t have time for this.” Wren opened a drawer, found scissors, and snapped them once in the air so Hana would understand they were not a metaphor. “Stand still. Glasses stay on. Don’t waste my time.”

The blades were cold. Wren hooked the waistband, pinched the cotton away from Hana’s skin, and cut. One side. The other. The bow died without ceremony. Wren peeled the ruined pair off Hana’s hips and dropped it in the trash with a sound like a period.

Hana felt the air take the place the cotton had been. Her nipples drew in, small and obvious now that there was no shirt to argue with. She wanted, stupidly, to say thank you for the correction. The want shocked her. She closed her mouth.

“On the table. Sit. Knees out. You will not study your way around this one, Miss Park. The last five girls arrived as instructed. You arrived with a bow.”

Hana sat. The table made her look like a note someone had misplaced. Behind Wren the one- way glass held three shapes. Hana tried to look at the unit on the tray instead: a small box, two leads, four pale pads. Her mind reached for vocabulary and found none that would cover the trash can.

Wren washed her hands as if the panties had been an insult to soap.

“This is a TENS unit,” she said, and her voice had lost the kindness she had spent on other afternoons. “Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation. It does not vibrate. It does not suck. It does not use my mouth. It talks to your nerves in a language your textbooks will not translate. I place pads here—” the inner left

thigh, high, a cool kiss of adhesive “—and here.” Inner right. Hana’s muscle jumped. Wren did not pause. “And here.” Mons, one pad to the left of the peak, one to the right, framing what Hana had tried to keep academic. “Current will jump the gap. It will find the clitoris whether you name it or not. Pulse width is how long each bite lasts. Frequency is how often the bite arrives. Intensity is how little I think of your dignity while it happens.”

Hana’s mouth opened. A textbook sentence lined up and fell apart.

She is angry with me. I did this. I should hate the scissors.

What she felt instead was a low, bewildered yes.

“You wanted to understand it,” Wren said. “Understand this. At a low setting it is a tapping you will try to count. At a mid setting it is a cramp that lives in the peak and pretends to be pleasure. At the setting I am going to use on a girl who wore underwear to a nude prequalifier, it is a promise with teeth. It will not ask if you have a paper due. It will not care that your glasses are expensive. It will make a filing clerk into a reading. Don’t waste my time by telling me the mechanism. I own the mechanism.”

Hana’s fingers curled in the paper. She could feel each pad as a claim. Gratefulness sat in her throat like a swallowed apology.

Wren held up the box so the glass could see the dials.

“I am going to turn it on at two. You will tell me what it is. If you say ‘interesting,’ I go to four. If you try to be a student, I go to six. If you come, I do not turn it off. You are the only candidate I am allowing more than one finish, because you arrived as if the rule were optional and I want the file to show what optional costs. Ready is not a question I am asking.”

The first pulse arrived like a fingertip flicked against the clit from inside the muscle.

Hana’s spine lifted. A thin sound. The glasses slipped a millimeter. Inside, she tried to sort it: not pain,something that borrowed her own nerves and used them against her.

“Name it,” Wren said.

“It’s— a tick. A tick with a— with a hook.”

“Wrong. It is me. Two is courtesy. Courtesy is over.”

Four.

The ticks became a stitch, sewing the pads together through Hana’s peak. Her wrists twisted in the paper. She tried to close her knees. Wren’s hand on one slim thigh made that a failed idea.

“You dressed like a girl who expected to be taken seriously,” Wren said, mild as a scalpel. “The bow was a thesis statement. It said: I know better than the instruction sheet. The current does not read theses. The current reads wet. You’re already shining on the pad. That’s faster than it should be for someone who came in here to be correct.”

The words landed lower than the pulse. Hana felt a gathering she did not have a name for yet —tight, bright, humiliating. *I am going to finish because she is scolding me.* The thought was so sideways she almost shook her head at herself. Wren saw the shake, saw the wetness jump on the pad, and her voice went colder on purpose.

“Oh,” Wren said. “Not the current. That. You almost spent yourself on being told you were wrong. Don’t look away. I am going to say it again so we both know what you are.” She tipped the box a degree, nothing more. “You ignored a written rule, you put a bow on it, and you liked being cut out of it. Stay on the number while I finish the sentence. You are not clever this afternoon. You are a girl on a table who gets wet when a doctor is disappointed.”

Hana broke.

It was unmistakable. Her belly cinched hard. The peak under the pads seized in a bright, shamed flutter she could feel as a finish, not a flinch—wet pulsing against adhesive, breath punched out of her, a sound she did not choose. Her thighs shook around Wren’s hand. Behind the lenses her eyes went wide with the stupid surprise of it: *that was coming. I came from that.*

Wren did not drop the dial.

“There. That was one. Not a twitch. A finish. You clenched, you wet the pad, and you looked astonished that language could do what you thought only a device was for.” Wren leaned in so the mole was a fact Hana had to see. “Don’t look proud. That was an accident you had because you like being dressed down. Most girls need the body first. You needed the remark. How disappointing for anyone who thought you were cerebral.”

Six.

The pulse widened. It was no longer a tap. It was a bite that arrived, stayed, left, arrived again. Hana’s hips tried to escape the table and found only more paper. Inside she was still catching up to the first one, dizzy with the gratitude she could not put down. *She saw me. She said it out loud. Please keep saying it.* The current made the please physical.

“Please—”

“Please is not a setting.” Wren’s mouth almost smiled. “A teacher who takes you over a lap is going to want a girl who goes inward. You go inward. That is not a

virtue. That is a socket. I am plugging the school into it. You will come when I describe you, and you will come when I increase the width, and you will come when I tell the glass you wasted adhesive on a bow. If you try to hold one back I will call it by its name while it happens.”

Hana shook her head and the second finish took her anyway—sharper, longer, a hard flutter that made her lose the edge of the table for a second. She heard herself cry out. The left lens fogged. She knew this one as it rolled through: not almost, not maybe. Emptying. Her own pulse trying to match the box and failing.

Wren pushed the glasses back onto the bridge of Hana’s nose with one clean finger. “Leave them. I want them to record this. Two. You finish like a girl who thought she was going to take notes. There are no notes. There is only pulse width. And my mouth, which you are using as a switch.”

She thumbed the width higher. The bite lengthened. Each pulse sat on the peak long enough to be mistaken for a mouth, then vanished long enough to make Hana chase it with a roll of her hips she would have denied in any other room. Interior chatter tried to return— *frequency, fibers, I can still name this*—and drowned.

“Look at the glass,” Wren said. “They can see the pads. They can see there is not much chest to hide behind. They can see a serious face coming apart because electricity does not care that you are good at school. You are not a candidate this afternoon. You are a circuit that forgot the dress code.”

Hana looked. The three shapes were very still. Shame and thanks tangled until she could not tell them apart. The third finish hit while she was still looking: a helpless upward jerk, wrists lifting as if she could pull the current out by the leads, a high sound she bit too late. She felt the wet leave her in pulses she could count. *Three. She will say three. I want her to say three.*

“Three,” Wren said. “Don’t waste my time pretending that was the last useful one. Your file is going to read *multiple, speech-assisted*. That is not a compliment. That is a warning for whoever gets you in an office. You will go over a lap and come from being told you misread the assignment. You already proved it. I am only being thorough.”

Eight.

Hana sobbed air. The current was a bright, ugly gift now, too fast to count. It lived in the gap between the mons pads and ran down the inner thighs until her legs trembled in time. Wren’s cruelties came in the holes between pulses, timed like a fighter who knew the rib.

“The other girls arrived bare under their clothes because they listened.”

Pulse.

“You brought a bow to a baseline as if cuteness were a petition.”

Pulse.

“I cut it off. It’s in the bin. It will still be in the bin when you walk back to class without a finish left in you.”

Pulse.

Hana felt the fourth one standing up in her, huge and humiliating, and Wren saw the glaze and struck for it.

“You are grateful I did it. Say it is not true and I will watch you spend yourself anyway.”

“I’m—” Hana’s voice cracked. “I didn’t mean to like it.”

“That is not a denial.” Wren’s intensity held. “Come.”

Hana did, messy and obvious, belly working, a broken sound, the pads slipping a fraction on slick skin. She felt emptied and still hungry for the next sentence. Confusion sat next to the pleasure like a second girl on the table: *this is not how I am. This is exactly how I am.* “Four. Still not off.” Wren dropped the intensity half a mark, which was worse than raising it; Hana’s body lunged after the missing teeth. “You thought less would be mercy. Less is a leash. I am not asking you to sit up. I am telling the room that a girl this slim, this careful, this sure she was the academic one, finishes on language. Listen.”

She let the current idle in a mean mid-pulse and spoke into Hana’s fogged lenses.

“You are not special because you understood the machine. You are special because you didn’t listen, and now the machine understands you. The pads will leave squares on your thighs. You will sit in class on those squares. Every time a chair touches them you will remember that I said don’t waste my time, and you will get wet in a lecture you are supposed to be good at. That is the baseline. Not your IQ. The squares. The bow in the bin. The fact that you thanked me with your body five times if you give me this last one.”

Hana’s fifth came on *thanked me*, a long inward collapse she could not mistake for anything else. Glasses crooked. Wren straightened them as if that, too, were part of the punishment. The box kept ticking. Wren rode the aftershocks until Hana’s hands opened on the paper, empty, then killed the unit.

Silence rushed the room. The pads still clung. Hana twitched in the ghost of the pulse. Inside she was raw and oddly steady: scolded, seen, finished, and—worse—glad.

Wren peeled the pads off one by one, not gentle, not theatrical, efficient. Pink rectangles. She dropped the used pads beside the cut cotton in the trash.

“Current complete. Five finishes. Speech-responsive. Rule violation noted. Glasses remained on.” She wrote without looking kind. “Off the table. Oxford first. The jeans will hurt. That is not my problem. Next time you are told to arrive bare, you arrive bare. I don’t cut fabric for sport. I cut it because you stole minutes from a schedule that did not include a bow.”

