Trio

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Chariot, Book 25

Chapter 1 — Nell. The appointment.

The kettle clicked off before the sun cleared the neighbor’s roof.

Nell stood at the counter in yesterday’s jeans and the gray sweater her mother had set on the chair the night before. Steam lifted from two mugs. Her mother’s identification card lay face- up beside the sugar bowl, clip still fastened, the photograph two years old. Under the name, in the same modest type as the address, the card read *human*.

Nell had seen the word every school morning of her life. This morning it held still in a way the rest of the kitchen did not.

“Sit,” her mother said.

Nell sat. Toast, jam, the blue plate. Her mother did not sit. She stood with her mug and looked at Nell’s hair, then at the clock over the stove.

“You washed it.”

“Last night.”

“Good. They photograph. Don’t touch it after you leave the house.”

Nell nodded. The jam was too sweet. She ate anyway because the appointment letter had said to eat. Her sweater felt fine in the kitchen and wrong in her hands, as if the knit already knew it would not be coming home.

Her mother set a folded paper on the table. The appointment time. The address Nell already knew. A line at the bottom about bringing the current card and wearing what she would wear to school.

“I’ll wait in the lot,” her mother said. “They don’t let anyone past the desk with you.”

“I know.”

“If they keep you, they call. You don’t call me from inside.”

Nell looked at the card again. Human. Her own card, in the zip pocket of her bag, said the same thing. Eighteen as of last month. Adult measurement today. Everyone did it. The girls in her year had been counting the weeks out loud since winter.

Her mother reached across and tucked a piece of hair behind Nell’s ear, then took her hand back as if the touch had been a mistake.

“You look like yourself,” she said. “That’s all they need.”

Nell put her plate in the sink. In the hall mirror she looked like herself: dark hair clean on her shoulders, mouth too honest, the small gold studs her mother had given her at sixteen. The sweater made her look younger than the letter in her

bag.

They locked the door. The morning was cool enough for sleeves. On the step her mother stopped and looked at Nell’s face the way she had looked at the clock.

“Arms down if you get cold,” she said. “Don’t fold them.”

Nell did not ask why. She got in the car.

The lot for adult appointments sat behind a low building with no windows on the street side. Other cars already waited. Girls Nell’s age crossed the pavement in pairs and alone, all of them dressed, most of them quiet. One girl in a yellow jacket laughed at something on her phone and then put the phone away when she saw the doors.

Nell’s mother parked facing the entrance.

“I’ll be here.”

Nell got out. The air found the gap at her wrists. She walked toward the glass.

Inside, the waiting room was already full. Plastic chairs in two rows. A counter with a woman behind glass. A screen on the wall listed first names and a room number that changed when someone was called. Everyone in the chairs was eighteen or looked it. Everyone wore clothes. A few had jackets in their laps. One girl picked at a hangnail until it bled and then sat on her hands.

Nell gave her name at the glass. The woman behind it took her card, looked at the photograph, looked at Nell, and slid a clipboard through the slot.

“Print at the X. Leave the card. You’ll get it back with the result.”

Nell printed. The card stayed on the other side of the glass.

She found a seat at the end of the second row. The girl to her left had a braid and a canvas bag printed with a campus seal. The girl across from her stared at the screen as if the letters might change if she blinked.

A door opened at the far end. A technician in gray called, “Pietra Lane.”

A girl two seats down stood. Fair hair, a navy sweater, shoes that looked new. She smiled at no one in particular, the tight smile of someone who had been told this would take twenty minutes. She went through the door with her bag on her shoulder.

Nell watched the door close. The room returned to the sound of the ventilation and someone turning a page they were not reading.

The girl with the braid spoke without looking at Nell.

“My sister said they make you take everything off even if you’re just baseline.”

Nell kept her voice low. “The letter didn’t say.”

“The letter never says. They say it when you’re in there. Witness in the room. Photos. Then the number.”

“What if you’re under.”

The girl shrugged one shoulder. “You put your clothes back on and they give you the card at the desk. That’s what my sister did.”

Nell looked at her own knees. The jeans felt suddenly specific: the seam, the button, the fact of them.