Hana stood on used legs. The oxford scraped over a chest that felt too awake for its size. The dark jeans seated themselves on a clit that still thought the box was speaking. She hooked her hair behind both ears with shaking fingers and could not make the gesture look like filing. The gratitude was still there, quiet and appalling. She did not say it. Wren had already written it down.

At the door Wren said, without raising her voice,

“Don’t thank me. Don’t apologize. Don’t invent a reason you wore them. The glass has the number. You have the squares. Go, Miss Park. Ashcombe is still in session, and you are late for pretending you are only a student.”

Hana went. The trash held a bow and four pads. Behind the one-way glass nobody spoke. On the clipboard Wren underlined *multiple* twice, and the table paper would have to be changed before anyone else sat down on what Hana had left there.

Chapter 7 — Assignments

They were taken to the room on the living side of the glass.

Not the clinic. A long table, six chairs nobody used, afternoon light, a period bell still dying in the plaster. Wren stood with them only long enough to say they had all passed, which landed in the body before it landed as news. Then the door opened and the three shapes from the glass came in with faces and hands and the particular attention of people who had already seen too much.

Helen Ward first, watch outward. Mara Quinn with her hair down. June Rhee last, cream blouse, the still mouth that had not spoken through six mornings and was going to speak now.

Helen thanked Wren as if she were dismissing a colleague from a meeting that had gone well.

“We have the files. We have them. Thank you, Doctor.”

Wren looked at the six of them one more time, the mole beside her mouth giving away nothing, and left. The clinic smell went with her. What remained was school, and three teachers who had not come here to be polite.

June set a folder down and did not open it.

“You placed,” she said. “That is not the same as being assigned. We watched you. Paper forgets. We are going to look again. Clothes off. Same rule as the other room. If that feels like theater, it isn’t. We are matching what we wrote down to what is standing here.”

Nobody asked whether they had a choice. The passing had already implied the rest.

Lila Hale pulled the pale blue knit up and over her hair and the room changed the way it had changed in the clinic: the high, independent chest arriving first, the drawn waist after, long legs, the habit of standing as if someone had arranged her. She folded nothing. She let the knit fall on a chair.

Bridget Donnelly dragged the Ashcombe tee off in one motion, green letters inside-out, then the denim skirt, and she was already shifting her weight, freckled, a real chest, thighs that had not learned how to wait. The tee hit the chair like a dropped bag.

Amy Fonté unbuttoned the rust blouse without hurrying and stepped out of her jeans, flush already living in her throat, medium breasts, the soft hips Wren’s wand had timed. She looked at Helen’s watch and then away from it.

Nora Shen took off the white collar as carefully as she had folded a pink shirt in another room. Compact. Short through the legs. Small high chest. Black hair

tucked once, an old habit with no clothing left to justify it.

Mina Santos let the black dress go down her warm skin and stood in the face that had made Wren's ears go pink. Small high breasts that did not try to compete with her mouth. Lean legs. She looked at Mara as if looking were already a kind of offer.

Hana Park worked out of the grey cardigan and the camisole underneath it and left the glasses on. Slim. Fine-boned. A chest that did not announce itself. Yesterday's squares were gone from the skin and not gone from her at all. She stood very straight, which fooled no one who had heard her come on being told she was wrong.

Six of them, bare, in a room that still had a clock.

June did not start with names. She walked to Lila first, because all three of them had been walking toward Lila in their heads since the first morning, and there was no point pretending otherwise.

Her hands found Lila's waist. She could span it. She did, not as a trick, as a check. Then she lifted the weight of one breast the way Wren had, and Lila's breath went audible. June held her there a moment longer than measurement required.

"I kept writing *visual*," June said, not to Lila, to the other two. "That isn't even the useful part. She stayed. Wren put her on a table and told her not to cover and she didn't cover. She finished on the chest alone and then she said thank you and walked back toward class. I have a seminar that does not stop because I want something. I need a girl who will go where I put her and remain there while I keep talking."

Mara made a sound that was not quite a laugh.

"You need a girl under a desk," she said. "Say that. Hale has not put her mouth on anyone. Santos has. I watched Santos try to give Ellison her hands. If your kink is use during a lesson, the evidence for giving is the dark-haired one."

Mina's lashes lowered. She did not look ashamed. She looked seen.

June's thumb moved once at Lila's waist, a small unprofessional stroke.

"I know what I watched in Santos. I also know what I would be looking at if Hale were in the well of my desk. The class would be looking at me. I would be looking down. That is not a small distinction." She glanced at Mina, honest. "I want her too. I'm not going to lie in front of her and say I don't. I can teach a mouth. I cannot teach a body to be this one."

Helen had not come closer yet. She stood with her arms folded, watch bright, looking at Lila the way she had looked at a wand.

“I timed Hale in my head,” Helen said. “Ellison was counting pinch-holds. I was counting how long I could keep a last ten minutes honest if that chest were in the room and I had my hands on it instead of a device. Fonté gave me a number I can use. Hale gave me a picture I would get stupid over. Those are different tools. I want both. I am not going to pretend I walked in here settled.”

Lila stood in their talk with June’s hand still on her. Heat moved through her without a second instrument. She was not quiet inside. She was listening to three women disagree about the use of her, and the listening was its own contact. She kept her arms at her sides because no one had told her she could cover, and because covering would have been a lie.

Mara left Lila to June’s hands and stopped in front of Hana.

She did not take the glasses off. She put two fingers under Hana’s chin and tipped her face up.

“Park broke a rule and came from being told she had,” Mara said, slower than the folder would have wanted. “That is not a personality. That is a switch I can reach in an office. I have a lap. I have a door that locks. I have no interest in running current through her in front of seniors. I have a great deal of interest in putting her over my knees and talking to her until she shakes.”

Hana’s throat moved. The gratitude from the clinic tried to stand up again, uninvited, and she hated how available it was. Mara saw it. Mara did not look away to spare her.

“I also want Hale in rope,” Mara went on, still holding Hana’s chin, as if Lila were a second sentence. “She holds a position. I could tie her to a chair and the chair would look expensive. And Santos—” She turned her head. Mina was already watching her mouth. “Santos I could restrain and she would still have something to work with. I am not choosing one hunger. I am staffing two, and I am telling you I could staff three if we were crueler than we have to be today.”

Bridget shifted, restless even in stillness. June’s attention finally left Lila long enough to put a palm on Bridget’s hip and keep her from making the line into a dance.

“Donnelly,” June said. “You promised Ellison you would stay on the table.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know. I was there.” June’s hand stayed. “I have a supply closet with a door that is not thick enough. I do not want that door during a lecture. I want it when I can afford you. You are not a desk. You are a risk I am willing to take in a smaller room.”

Bridget’s grin tried to happen and came out thinner. Being named a risk while naked in front of five other girls was not the same as being loud on paper. She

felt June’s hand like a decision landing on bone.

Helen moved at last. She stopped in front of Amy and let the watch do part of the looking. Her fingers rested at Amy’s hip, then higher, a brief unsentimental pass over the medium swell that had flushed in the clinic before the wand ever touched her.

“Fonté conducted,” Helen said. “She kept her hands behind her back. She told the glass the number was theirs. I can put a device on her in the last ten minutes of silent work and keep a count that belongs to me. That is the week I actually live, not the morning in the clinic.” She did not take her hand away. “I also watched Shen. The cup. The whisper. She will not spend a classroom. I can hold her at my desk and the seniors will think I lost my place on a page. I want that. I want Fonté’s number more. If someone is going to try to take Fonté, they should do it now, while I am still being reasonable.”

Amy’s mouth opened and closed. The wand was still in her hips if she thought about it. Hearing herself talked about as a week—an actual calendar, not a compliment—made the bareness worse and better.

Nora stood small enough that Helen had to look down. When Helen’s knuckles brushed the neat line of her chest, Nora’s face tried not to change and failed by a pink that had nothing to do with a cup. She did not speak. She had already spent her strange sentence. She kept the rest.

Silence sat in the room long enough to be real.

Then Mara looked back at Lila, at June’s hand still spanning that waist, and the fight that had been implied became spoken.

“You don’t get to keep Hale because she is pretty in a well,” Mara said. “I can use her. Ward can use her. You can use her. If we each walk out of here pretending she is only one person’s problem, we are lying to the girls and to each other.”

June did not take her hand off Lila.

“I’m not pretending she’s only mine in the world,” she said. “I am saying I can put her to work on Tuesday at ten while a senior section is reading, and I will not have to stop the reading. That is my claim. Not a monopoly on her body for the rest of term.”

Helen turned her watch, thinking.

“There is a second cut coming,” she said. “You all heard there would be more than a prequalifier. If Hale is still standing when we do the motion test—when we have them buck, no hands, in front of us—then none of us is deprived of her. We all three watch that. We all three get the thing we are pretending only one of us is allowed to want. The daily assignment is staffing. The later room is sight. I can live with staffing Fonté and Shen if I know I will see Hale’s hips work when it is

time to see them.”

Lila felt that land in her like a hand lower than June’s.

She understood the words. *Bucks her hips. No hands. In front of all three.* She understood that they were bargaining with a future version of her that had not happened yet, and that the bargain required her to survive another selection she had not been given a date for. The heat in her was not quiet. It was the particular heat of being the overlap: not the best at giving, not the loudest, not the one with a logged wand-time, the one they would not give up watching.

Mina’s voice surprised the room by existing.

“If Miss Rhee wants a mouth during class,” she said, careful, “I already know how to want that. I don’t need to be taught the wanting.”

It was not a bid against Lila. It was a fact, set down on the table like a spare key.

June looked at her for a long time.

“I know,” she said. “That is why this is ugly. I can use you. Quinn can use you. I am not going to take you and Hale and Donnelly and leave Quinn with whoever is left. That isn’t a program. That’s gluttony.”

Mara’s hand had gone to the back of Mina’s hair, not pulling, just present.

“Then give me Santos,” Mara said. “I can tie her and she can still work. I can take Park for the office. I will not take Donnelly; I don’t want to spend an hour covering a mouth I put over my lap. You can have the closet. Ward can have the count and the hush. You keep Hale for the desk because you will actually put her there instead of only looking at her, and we all keep the right to see her move if she makes the next room.”

Helen was quiet long enough that Amy’s flush deepened from the waiting.

“I’ll take Fonté and Shen,” Helen said. “I will not fight you for Hale today if the motion test is shared. I will fight you if that test disappears from the plan. I want it said in front of them so it cannot become vague later.”

June nodded once.

“Said. If Hale is still in the program when we run the stationary test, all three of us are in that room. No private viewing. No one of us claiming the first sight of her moving like that.”

Lila’s voice came out lower than she expected.

“What is the resident contract.”

Not a challenge. A girl with college sitting on her chest, asking the thing that had been waved like a flag.

Helen let go of Nora long enough to answer a person instead of a file.

“Ashcombe keeps cottages at the edge of campus for faculty,” she said. “One of us may take one of you to live there for the rest of term. You would still be a student. You would still come to class. You would not be a wife and you would not be a purchase. You would share a kitchen and a calendar with the teacher who signed you, and you would keep assisting after the building goes dark—the same work, closer. The school pays a stipend. Rent, and enough that the next year of college gets quieter. Only one contract. Not today. Today is who you stand beside in third period. The cottage goes to the girl who can still do the job when a real class is running, not the girl who had the most spectacular hour on Wren’s table.”

Hana’s glasses caught the light. Spectacular hour. She knew which file that sentence had glanced off. She felt, with a clarity that made her stomach drop, that five finishes in a clinic might be the opposite of a cottage. The knowledge hurt. It also settled something. She was not here to win housing. She was here because Mara’s hand had already chosen the shape of her afternoons.

Bridget said, “So we’re—assigned. Not kept.”

“Assigned,” June said. “Kept is later, and only for one of you, and only if the work holds. Until then you fetch chalk and you file and you stand in class, and you are also used. I am not going to find a softer verb. You have been naked in this room while we argued about which hunger you feed. That is the verb.”

She took her hand off Lila at last.

“Hale with me. Donnelly with me. Santos with Quinn. Park with Quinn. Fonté with Ward. Shen with Ward. Third period, senior seminar, Hale and Donnelly in my doorway. After lunch, Santos and Park in Quinn’s. Last block, Fonté and Shen with Ward. If you are in the wrong door, you will be sent to the right one in front of seniors, and I do not recommend the education.”

Mara released Mina’s hair and Hana’s chin as if putting tools back in a drawer she could open again tomorrow.

“I want it understood,” Mara said, looking at Lila, then at June, then at Helen, “that Hale is staffed, not buried. The later room exists.”

“It exists,” Helen said.

Lila stood there another second before anyone told them to dress, because no one had said dress yet, and the not-saying was part of it. She could feel where June’s hand had been. She could feel the future they had put on her hips without touching them. She was not a dwarf in a chart. She was the girl all three of them had wanted, given to the teacher who would hide her under a desk and promised, in front of her, to the other two as a body they would watch move if she lasted.

“Now you can dress,” June said.

They did, one garment at a time, the knit and the Ashcombe tee and the rust blouse and the collar and the black dress and the cardigan going back on over skin that had been handled and named and bargained. Nobody looked like a student yet. The corridor already sounded like one.

Helen closed her watch against her wrist.

“Go,” she said. “Ashcombe does not wait because we spent an afternoon deciding where to put our hands.”

They went, in pairs that had cost something to reach. Behind them the folder stayed closed. The argument had not needed paper. It had needed six girls standing still long enough for three teachers to tell the truth about what they had seen, and what they were still not willing to give up seeing.

Chapter 8 — June, Lila, under the desk

Lila Hale stood in the corridor with the extra chalk and thought, very simply, *I am going to put my mouth on her.*

The thought did not feel like a speech. It felt like the walk from the dorm. Sage pullover. Charcoal skirt. Nothing underneath, which had seemed brave in front of the mirror and now, with seniors filing through the door, seemed like a fact she would have to live inside for fifty minutes. Pale gold hair down. Chest high and heavy in the wool. She was eighteen. She could still taste toothpaste. She could already feel the air on her under the skirt when she moved.

June Rhee was at the board, cream blouse, black hair at her shoulder, writing a verb and underlining it. She did not look at Lila until the last chair went still.

“Miss Hale. Chalk on the ledge. Then come here.”

Here meant the kneehole. Lila had known that since the room behind the glass, when June’s hand had spanned her waist and three women had argued over her as if she were not also listening. She set the chalk down. She walked around the desk. From the seats she was only the TA.

June opened her knees.

“Down. Skirt up after. If you lift your head they will see hair. That is all they get to see.”

Lila went to her knees.

The wood was dirty in the corners. A dried ring of old coffee marked the metal brace. June’s legs were warm. Lila worked the charcoal skirt up around her hips and the cool found her, bare, and she had to close her mouth on a sound that was only nerves and want mixed so tightly she could not sort them. She folded her long legs. Her chest pressed June’s inner thigh through navy cloth, and the weight of her own breasts surprised her, as it always did when she leaned — how much of her there was, how little hiding it did.

June’s hand came into her hair.

“Look at me.”

Lila looked up. June’s face was the same face that taught. That was the part that made Lila’s stomach drop.

“You have not done this while I am talking,” June said, quiet. “I will tell you when. I will tell you stop. You will not finish me until I say. If you make a noise they can place, you sit in the chair and you stay wet and you do not get to touch me again today. Do you want to be under here.”

“Yes,” Lila said.

She said it too fast. She felt herself color. “I wanted to come in this morning. I didn’t put anything on under the skirt. I kept thinking about your hand. From the other room.”

June’s thumb moved once at her scalp.

“Good. Then we will not pretend you were sent.”

June opened her trousers. No underwear. Lila stared because staring was allowed down here and not allowed anywhere else. Dark hair. Skin already shining. The small peak standing, unmistakable. Lila’s mouth filled. She thought, *that is her,* and then, *I am going to taste that in a classroom,* and the second thought made her so wet she felt it on her thigh.

“The verb in line two,” June said, to the room. “Why *claims* and not *says*.”

A boy answered. Lila heard the shape of an answer and none of the words.

June’s hand pressed.

“Now. Slow. Flat tongue. You are not in a hurry.”

Lila put her mouth on her.

June was hot and already wet and tasted like skin and salt and a little like soap. Lila had imagined a hundred versions of this since the assignment and none of them had included how specific it was — the give of the folds, the firm distinct bud under her tongue, the way June’s breath stayed even above the wood while Lila’s did not. She licked where she was told. June’s clit moved. Lila’s own clit answered so hard she almost closed her thighs on nothing.

Don’t rock the desk, she thought. *Don’t make a sound. God, she tastes good. I like this. I really like this.*

She liked the dark. She liked the wool of the pullover dragging on her nipples. She liked that her chest was crushed to June’s thigh and that June could feel the weight of her and did not move away. She sealed her lips and sucked once, experimentally, and June’s fingers tightened.

“Softer,” June said, down. To the room: “Mark every verb that is doing two jobs. You have a minute.”

Pens. Pages. A cough. Someone’s shoe scuffed near the front leg of the desk, so close Lila froze with her mouth still on June and thought, *if he drops a pencil I am hair and a pullover and nothing else.*

The shoe stayed where it was.

She went softer. Softer meant she could stay there a long time. Softer meant June got wetter against her mouth and Lila had to swallow. The swallow embarrassed her and then did not. She was a girl on her knees with a teacher’s

clit on her tongue and seniors annotating dashes. The two facts sat beside each other and neither one canceled the other. That was the heat. Not a symbol. The facts.

June pulled her off by the hair.

Lila hung there with her lips wet and her chin wet and her chest lifting hard. She wanted to go back so badly she felt stupid with it.

“You’re shaking,” June said, almost kindly.

“I know.”

“From fear or from wanting.”

“Wanting,” Lila said. Then, because it was true and she was not quiet: “Both. Mostly wanting.”

“Wait.”

She waited with her cheek on June’s thigh. She could see June’s peak, uncovered, glistening from her mouth. She could feel her own wetness cooling on her inner thigh and new wetness replacing it. Her nipples were two tight points. She thought of Wren’s hands on her breasts in the clinic and of standing naked while they bargained, and of June saying *staffed, not buried,* and she thought, *this is the staffing.* She almost laughed, and bit it back.

June brought her in again.

“You may be hungrier. You still do not finish me. I have the rest of the stanza.”

Hungrier was easy. Lila had been hungry since she shut the dorm door. She used the point of her tongue under the hood and the flat on the downstroke and she learned, in real time, that the left side made June’s hip twitch. She filed that away like a note. She sucked until June’s wet ran, then stopped because the hand said stop, then started because the hand said start. Her jaw ached. She did not care. Between her legs she was swollen and ignored and the ignoring had become its own kind of touching.

A girl in the front row read four lines.

June answered her in a voice that did not shake.

Under the desk Lila felt June get close — the extra tight, the extra wet, the tremor that was not quite a coming — and she wanted to take her over the edge so badly she made a sound into June’s skin, small, helpless.

June pulled her off.

“That is enough of that,” June said, very low. “You almost spent me on a question about Friday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be still.”

Lila was still. She wiped her mouth with her wrist and then licked her wrist without deciding to. June saw it. Something in June’s face went darker and stayed controlled.

Two minutes of silent work, June told the room.

Then her hand pressed Lila’s nape.

“Now you finish me. However you want. Quietly. I have watched you want a particular thing since you looked.”

Lila did not ask what the particular thing was. She knew. She put her whole mouth on June and sucked her clit the way she had wanted to the first second — sealed, steady, greedy, nose in dark hair, the full weight of her breasts mashed to June’s thigh as if she could climb into the taste. June’s thighs closed on her ears. The world narrowed to wet and pulse and the faint squeak of a pen.

June came on her tongue.

Lila felt it as a flutter and then a clutch and then a long run of wet against her mouth. She stayed. She licked her through the end of it because stopping in the middle felt like dropping a glass. Above the desk June’s chalk touched the board. No one looked up.