The screen changed. Other first names. A girl in a green dress was called and did not come back for a long time. When she did come back she was dressed and her face was blotchy and she walked straight to the exit without stopping at the glass. The woman at the desk called after her about the card. The girl did not turn.

Nell’s hands were cold. She put them in her sweater pockets and then took them out again because her mother had said arms down.

The door opened. Pietra Lane came out.

She was dressed. Navy sweater, bag on her shoulder, the same new shoes. Her color was high, as if the room behind her had been warm. She stopped at the glass. The woman there slid a card through. Pietra looked at it, nodded once, and walked toward the exit with her shoulders down, the walk of someone who had passed a test she had not wanted to take out loud.

She was almost to the doors when the woman at the desk stood.

“Lane. Pietra Lane. Back to four, please.”

Pietra turned. The smile from earlier was gone.

“I just—”

“Room four. Leave the card at the glass.”

Pietra came back down the row. She did not look at anyone. She set the new card on the counter. The technician who had called her the first time appeared in the doorway and waited until Pietra reached her, then put a hand out, not quite touching, and guided her through.

The door shut.

The girl with the braid let out a breath.

“That’s a call-back.”

Nell did not ask what a call-back meant. The ventilation filled the space where a question would have gone.

Her name came up on the screen.

“Nell Ives. Room two.”

She stood. Her legs felt unused. At the inner door a woman in gray held it open with her foot.

“Bag on the hook. Phone in the bin if you brought one.”

Nell had not brought a phone. She hung the bag. The hallway beyond the waiting room was narrower and brighter. Floor the color of weak tea. A second door, already ajar.

Room two was a square with a table, a stool, a wall of pale cabinets, and a camera on a short arm near the ceiling. The air was cooler than the waiting room. A paper sheet had been pulled down over the table and not yet wrinkled.

Two women were already inside.

The one nearer the cabinets wore the same gray as the hallway staff. Older than Nell by ten years or more, hair pinned, hands bare. She looked at Nell the way the woman at the glass had looked at the card.

“I’m Ms. Bram. I’ll take the baseline and the volume. Officer Noll is your witness today.”

The second woman stood near the wall with a tablet. Dark uniform, no jacket, hair cut close to her head. She nodded once at Nell and did not smile.

“Officer Noll,” she said, as if Nell might need the name twice. “I stay for the photographs and the reading. I don’t leave the room.”

Nell stood just inside the door. The sweater that had been fine in the kitchen felt thick.

Ms. Bram opened a cabinet and took out a folded cloth the size of a hand towel. She set it on the stool.

“Current card is at the desk. We reprint at the end of the appointment. Clothes off, including jewelry. Fold them on the chair. The studs too.”

Nell’s hand went to her ear.

“Everything,” Ms. Bram said, not unkind. “Baseline means we see the skin we measure. Hood included. If you leave anything on, we start over and the file notes resistance.”

Officer Noll looked at the tablet, then at Nell, and waited.

Nell pulled the sweater over her head. The air found her shoulders and the tops of her breasts through the thin tank she had worn underneath. She folded the sweater because folding gave her hands something to do. The tank came next. Her nipples tightened in the cool before she had time to think about them. She crossed her arms and then remembered her mother and let them hang.

Jeans. Socks. The last of it. The gold studs in her palm, then on the chair with the rest. She was bare in a room with two dressed women and a camera on an arm. The paper on the table made a small sound when the vent pushed air across it.

Ms. Bram did not look away while Nell undressed. She did not stare either. She watched the way a person watches a list being completed.

“Step to the mark on the floor. Facing me. Arms at your sides.”

A strip of tape on the tile, pale as the cabinets. Nell stepped to it. The floor was cold under her feet. She felt the air along her spine, between her thighs, across the place she had been told since she was small not to fuss with in public. Her pulse sat high in her throat.

Officer Noll lifted the tablet.

“Photographs first,” Ms. Bram said. “Front. Then turn when I say. We need the whole figure and a close set. You can breathe. You don’t need to smile.”