When June’s legs opened, Lila put her forehead on June’s knee and breathed. She was shaking again. She was smiling, which surprised her. She could feel how close she was herself — a hard, stupid, wonderful closeness that had nothing to do with being noble and everything to do with having just made June finish in a room full of people.

June’s hand slid from her hair down the bare narrow waist and between her thighs.

“You’re soaked.”

“I know.”

“Ask.”

Lila swallowed June’s taste. “Please touch me. I don’t want to come on the wood by accident.”

June’s fingers found her clit as if she had already known where it would be. Two fingers, not inside, a tight wet circle. Lila bit her own wrist and came in a hard, quiet clench that folded her into June’s lap. It went all the way through her chest and her legs and the place under June’s hand. She did not buck the desk. She did think, very clearly, *oh,* and then nothing, and then the slow return of the

radiator and the page and her own breath.

June took her hand back and wiped it on a tissue from the drawer, the same way she would wipe chalk.

“Skirt down. Chair. You start.”

Lila pulled the charcoal skirt over the mess on her thighs. The lining stuck and then didn’t. She climbed into the TA chair on June’s right. Her mouth felt used. Her hair was bent where June had held it. Her nipples still showed through the sage wool if you were looking, and June was looking, once, and then not.

Lila looked at the board. The verb was *claims.*

She read the line. Her voice held. She could taste June when she spoke. She could feel her own finish cooling, ordinary and enormous, under the skirt. A senior asked if the essay could come from the speaker’s side.

“It can,” June said. “Don’t make her simple.”

Lila wrote that down because she was the TA, and because her hand needed something to do, and because she was still, unmistakably, a girl who had just had a very good time under a desk and was now sitting in a chair like anyone else.

The class went on. She went on with it. The wanting did not vanish. It sat in her body and waited for the next time June opened her knees, which, Lila thought, turning a page, would not be soon enough.

Chapter 9 — June, Bridget, the closet

The assignment on the board was a passage and a question. Eighteen seniors, all of them eighteen, had ten minutes of silent work. Pens. A radiator. Someone turning a page too loudly and then not again.

June Rhee did not raise her voice.

“Miss Donnelly. The extra packets are in the closet. Bring the whole stack.”

Bridget Donnelly stood up from the side table where she had been clipping pages. Eighteen. Copper-auburn hair that had already left its knot. Cream sweater. A short brown skirt that moved when she moved, which was always. Freckles across her nose and, she knew, lower, where the sweater would have to come if anyone asked it to. Athletic through the seat and the thighs. A real chest, not a small one. She grinned at nobody in particular and went.

The supply closet was a narrow room off the board: paper, chalk, a step stool, a smell of dust and old glue. The door did not sit true in the frame. Bridget had noticed that on the first day, the way she noticed anything that might get her in trouble.

She had the stack in her arms when June came in and shut the door to the width of a finger.

Class noise stayed on the other side of it. A cough. A chair. Not far.

“Set them down,” June said.

Bridget set them on the shelf. The sweater pulled across her chest when she reached. She felt June look at that and did not pretend she hadn’t.

“You were loud on the table,” June said. Ordinary teacher voice, only quieter. “Ellison asked you to stay. You didn’t. I did not take you for a desk. I took you for this door. It is not thick. If you can be quiet, we will find that out. If you cannot, I will decide what to do with your mouth. Do you want to be in here.”

Bridget’s grin came and went.

“Yes,” she said. “I wanted you to follow me. I thought about the door the whole time I was clipping.”

“Take the sweater off.”

Bridget pulled the cream sweater over her head. Her hair came down with it, copper and messy. No shirt under it — she had dressed for the possibility, same as she had talked too much on the way into the clinic. The air hit her chest and her nipples drew up, freckled skin going pink. She dropped the sweater on the stool.

June’s hand found her waist, then the side of her breast, a brief unsentimental weight, then the seat of the brown skirt.

“Skirt.”

Bridget pushed it down. She had worn underwear this time, plain, and June’s mouth went thin.

“Off.”

Bridget stepped out of them. Bare feet on closet linoleum. Athletic thighs. The skirt and the cotton made a small pile. She was already breathing like she had run.

June turned her to face the door.

From here the class was a blur of sound through a crack. Bridget put her palms on the wood because the wood was what there was. June’s body stood close behind her. A hand slid between Bridget’s legs from the front and found her wet, which Bridget had known she would be and still flushed for.

“You are not going to perform quiet,” June said, against her hair. “You are going to try. That is different. If a sound comes, I will hear whether I need my hand.”

June’s fingers were sure. Not a clinic count. A woman using the ten minutes she had. She stroked Bridget’s clit with a pressure that made Bridget’s hips kick on the first pass.

Bridget bit her lip and still made a noise. Small. Then not small.

June’s other hand came up and covered her mouth.

The sound went into June’s palm. Bridget’s eyes opened wide at the door. Someone in the room asked if they could use the last page as scratch. June’s voice, when it went through the crack, was the same voice as the board.

“Yes. Keep working.”

The hand between Bridget’s legs did not stop.

Bridget tried. She really did. She thought about the seniors and the packets and the fact that June had chosen her for a closet because she could not stay on a table, and the thought did not make her quieter. It made her wetter. June’s fingers circled and then slid and then came back to the peak, and Bridget’s athletic body did what it had done on Wren’s paper: it moved. Her seat pushed into June. Her thighs shook. A moan got out around June’s fingers.

June’s mouth was at her ear.

“That is the problem and the use,” she said. “You do not hold. I am not going to punish you for the body I picked. I am going to keep you from spending the lesson.”

She took her hand off Bridget’s mouth long enough for Bridget to gasp, then put it back when the next sound started. Bridget licked June’s palm without deciding to. June’s breath changed, once.

Outside, a chair scraped.

Both of them went still. June’s fingers stayed on Bridget, not moving, a hard quiet hold on her clit that was almost worse than stroking. Bridget shook against the door and did not knock it. Footsteps passed the crack and went toward the windows. A window latch. Then pens again.

June’s fingers started.

Bridget came closer than she meant to, fast, the way she did everything. She tried to say *wait* into June’s hand and it came out as a muffled broken sound that June clearly understood as the opposite of wait. June eased off the peak and held her there, soaked, freckled chest rising against the painted wood, nipples tight, copper hair in her own mouth.

“Not yet,” June said. “You will finish when I can afford the noise. You will also finish me. Turn.”

Bridget turned. The closet was so narrow her breasts brushed June’s blouse. June took Bridget’s hand and put it under the cream silk, then lower, into the navy trousers, onto hot wet skin.

“You can be loud against me,” June said. “Not against the hall. Work.”

Bridget worked.

She was not delicate. She found June’s clit and rubbed with the same honest hunger she had brought to the table, and June’s still face had to be rebuilt from the inside. Bridget watched that and felt a fierce, simple pleasure: *I can do this to her. In a closet. With a class right there.*

June’s fingers were on her again at the same time. Two women standing, cramped, the stack of packets at their hip, the door a rumor of school. Bridget’s sounds started to rise and June kissed her to swallow them, which Bridget had not expected and which made her knees go. She kissed back too hard. Their teeth clicked. June’s hand clamped the back of her copper hair and held her there so the next moan went into June’s mouth instead of the crack.

Someone knocked.

Two short raps.

Bridget froze with her fingers on June and June’s fingers on her. Her heart slammed so loud she thought the door would hear it.

June did not take her hands away. She turned her face toward the crack.

“Two minutes,” June said, clear, bored. “Use the packets already on the side table.” “Yes, Miss Rhee.”

Footsteps left.

Bridget let out a shaking breath that was almost a laugh. June’s eyes were dark and very awake.

“Now,” June said. “You first. Into me. Then you finish what you started.”

She covered Bridget’s mouth again and put her fingers back on Bridget’s clit with no mercy and no delay. Bridget came in a hard, athletic buck that would have shaken a table and instead shook June. The sound she made was real, muffled, animal, the same failure as the clinic except this time it was the assignment. She soaked June’s hand. Her chest heaved. Freckles stood out on pink skin. She would have fallen if the door had not been there.

June kept her up.

“Your hand,” June said.

Bridget, still clenching, found June again and rubbed her through the last of her own shaking. June came quieter than Bridget and not by much — a sharp held breath, a hitch in the still face, wet on Bridget’s fingers, her forehead tipped to Bridget’s temple for one unguarded second. Then the face came back.

They stood there dripping in a closet that smelled like glue.

June found a box of tissues on the shelf as if it belonged in the lesson plan. She wiped Bridget’s mouth first, where her own palm had been, then her fingers, then Bridget’s.

“Sweater. Skirt. Packets.”

Bridget dressed with hands that did not feel clever. The cream sweater scraped her nipples and made her hiss. The brown skirt sat on a body that was still finishing. She picked up the stack.

June opened the door the rest of the way.

The classroom looked exactly like a classroom. Eighteen seniors writing. The passage on the board. The radiator.

Bridget walked to the side table and set the packets down too carefully. A boy glanced at her hair, which was worse than when she had left, and went back to his page. June returned to the front as if she had been checking inventory.

“Two minutes became one,” June said. “Finish the question. Miss Donnelly will collect.”

Bridget collected. When she bent, the skirt reminded her what had just happened. She liked the reminder. She liked that she had been loud and that

June had put a hand over it and that the knock had not ended the hour. She liked, with a clarity that made her want to grin and not quite dare, that she was the closet and Lila was the desk and that both things were true at once.

She put the last paper in the pile. June’s eyes met hers for half a second. Not a smile. A confirmation.

The bell was still two minutes off. Bridget sat down on the side chair, thighs pressed together under the brown skirt, copper hair a mess, and waited for the next time June sent her for packets.

Chapter 10

Hana Park was wet before the door shut.

She knew it the way she knew a wrong answer on a page — a fact she could feel and could not un-know. Eighteen. Long black hair tucked behind both ears. Thin-rim glasses. A grey pullover she had chosen because it looked like filing. A dark skirt. Under the skirt she had obeyed the rule this time and worn nothing, and the nothing was already a problem.

Mara Quinn locked the office. Charcoal sweater. Hair down. The shoulders that made a room smaller. She did not sit first. She looked at Hana until Hana's mouth opened and no useful sentence came out.

"You know why you are here," Mara said.

"Yes, Miss Quinn."

"Say it."

Hana's voice thinned. "Because I finish when I'm told I did it wrong."

"And because I have a lap, and a door that locks, and no interest in running a current through you in front of seniors." Mara pulled the chair out from the desk and sat. She patted her thigh once, as if Hana were a file. "Pullover off. Skirt up. Over."

Hana's hands shook on the hem. The grey wool came off and her small chest was there in the office light, nipples already tight, pale-warm skin going pink without being touched. She pushed the dark skirt to her waist. She had to walk three steps to the chair. Each step made the air move between her legs. She was shiny. She could feel it on her inner thigh.

She laid herself over Mara's lap.

The charcoal sweater was soft under her hipbone. Mara's thighs were firm and wide enough that Hana's slim body fit like something placed. Her glasses slipped. She hooked them back with two fingers and left them on because Mara had not said otherwise. Her hair fell forward. Her bare seat was up. The small of her back felt too exposed to belong to a girl who filed papers.

Mara's structured hand rested on her, not spanking yet, just owning the skin.

"You came five times in the clinic," Mara said, mild, almost bored, and the boredom was the heat. "Ellison cut a bow off you and you thanked her with your body. I am not going to invent a machine. I am going to use my hand and I am going to talk, and you are going to try not to soak my trousers before I have even started. You are already failing that."

Hana made a sound. It was not a word.

Mara’s fingers slipped between her legs from behind, two of them gliding through wet that had no business being that ready, and found the peak, and stopped there, holding.

“This,” Mara said, “is not the spanking. This is me noticing. You walked down the hall like a student. You are over my knees like a correction. Which one did you think about while you were clipping handouts.”

“This,” Hana whispered. “I thought about this. I shouldn’t have. I did.”

“I know.”

The first spank landed.

Not theater. A hard, clean smack on the left side of that slim seat, heat blooming at once, the sound sharp in the small office. Hana jerked and her glasses jumped and a thin cry got out of her before she could swallow it. Mara’s holding fingers were still on her clit. The two facts arrived together: sting, and the bright wet pulse under Mara’s pads.

“One,” Mara said. “You will not count. I will. You will keep your hands on the floor. If you reach back I will take the glasses off and you will not like how much of your face I can see.”

Hana put her palms on the rug. Fine wrists. She stared at the grain of the wood under the desk and thought, very clearly, *I am going to come from this,* and the thought made her push her hips into Mara’s hand without permission.

Mara spanked her again. Right side. Then left. A rhythm that was not angry and was not kind. Each smack landed and the heat stacked, and between smacks Mara’s fingers gave her clit a small, precise stroke that was worse than the slap because it meant Mara knew exactly what the slaps were for.

“You broke a written rule and called it walking over,” Mara said. “You like being dressed down. You liked Ellison’s scissors. You are going to like this more, which is inconvenient for anyone who thought you were the academic one.”

Hana’s seat was burning. She could feel it from the inside, a spreading flush that ran straight into the place Mara was touching. Her small breasts hung toward the rug, nipples grazing nothing, aching anyway. She tried to keep still and failed by little lifts of her hips, offering the next slap, hating the offer, needing it.

Mara gave it to her.

The office filled with the sound of hand on skin and Hana’s breathing and, once, a knock of Hana’s knee against the chair leg. Mara did not pause for the knee.

“You are wet enough to write with,” Mara said. “If I sent you back to class now, the chair would tell on you. Stay over. I am not finished talking.”

Another spank, lower, where seat became thigh. Hana’s cry was not thin that time. It was the sound she had not budgeted, the one the notes had promised, punched out of her on a single blow while Mara’s fingers pressed her clit and held.

“There,” Mara said, and there was satisfaction in it, quiet and intent. “That is the one. Do not swallow the next.”

Hana did not swallow it.

Mara spanked her through a long, rising sequence that left the slim seat hot and pink and shaking, and all the while the fingers between her legs made a slow filthy circle that Hana would have called clinical if it had not been aimed so exactly at finishing her. Correction and pleasure stopped being two rooms. They were one lap. Hana’s glasses fogged. She thought of the bow in the trash and of Mara’s hand on her nape in the lineup and of the sentence *a TA should work for her,* and she worked. She worked by lying there and taking it and getting wetter and whispering, against her will,

“Please— I— Miss Quinn—”

“Please what.”

“Please don’t stop talking.”

Mara’s hand stilled on her burning skin. The fingers on her clit did not.

“You just asked me to keep telling you what you are.” Mara leaned down so Hana felt the words in her spine. “You are the girl who came from a doctor’s disappointment. You are over my lap because I wanted that switch in an office I can lock. You will go back into the building with my handprint under your skirt and you will sit in a chair and file, and every time you shift you will remember that I said you failed the walk down the hall. Come.”

Hana came.

It tore through her in a hard, shamed clench, pelvis grinding on Mara’s thighs, seat on fire, clit jumping under Mara’s fingers, a broken sound she did not recognize as hers. Her glasses went crooked. Wet ran onto the charcoal trousers. She shook and kept shaking while Mara spanked her twice more through it, not cruel for sport, cruel because Hana’s body climbed the last of the wave on those two blows and spent itself again, smaller, helpless, a second finish stacked on the first.

Mara held her there until the shaking thinned.

“Off. Knees. Mouth.”

Hana slid to the rug on used legs. The dark skirt was still rucked at her waist. Her seat throbbed. She looked up through fogged lenses and Mara had opened

her trousers, and Hana did not need a second instruction. She put her mouth on Mara because the gratitude was still there, appalling and sincere, and because she wanted the taste of the woman who had just taken her apart with a hand and a sentence.

Mara was already wet. Hana licked, clumsy with aftershocks, then less clumsy. She found the peak and stayed on it. Mara's structured hand went into the black hair and set a pace. No lecture voice now. Only breath, and the faint creak of the chair, and Hana's small sounds against skin.

"That," Mara said, low. "Keep that. You can give. You just prefer to be told."

Hana kept that. She sucked when Mara's hips asked. She used the flat of her tongue when the hand eased. She came up only far enough to fog the glasses worse, then went back down. Mara finished with her fingers locked in Hana's hair and her other hand braced on the desk, a tight, held climax that painted Hana's mouth and made Hana's own neglected body twitch as if it wanted a third and knew it would not get one unless it was spoken for.

Mara sat back. She looked at Hana on her knees, lips shining, glasses crooked, skirt still up, small chest rising, the pink of a spanking visible when she shifted.

"Skirt down. Pullover on. Do not fix the glasses yet."

Hana dressed. The dark skirt sat on hot skin and she hissed. The grey pullover scraped her nipples. She stood with the lenses still smeared because Mara had told her not to fix them, and the not-fixing was another small correction she felt between her legs.

Mara unlocked the door.

"You have handouts to stack," she said, as if the last twenty minutes had been inventory. "If you sit carefully, no one will know. If you sit the way you want to sit, I will know you thought about my hand the whole way down the hall. Go."

Hana went.

The corridor was just a corridor. A period bell. Seniors somewhere laughing. Under the skirt her seat burned and her clit beat and the taste of Mara was still in her mouth. She did not fix the glasses until she reached the copy room. Then she did, and saw her own face, pink and serious and unmistakably finished, and had to lean on the copier for a second before she could pick up the stack.

She sat down to file. She sat carefully. She thought about Mara's hand anyway.

Chapter 11 —

Mina Santos knew what the chair was for when she saw the strap on the arm.

Mara Quinn’s office. Same lock as yesterday. Same charcoal sweater. The air still held, faintly, the heat of another girl — paper, skin, the ghost of a spanking Mina had not been invited to watch and had thought about anyway.

“Close it,” Mara said.

Mina closed the door. Eighteen. Near-black hair down her back. Warm light-medium skin. A rust-colored cardigan she unbuttoned while she walked because waiting to be told felt like wasting the look on Mara’s face. Under it, a thin white camisole that did almost nothing about the small high breasts or the mouth that did most of the work. Dark jeans. She was already wet. She had been wet since the stairwell, when a senior asked if Miss Quinn was in and Mina said yes and felt the yes in her body.

Mara pointed at the chair.

“Camisole off. Jeans off. Wrists on the arms. You keep the mouth. That is the whole design.”

Mina pulled the camisole over her head. The cardigan had already fallen. Her chest was small and high and tight in the office air. She stepped out of the jeans and the nothing underneath them. Lean legs. The full mouth a little open. She sat. The wood was cool on her bare seat. Mara buckled a strap around each slim wrist, snug, not cruel, finished. Mina tested them once. They held. Her hands were gone. Everything else was not.

Mara stood between her knees and looked at her the way she had looked at Hana, and not the way she had looked at Hana.

“Park went over my lap and came from being told she was wrong,” Mara said. “You would not last three slaps. You would start giving in the middle of them. That is not an insult. That is why you are tied and she is not. Rhee wanted this mouth under a lecture. She said so in front of you. She took Hale instead because Hale stays put. You wander. So I tied the wandering down and I kept the part that works.”

Mina’s dark eyes held. Heat moved through her, sharp and clean. Being compared did not shrink her. It lit her. She could see Hana’s glasses without seeing them. She could see Lila’s chest in a desk well. She could see herself in this chair with her wrists turned up and her mouth still free.

“I can stay,” Mina said.

“You can stay because the strap says so.” Mara’s thumb brushed Mina’s lower lip. “Open.” Mina opened.

Mara did not kiss her. She put two fingers in Mina’s mouth and let Mina understand the assignment. Mina sucked them at once, greedy, practiced without having practiced on Mara, the same hunger Wren had felt in the clinic when Mina’s hands had wanted hair they were not allowed to take. Mara watched the face do the work the chest did not have to.

“Hale would wait to be placed,” Mara said. “You don’t wait. That is the heat and the problem. If I put you and Park in this room together I know who finishes me first and who needs to be turned over to get there. Do not look proud. It is not a prize. It is staffing.”