The camera on the arm woke with a soft tone. Officer Noll moved it down, then in. Nell looked at the cabinet handles so she would not look at the lens.

“Front.”

A click. Another.

“Turn left.”

Nell turned. The air moved over the newly exposed side of her. She could feel Officer Noll’s attention as a weight at her back, not a hand, the fact of being recorded.

“Again. Good. Face the wall. Hair over one shoulder, please. We need the nape.”

Nell gathered her hair and drew it forward. The motion lifted her breasts. She felt them settle. The camera clicked.

“Now the table. Sit on the edge, feet on the step. Knees apart to the tape.”

There was tape on the step as well. Nell sat. The paper sheet stuck faintly to the backs of her thighs. She opened her knees to the marks. The position made her aware of everything the waiting-room clothes had hidden: the heat that had started, uninvited, on the walk down the hall; the way the cool air found her and made her want to close. She did not close.

Ms. Bram pulled on gloves. The sound was ordinary and enormous.

“I’m going to look first without the instrument,” she said. “I need to see the hood and the glans at rest. You can look at the ceiling or at me. Don’t tuck your hips. If you get wet, that goes in the notes. It isn’t a problem. It’s a variable.”

Nell looked at the ceiling. There was a water stain the shape of a comma.

Gloved fingers touched the inside of her knee, then higher, not rushing. Ms. Bram used the back of a knuckle to settle Nell’s thigh where it had started to drift inward.

“Stay.”

Nell stayed. The next touch was on her, directly, parting what she kept covered when she was alone in the bath. The hood moved under the glove. Nell’s breath snagged. She felt herself swell in the space of that single adjustment, a heat that had nothing to do with the room’s temperature. Shame came with it, sharp and useless. She kept her arms down.

“There,” Ms. Bram said, to Officer Noll more than to Nell. “Visible at rest. We’ll get the volume in a minute.”

Officer Noll made a mark on the tablet.

“Photographs of the field,” Ms. Bram said. “Same protocol.”

The camera came closer. Nell stared at the comma on the ceiling and felt the lens find her. Click. Click. She was wet now; she could feel it, a thin slick where Ms. Bram’s glove had been. The knowledge sat in her face. She could not tell if they could see that too.

“All right,” Ms. Bram said. “Instrument.”

She opened a shallow case on the cabinet. What she lifted out was smaller than Nell had pictured from the pamphlets at school: a clear head, a slim neck, a readout no larger than a thumb. Ms. Bram held it up so Nell could see it was clean.

“This reads volume and a surface temperature. You don’t have to do anything except not clamp. If you clamp I wait and we start the count over. Most people clamp the first time. That’s expected.”

Nell nodded. Her mouth was dry.

Ms. Bram stood between Nell’s knees. The glove was still on. She used two fingers to hold Nell open enough for the head of the instrument. The contact was cool at first, then not. Nell’s hips tried to lift. She forced them down. The instrument seated against her glans with a pressure that was not pain and was not nothing. Her whole attention poured into that one small place.

“Breathe,” Ms. Bram said.

Nell breathed. The readout made a quiet tick. Ms. Bram watched it. Officer Noll watched Ms. Bram, then Nell’s face, then the tablet.

The sensation gathered. Nell had touched herself. She knew the shape of her own want. This was that shape with no privacy around it: a dressed woman

holding her open, another woman recording, the camera still live on its arm. Her nipples ached in the cool. She felt a pulse low and insistent. A sound almost left her mouth. She kept it.

Ms. Bram glanced at the readout and did not remove the instrument.

“Hold.”

Seconds. Nell’s thighs shook once and she locked them. Wetness made the next small adjustment of the head feel like more than it was. She thought of the girl with the braid, of Pietra walking out dressed, of her mother’s card on the kitchen counter with *human* printed under the name. The thought did not help. Her body had decided to be in the room without her.

Ms. Bram read the number aloud for the tablet.

“Over.”

Officer Noll did not look surprised. She entered it.

Ms. Bram lifted the instrument away. The air on wet skin made Nell flinch. She started to close her knees.

“Not yet,” Ms. Bram said. “Photograph after volume. Then you can sit back.”