Mina made a sound around the fingers. Mara took them out, wet, and drew them down Mina’s throat, between the small breasts, over the slim belly, and straight between her legs.

Mina was soaked. Mara’s mouth almost smiled.

“You thought about Park.”

“Yes.”

“You thought about Hale under the desk.”

“Yes.”

“You thought about winning.”

Mina’s breath caught. The straps creaked. “I thought about being the one you wanted to untie last.”

“Better.”

Mara’s fingers found her clit and stayed there, not kind, not shy, a slow hard circle while she opened her own trousers with the other hand. She was ready. She stepped in until the dark heat of her was level with Mina’s mouth.

“You cannot use your hands. You use this. Park used her mouth after I painted her seat. She was grateful. I want something else from you. I want skill. I want you to try to be better than the last girl in this room without saying her name.”

Mina leaned forward as far as the straps allowed and put her mouth on Mara.

She knew how to want this. The clinic had proved it. The wanting had not gone anywhere. Mara tasted already wet, salt and skin, and Mina sealed her lips over the peak and worked with the full attention of a face that had always been the event. She used the flat, then the point, then a suck that made Mara’s hand land in her hair and hold. Mina’s wrists pulled and got nothing. The nothing made her lick harder. Between her own legs Mara’s fingers had not left her, and the two rhythms tried to match, and Mina’s hips lifted off the chair into the hand she could not control.

Mara spoke while she was being taken, which was worse and better.

“Donnelly would be loud enough to bring a hall monitor.”

A stroke on Mina’s clit.

“Hale would hold still and look like a painting while she did it.”

A suck from Mina that made Mara’s sentence thin.

“Park would come if I said she was second.”

Mina moaned into her.

“You will come because you cannot stand being second, even when I have not made it a contest.”

“It is a contest,” Mina said, off her for half a breath, mouth shining. “You made it one when you said her name.”

Mara’s eyes were intent and pleased.

“Then win.”

She pushed Mina’s mouth back where it belonged and used the hand in her hair to set a pace that was almost unkind. Mina took it. She gave. Her small breasts rose and fell, ignored and tight. Her lean legs opened wider because the chair allowed it and because Mara’s hand between them had gone from circling to a wet, exact pressure that meant Mina was close whether she wanted the timing or not.

She tried to last longer than the implication of Hana. She tried to make Mara’s still-ish breath break first. She failed and succeeded in the same minute: Mara’s thighs tightened and Mina felt the flutter start against her tongue, and Mara’s fingers on her clit did not ease off to be fair.

“Together,” Mara said, rough now. “You don’t get to finish me and look composed. You don’t get to beat her in my head and stay dry. Come.”

Mina came with her mouth still working.

It ran through her in a bright, helpless shake, wrists straining the straps, hips lifting, a sound she put into Mara instead of into the office. The coming made her sloppy for one second and then hungrier. She sucked Mara through her own clench, sloppy then precise again, and Mara broke on that second effort — a held, shaking finish against Mina’s mouth, hand fisted in near-black hair, the chair scraping an inch on the floor.

They stayed like that until the shake left.

Mara pulled out of her mouth and looked down at her: tied, wet-chinned, small chest marked only by breath, dark eyes blown, jeans in a pile, the rust cardigan

on the floor like a dropped flag.

“Hale is still the one all three of us watch if she lasts,” Mara said, and she said it while she unbuckled the left wrist, then the right, as if the sentence were part of the strap. “Park is the one I put over my knees. You are the one I tie when I want to be finished and still have my hands. Do not make me explain the difference again. It will sound like rankings, and I told the room we were not doing theater.”

Mina flexed her fingers. Her mouth felt used. She was smiling, small and wrecked.

“If it isn’t rankings,” she said, “why do I feel like I won the hour.”

Mara thumbed the shine off Mina’s lower lip and put the thumb in her own mouth, tasting both of them.

“Because you like winning more than you like being good. Dress. The handouts are still real. If Rhee asks why your wrists are pink, you were moving chairs.”

Mina put on the camisole, the jeans, the rust cardigan. The jeans sat on a body that had just come in a strap. She buttoned two buttons and left the third. At the door she paused.

“Miss Quinn.”

“What.”

“If you ever put me in a room with Park, I still want the chair.”

Mara’s mouth did that almost-smile again.

“I know you do. That is why it would not be fair to her. Go stack the papers before you start competing with furniture.”

Mina went.

The corridor smelled like school. Under the cardigan her wrists hummed and her mouth tasted like Mara and the implied scoreboard she was not supposed to believe in. She believed in it anyway. She stacked the handouts with hands that had been useless on purpose, and she thought about Lila under a desk and Hana over a lap and herself in a chair, and the thought did not make her smaller. It made her walk back toward Mara’s door in her head, already wet again, already wanting the strap more than the win, which — she suspected — was the same thing.

Chapter 12

10:50

Helen Ward put a small blunt vibrator into Amy Fonté's palm under a stack of quizzes. It was smooth, heavy for its size, the rounded face of it warm from Helen's pocket. In her other pocket, Amy saw the remote — a flat thumb-switch Helen did not bother to hide from her.

"You are my TA," Helen said, low, as if she were telling her where the quizzes went. "I have ten minutes of silent work and I am going to use them on you. That sits on you, not in you. Under the dress. Against the clitoris. I have the remote. When I turn it up, that is me, not an accident."

Amy's fingers closed around it. Eighteen. Chestnut hair a little undone. Hazel-brown eyes. Forest-green knit dress to mid-thigh. Medium breasts, soft hips, a flush already in her throat.

"Your clinic file says thirty-eight," Helen said. "Thirty-eight seconds standing before you finished on the wand. You told the glass whoever wanted that number could have it. I have it. You do not come until I say *thirty-eight* out loud. The class will hear four, five, six, seven. Those are not yours. If you make a face I take it off and you sit through the bell empty. Side desk."

Amy sat. She slipped the warm face of the toy between her legs, under the dress, and seated it on herself. She was already wet enough that it slid into place and stayed. The dress hid it. The chair would know.

Helen's watch caught the light. Her thumb was in her pocket.

10:51

"Silent work," Helen told the room. Eighteen seniors, all of them eighteen. "Questions four through seven. I will not repeat myself."

Pens.

Helen pressed the remote.

The toy came on low — a thick purr against slick skin, blunt, steady, not sharp. Amy aligned quiz edges that were already aligned. She did not count. If she counted to thirty-eight herself she would spend it on arithmetic.

Helen passed for chalk.

"Four," she said to the class. Then, only for Amy: "Not yours. Stay."

Amy stayed. The purr lived in her hips. The green knit scraped her nipples. She left her thighs open enough to keep the face of the toy where Helen had told her to put it.

10:53

A boy in the second row stood and came up the aisle with his paper.

Helen’s thumb moved on purpose.

The purr thickened into a hard, deep pulse just as he stopped at Amy’s desk.

“Are these the extras?” he said.

Amy had to look at him. She had to speak with a vibrator hammering her clit because her teacher had decided that a question was a cue.

“Side table,” she said, and heard her voice come out ordinary. “The ones with the blue clip.”

“Thanks.”

He walked on. Helen took his work at the front. When he sat, the toy dropped back to the low purr. The drop made Amy’s hips chase it half an inch.

Helen’s knuckles brushed Amy’s nape as she set down a pen.

“Five. You answered him while I had it up. That is the game. I surge you when you have to talk. You stay a TA in the face. Thirty-eight is still in my mouth, not yours.”

Amy’s lower lip was between her teeth. She knew the number. She could have whispered it and ruined the hour. She did not. The not-saying sat on her as heavy as the stone.

10:55

Helen wrote on the board. *Check your tense in six.*

Six.

Amy flinched as if six were close to thirty-eight. It was not. Her body did not care.

The toy climbed to mid — a fat throb that made a wet sound she was sure the front row could hear. No one heard. Pens were louder. She was so slick now the face of it rode her instead of sitting; she had to pin it with her thighs, which only pressed it harder into the peak.

A girl came up with a finished packet.

Helen turned it up again, on purpose, as the girl said, “Do I put this here or on her desk?”

Amy smiled the empty smile of a girl with quizzes. The toy punched.

“Helen’s desk is fine,” she said, and the name nearly broke, and the girl went, and the door opened for someone slipping out early — lockers, a laugh, a late slip shouted down the hall — and Helen left the surge on through the laugh, through

Amy taking hallway noise in her clit like a hand, and only eased it when the door shut.

Helen’s watch. Her mouth at Amy’s shoulder, pretending to look at the stack.

“Six. You have spoken twice on a harder setting. You still have not heard your number. If you come on a hallway laugh I will let you sit in it until they leave, still waiting for me to say thirty-eight.”

Amy breathed. It pulled the dress across her chest. She was open and shining around a piece of plastic her teacher could raise from the front of a classroom. That was the whole game. That was all a stranger needed. It was enough.

10:58

“Two minutes,” Helen told the class. “Finish or don’t. No talking.”

She set a red pen on Amy’s quizzes.

“On.”

The toy jumped to nearly the wand — thick, ruthless, the whole blunt face shuddering on a clit that had been held since 10:51. Amy’s hips moved and she locked them. Sweat at her hairline. She kept her hands on paper. She kept her eyes on question seven and saw thirty- eight standing up in a clinic, a watch behind glass, this watch now two feet from her face.

Helen appeared to watch the room.

“You offered the number,” she said, a thread for the side desk. “I am using it. Last minute. You do not spend yourself on the motor. You spend yourself on the word. The word is thirty- eight. I have not said it.”

Amy nodded once, like a TA.

She was a held thirty-seven, waiting for her teacher to finish a sentence.

11:00

The bell.

Bags. Chairs. Noise. Helen thanked them as if they had only been a class. Amy sat with the toy still raging and let coat after coat pass and did not come, because the file had not been spoken, and the rule was simple enough to hold her together.

Helen shut the door.

She did not turn the toy off.

She came to the side desk and looked at Amy’s wet eyes and the green dress glued between her thighs.

“Thirty-eight,” Helen said.

Amy came.

She came on the word, sitting, the stone held to her by her own hand and Helen’s hand over it, keeping the face of the vibrator on her through the whole wave the way the wand had stayed through those thirty-eight seconds on her feet. She bit her cheek and still sounded. The quizzes slid. Her hips tried to lift and Helen put her down by the shoulder, watch at her eye line, logging her again. It was a number she had given away in another room and gotten back in this one. It lasted until her thighs jumped and Helen held the toy on her for one extra pulse, then clicked the remote off.

Amy sat twitching, dress wrecked, mouth open, thirty-eight still going through her.

Helen’s face had color in it. The remote was still in her pocket.

“Stand up.”

Amy stood. Helen took the vibrator, wiped it like chalk, dropped it into the navy pocket. Then she put Amy’s wet fingers under the waistband of her own trousers and held them where she needed them.

“Count,” Helen said. “You already know how far.”

Amy counted.

She rubbed Helen through the cloth, whispering the seconds because the number had become a touch, and Helen came on twenty-eight with her forehead nearly at Amy’s temple and the watch cold on Amy’s shoulder. A held sound. Then the mouth that taught.

Helen stepped back.

“Dress down. Quizzes in the box. You have class after lunch. If a boy asks you about clips this week, you will already know my thumb is the part that answers.”

Amy tugged the forest-green hem. It clung. She carried the stack. At the door she said,

“You can have thirty-eight whenever you want it.”

Helen looked at the watch, then at her.

“I just did,” she said. “That is the job. Go.”

Amy went into the hall with the stone’s ghost on her, the blue clip and the laugh and the word stacked in one landing. She walked to lunch like a girl who had finished a quiz. Under the dress she had finished what a teacher had filed, and used, and said out loud at last.

Helen Ward pulled her chair back and opened her knees.

“Stand here,” she said. “Face the paper on the desk. If someone walks up they will think you are helping me mark a draft. My hand is going under your skirt. I am going to rub you until you are close to coming, and then I am going to keep you there. You do not make a sound. When the room is empty I will decide if you get to finish. Do you want that.”

“Yes,” Nora Shen said.

She stepped in.

Eighteen. Small. Short legs. Straight black hair, tucked behind one ear. Pale blue sweater. Grey skirt. A compact chest, high and small. She had nothing on under the skirt. Helen’s navy blouse was in front of her. Helen’s watch was beside her hand on the desk. Helen’s other hand went up under the grey wool, found her already wet, and settled two fingers on her clitoris.

Nora’s mouth opened. She kept the sound in.

The classroom was full. Eighteen seniors, all of them eighteen, working silently on a passage. Pens. A radiator. Helen spoke to them over Nora’s shoulder as if Nora were only standing close.

“You have ten minutes. I am checking a draft with Miss Shen. Stay on your own page.”

Her fingers began to move.

A slow circle, wet, exact, right on the spot. Nora felt it immediately, a bright tight pleasure that made her toes curl in her shoes. She put her hands on the desk so she would not grab Helen. Her small nipples pulled up inside the sweater. She looked at the draft and saw ink.

Helen watched her face the way she watched a clock.

“Closer,” Helen said, very low. “Not over. If you come before I say, I stop and you go sit down soaked.”

Nora nodded. The circle went on. She got wetter. She could feel it on Helen’s fingers and on the inside of her own thighs. Her compact hips wanted to push into the hand. She let them, a little, and Helen allowed it, and the pleasure sharpened until Nora had to bite the inside of her cheek to stay quiet.

A chair scraped.

A girl came up the aisle with a paper.

Helen did not take her hand away.

“Miss Ward? I think I have question two wrong.”

The girl was eighteen. Pencil behind her ear. She stopped at the front of the desk and laid her page over the draft. She could not see under the desk. She could see Nora’s face and Helen’s face and two people looking at a sentence.

“Show me,” Helen said.

The girl planted her finger on the line and leaned in. The desk slid a half inch toward Helen. Helen’s fingers pressed harder against Nora’s clitoris.

Nora’s knees bent. She locked them. No sound.

“This part,” the girl said. Her sleeve brushed Nora’s sweater. “If I move it, is it better?”

“Read it out loud,” Helen said.

The girl read the sentence. While she read, Helen rubbed Nora in small, filthy circles timed to the words. Nora had to stand there and look helpful. She could feel how close she was — that high, shaky almost, the one where another three seconds would finish her. Helen knew. Helen eased off just enough that Nora stayed stuck on the almost, dripping on her teacher’s hand, while a classmate asked about a clause.

The girl tapped the paper to make her point.

Each tap shook the desk. Each shake pushed Nora onto Helen’s fingers. Nora’s eyes watered. She nodded when Helen glanced at her, because a nod was allowed and a moan was not.

“Keep that word where it is,” Helen told the girl. “Go finish at your seat.”

“Thanks, Miss Shen.”

Nora smiled at her. It was a real, ruined little smile. The girl smiled back and walked away. On the way up she bumped the desk with her packet. Helen used the bump to give Nora one firm stroke that nearly ended it. Nora shook and did not come. She did not make a sound.

Helen looked at her watch and wrote a time in the margin.

“Four minutes to get you that close,” she said, only for Nora. “She helped and she has no idea. Stay standing.”

The rest of the silent work was Helen’s hand doing the same thing again and again: rub until Nora’s thighs trembled against Helen’s knees, stop, wait until Nora’s breathing evened, start again. Nora stared at the paper. She thought ordinary thoughts in between the pleasure — *don’t make a noise, don’t sit down, please don’t stop, please stop, I am going to leave this all over her hand* — and the thoughts did not need a second meaning. She was a girl being jerked off under a desk in a working classroom. That was the scene.

“Is the last question extra?” a boy called from the back.

“No,” Helen said, and on the word her fingers slid full over Nora’s clitoris once, generous, and then went still. Nora’s breath broke. She kept the rest in her mouth.

The bell rang. Helen did not move her hand.

“Pack up,” she told the class. “Miss Shen is still with me.”

Bags. Talk. The girl with the pencil waved on her way out. Nora lifted two fingers off the desk and waved back, with Helen still holding her by the clit. The door shut.

Helen looked at her.

“You can finish now. Quiet as you can. You can shake.”

She rubbed her properly.

Nora came standing, small body folding toward Helen’s shoulder, mouth open on the navy blouse, a hard wet pulse against Helen’s fingers and no voice on it. Helen kept her hand there until the pulses thinned, then took it away and wiped it on a tissue from the drawer. She wrote the second time next to the first.

Nora pulled the grey skirt down. Her legs were unsteady. She was still twitching.

“You did what I asked,” Helen said. “Go on to your next class. If that girl talks to you about the sentence, talk about the sentence.”

“Okay,” Nora said. Her voice was hoarse from not using it.

She went out into the hall. The girl with the pencil was at her locker and called something friendly about the draft. Nora said it looked better with the word left in. Under the skirt she was wet and finished, and she could still feel the taps on the desk as if the girl had been in on it. She walked to her next room knowing exactly what had happened to her, and glad of it.

Chapter 14

June Rhee did not give the afternoon another name.

“We are not waiting for a later date,” she said. “We said if Hale lasted we would watch her move. She lasted. Fonté is coming home with Ward. That is the resident job — she still goes to class, she lives in the cottage, she keeps helping after the building is dark, the school pays her rent and a bit toward next year. Not a marriage. Not a sale. We do the horse first. Then Ward takes her.”

The gym annex off the east cloister was empty. A padded pommel horse stood in the middle of the mat: leather, two handles, the top a smooth worn hump. Door locked. Skylight. Three teachers. Three girls. All of the girls eighteen.

Lila Hale, Mina Santos, Amy Fonté. Already bare from the room they had left. Pale gold hair. Near-black hair. Chestnut hair. The high full chest, the small high chest, the medium one. Long legs, lean legs, soft hips.

“No hands,” Mara Quinn said. “You put that on the leather and you rub until you come, or until we stop you. We do not touch you. We look. We talk. Hale in the middle. I want her hips where we can all see them.”

Lila stepped up first.

She had to spread her long legs around the end of the horse and tip her pelvis in until her clitoris met the warm leather ridge. The first contact made her breath jump. She set her hands on the handles only long enough to find the height, then took them away and held them in the air, then at her back, then nowhere useful. Her breasts hung and then lifted as she moved. The narrow waist worked. She looked like a picture and she was also just a girl trying to get herself off on a piece of gym equipment in front of three women who had argued over her.

She dragged forward.

The leather was slightly tacky. It caught. It slid. Pleasure went up through her, blunt and specific. She did it again. Her mouth opened. She was not quiet. She never had been.

“There,” June said. “That is what I wanted from the first morning. Stay on it.”

Mina mounted the far end, facing the other way, small body, lean hips. She had to work harder to get pressure. Her face did too much at once — concentration, hunger, the wish to be best. She rubbed and her mouth stayed open and her small breasts barely moved and she made a frustrated sound because the angle was cruel to a slighter frame.

Amy took the near side, standing beside the horse more than astride it, soft hips tipped, chestnut hair falling, and put herself on the leather as if she had been built for the height. The first grind landed. She gasped. She found a rhythm in

three strokes.

Helen Ward’s watch was in her hand and not even running. She was not timing her yet. She was watching Lila and watching Amy and not bothering to hide which sight she liked for which reason.

“Fonté,” Helen said. “You will finish first if you keep that pace. That is useful to me. Hale, do not turn this into a pose. Rub.”

Lila rubbed.

Sweat started at her hairline. Her breasts swung. The leather went slick under her from her own wetness. She could hear herself — the wet sound, the slap of skin when her hips lost the pretty line and just chased. Mara walked a slow circle and did not touch her.

“She is even better than the argument,” Mara said. “I still would have tied her. I am still not sorry I am watching this instead.”

Mina cursed under her breath and changed the angle, up on her toes, clitoris scraping, face flushed dark. She was close and angry about the work of it. Amy was closer. Amy’s hips knew how to stay on a point. She used the horse the way she had used a chair in class: she let the object do the holding and she moved the one place that mattered.

A sound came out of Amy that was only pleasure.

“Don’t stop her,” Helen said, to the other two, as if they might. “That is the girl I am taking across campus.”

Amy came first.

She came on the leather, hips jerking, hands fisted in the air, a raw yes, the medium line of her chest shaking, wet on the pommel where Lila was still working. She almost fell and caught the handle and Helen said, “Hands off,” and Amy took her hands off and rode the last of it with nothing to hold, knees bent, mouth open.

Lila broke next, watching Amy’s finish sideways, and the watching finished her. She ground down hard and came loud, blonde head back, breasts lifted, the long body losing the picture and becoming only motion. The leather squeaked. She shook through it and kept moving until June said, “Enough, Hale. We saw you.”

Mina came last, on effort, with a broken sound and a face that had done more than her hips, and Mara said, “Good. That is still not why you stay. Get down.”

They got down. The horse was marked. The annex smelled like skin and dust and leather.

Helen took a short leather lead from her bag and a plain collar that looked like it had been bought at a tack shop, not a costume drawer.

She held them up so Amy could see.

“This is for the walk,” Helen said. “Campus is mostly empty. The lead is so you stay with me. You are still a student. You still have class in the morning. Tonight you live at my house and you keep helping. If you do not want the collar you say so and we walk without it.”

“I want it,” Amy said. Her voice was rough. She lifted her hair.

Helen buckled the collar. It sat in the hollow of her throat. The lead clipped on. Amy was still naked. Helen took the green dress off the chair and did not give it to her yet.

“Coat,” June said, and threw Helen a long school coat. Helen put Amy in the coat and nothing else. The lead hung out through the buttons. Amy’s legs were bare. The coat hid the rest from a distance.

Lila stood naked on the mat with her chest still flushed and watched the clip close. Mina wiped her mouth with her wrist. Neither of them was going to the cottage. That was plain too.

“Hale with me tomorrow under the desk,” June said. “Santos with Quinn. Fonté is Ward’s evenings now. We are done here.”

Helen walked Amy out.

The cloister was cold. Amy’s bare feet found stone, then the path. The lead stayed short. A late senior crossed at the far end and saw a teacher and a girl in a coat and did not see the leather. Amy’s clitoris was still swollen from the horse. The coat lining brushed her nipples. Every time Helen changed pace the collar told Amy’s throat.

“You won because your hips can do that when a class is running and when it is not,” Helen said, not looking at her. “The house is the same work. Kitchen. Papers. My hand or the toy. You sleep there. You are not my wife. You are the girl who came on the horse first and is going to come again after we eat.”

Amy said, “Okay.” She meant more than okay. The lead pulled when she walked too slow, and she did not walk too slow again.

The cottage sat at the edge of campus, low, lamp already on in the kitchen. Helen unlocked it, brought Amy in, shut the door, and took the coat off her.

Amy stood in the kitchen on the tile, collar on, lead in Helen’s hand, naked, eighteen, chestnut hair stuck to her neck, the wet of the gym still on her inner thighs.

Helen hooked the lead around a chair back so Amy had to stay near the table.

“Plates,” Helen said. “There are two. You set them. I am going to watch you do it like this.”

Amy set two plates. Her breasts moved when she reached. The lead checked her when she went too far for a drawer. Helen’s eyes were on her hips. When the second plate was down Helen reeled her in by the leather, put two fingers between Amy’s legs, and found her soaked from the horse and from the walk.

She rubbed her standing at the table until Amy came again, fast, holding the chair, collar tight on the sound, dinner plates clicking when her hip hit the wood.

Helen licked her fingers, ordinary as tasting sauce.

“That is the job,” she said. “We eat. Then you kneel in the other room and I use you until I finish. In the morning you put clothes on and you go to class. The collar stays here unless I take it.”

Amy nodded. She was smiling, wrecked and clear-eyed. She set out forks. The lead slackened when Helen let it. The house was just a house: a sink, a window onto dark grass, a drawer that would have a toy in it later.

Lila, back in the dorm, lay on her bed with the leather ridge still printed on her memory and her own finish still in her muscles, knowing they had all three watched her, knowing Amy had gone out on a lead. Mina washed her face and thought about the chair tomorrow. None of that had to be a riddle.

In the cottage Helen sat down to eat with a naked girl on a short leather line and a watch she was not even using, and the day that had begun as school ended as this: a pommel horse, a walk, a kitchen, a hand, and no one in the room confused about what any of it was for.

Edith Worth was eighteen at breakfast. By fourth period the whole senior hall knew. By last bell she was still in the uniform because someone had asked her to pose for the yearbook on the gym steps: navy sweater, gold A, pleated skirt, hair in a ribbon the color of honey. She had the kind of face the campus already used for posters. She knew it. She liked it. She was not shy about being looked at.

She did not expect the clinic door.

Dr. Wren Ellison met her in the corridor with a clipboard and the three teachers behind her, as if this were a prize committee.

“Miss Worth,” Wren said. “Birthday honor. Come in.”

The room was not the clinic. It was the gym annex. The pommel horse stood in the middle of the mat. Edith laughed once, bright, automatic.

“Is this a joke for the squad?”

“No,” June Rhee said. “Take the sweater off.”

Edith looked from face to face. Wren. June. Mara Quinn. Helen Ward and her watch. The laugh thinned.

“I thought—” She stopped. “I thought if it was the TA thing I went to the doctor and sat on a table.”

“You would have,” Wren said. “They don’t want six mornings of that on you. The school already stares at you every Friday. They are not going to pretend they need a baseline to find out whether you can be looked at. I am here so someone still undresses you and puts a first hand on you. Then they use the room you actually work in. Clothes on the chair. No gown.”

Edith’s mouth opened. Surprise first, clean and real. Then, under it, a heat she did not decide to have.

She pulled the navy sweater off. The gold A hit the chair. A white sports bra, then that too. Her breasts were high and athletic, not small, the kind the sweater had been doing work for. She pushed the pleated skirt down. Briefs. Wren pointed. Those too. Sneakers last. Bare feet on the mat. Ribbon still in.

Wren washed her hands and put two fingers on Edith’s left nipple, then the right, a doctor’s first touch, swell and color, nothing like a team stretch. Edith’s breath went sharp. She had been touched for tape and for luck and for a stunt hold. Not like this. Not with three teachers watching her stand naked on the gym floor on her birthday.

“Responsive,” Wren said, to them, not to Edith. “You can have her.”

Mara walked around her once.

“You thought this was going to be private,” Mara said. “It isn’t. Up on the horse. The way Hale went up. No hands. You rub yourself on the leather until you come, and you keep your face like Friday night while you do it. If you drop the smile I will put you back on the floor and we start over.”

Edith stared at the horse.

“That’s— that’s the men’s event thing.”

“It’s leather,” Helen said. “It will do. You asked for adulthood this morning on a cake. This is what it is here. You may say no. You will not say you weren’t told.”

Edith’s throat worked. She could have said no. She climbed up.

She had to spread her thighs around the end of the horse and tip in until her clitoris met the warm ridge. The contact shocked her into a sound she tried to turn into a laugh and failed. She was wet. She had not known she would be. The poster-girl smile tried to come on by habit and shook.

“Smile,” June said.

Edith smiled.

She dragged forward.

The leather caught. Pleasure went up through her, blunt, ugly, exact. Her arms wanted the handles. She held them out to the sides like a stunt check and Mara said, “No,” and Edith put them behind her back and had to find the rhythm with only her hips, the way she found a beat in a cheer, except the beat was her own clitoris on gym equipment in front of four women.

She was surprised all over again when it felt good.

Not a little. A lot. The smile became real because the feeling made it real. Her breasts moved. The ribbon bounced. She heard how wet the leather had gotten and flushed to her hairline and did not stop.

“She likes it,” Helen said, mild, watch forgotten in her fingers. “Of course she does. She has been performing for a hundred people since September. We only took the uniform off.”

“Please don’t—” Edith started, and then, “—don’t stop watching.”

That was the surprise that mattered. She had thought she would be embarrassed into silence. She wanted their eyes. She wanted Wren’s clipboard still in the room. She wanted June’s still face and Mara’s circle and Helen not even timing her. She rubbed harder. The smile held. A small broken sound got out under it.

“Keep the face,” Mara said. “You can make noise. You cannot look ashamed. You are not.” Edith came on the horse with her birthday still in the building.

She came grinning, shocked at the grin, hips jerking on the leather, athletic thighs locked, a bright helpless sound that bounced off the annex walls. She almost grabbed the handles and didn’t. She rode it out the way she would ride a full-out at the end of a routine, except there was no mat to stick, only four women and her own wetness shining on the pommel.

She folded forward, shaking, laughing once for real.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh my god.”

Wren handed her a towel and did not make it a gown.

June said, “You start Monday. You fetch work. You stand in class. You are also used. Fonté already lives at Ward’s house. That job is taken. You belong to the school day. If that is not what you want, say it now.”

Edith sat on the end of the horse with the towel in her lap and the ribbon crooked and her whole body still ticking.

“I want it,” she said. She sounded eighteen and sure. “I thought you were going to measure me. I didn’t know you were going to make me do that. I liked it. I like that you watched.”

Helen clipped nothing on her. No lead. That was Amy’s walk. Edith got the pleated skirt back, and the briefs if she wanted them. She left the briefs on the chair. She put the navy sweater on over bare skin and felt the wool on her nipples and smiled at the floor.

“Go,” Wren said. “You have a birthday left.”

The cloister was full of ordinary late light. A girl from the squad spotted her and shrieked and hugged her and said happy birthday and you look so pretty, and Edith hugged her back, magnetic as ever, and did not say where she had been. Under the skirt she was wet and bare and finished. The gold A sat on a chest that still felt handled. She was late for the thing in the dining hall they had saved a cake for.

She went.

She took the stairs two at a time because she wanted to arrive while she still felt like this: used, chosen, not a child, not confused, a very happy new adult with gym leather still printed on her and Monday already sitting in her body like a date she was glad about.

In the dining hall someone started the song. Edith stood there and let them. She blew the candles out. She thought of the horse and the smile she had been told to keep and the fact that she had kept it because she wanted to. When they cheered, she cheered with them, and meant it.