The camera again. Nell’s face burned. She knew what the lens was getting: flushed, open, the glans she had never had to think of as a measurement now swollen from the reading itself. Click.

“You can bring your knees in. Stay on the table.”

Nell brought her knees in. The paper stuck and released. She wanted the sweater with a force that felt childish. The chair with her clothes on it was six feet away and might as well have been in the lot.

Ms. Bram stripped the gloves into a bin and washed her hands at the small sink. While the water ran she spoke to Officer Noll without lowering her voice.

“Print the adult card. Standard language. Same-day transfer; they have a seat on the ten- forty.”

Officer Noll nodded and tapped the tablet. A printer in the cabinet hummed.

Nell found her voice.

“Over the line.”

“Yes,” Ms. Bram said. She dried her hands. “The reading is over. The card will say volatile where the old one said human. That’s the classification. Clothes stay here with the old card. You don’t redress.”

Nell looked at the chair.

“I have to go outside.”

“Yes.”

“There’s a lot.”

“Your ride is arranged. You won’t walk the street. Van in the bay. Someone from clinic meets you.”

Officer Noll took a card from the printer slot, compared it to the tablet, and brought it to Nell. She did not hand it over. She held it so Nell could see.

Nell’s photograph from five minutes ago, hair still neat, face still the face from the hall mirror. Under the name, where *human* had been, the word *volatile* sat in the same modest type.

“This stays with you,” Officer Noll said. “Clip it or hold it. Don’t fold it. Desk will take the old one off the file.”

Nell reached for the card. Their fingers did not touch. The plastic was warm from the printer.

“I passed the waiting room dressed,” Nell said, and heard how small it sounded.

Ms. Bram had already turned to a second form.

“The waiting room is for humans and for girls who haven’t been read yet. After the card prints, you aren’t either of those. We don’t send you back through dressed. Policy is immediate. It keeps the file clean.”

Officer Noll set a shallow bin on the chair beside Nell’s clothes.

“Sweater, tank, jeans, underthings, socks, studs, bag contents except the letter. Letter can travel. Everything else stays with the old identification.”

Nell got off the table. Her legs were unsteady. She put the new card on the stool so she would not drop it and then, because there was nothing else to do, she picked up her own clothes and laid them in the bin the way Ms. Bram had asked her to fold them at the start. The gold studs looked like someone else’s. The sweater looked like morning.

She was still wet. Standing made her feel it. The air in the room had not changed; her skin had. She kept her arms at her sides because her mother had said to and because there was no longer a sleeve to hide in.

Ms. Bram attached a paper band to Nell’s left wrist. A number. No name.

“Bay is left out of this room, second left, don’t take the public hall. Officer Noll walks you.”

Officer Noll opened the door.

The hallway was the same tea-colored floor. A woman in gray passed them going the other way and did not look at Nell’s face. She looked at the wristband, then at the card in Nell’s hand, and kept walking.

They did not take the public hall. The second left opened on a wider corridor with a roll-up door at the end and daylight under it. Cooler air came in from the bay. Nell’s skin tightened all over. She felt her nipples draw and could do nothing about it. Officer Noll did not comment.

In the bay a white van sat with its side door open. No windows along the passenger compartment. A woman in clinic gray stood by the running board with a clipboard.

Before they reached her, a door on the right opened and Pietra Lane came out.

She was not dressed.

Her fair hair was still the hair from the waiting room. The rest of her was the rest of her: pale, marked with the same kind of wristband Nell had, shoes gone, the navy sweater nowhere. She held a card against her ribs as if it could be a hand. Her mouth was set. When she saw Nell she looked at Nell’s face and then at Nell’s body and then away, a look with no greeting in it.

A technician had her by the elbow, not hard.

“Inland has the one-o’clock,” the technician said to the woman at the van, as if Pietra were not standing there. “This one waits in three until they roll.”

The woman at the van checked her clipboard.

“I’ve got Ives for clinic. Lane’s not on my list.”

“She’s not on yours.” The technician steered Pietra toward a bench along the wall. Pietra sat. She kept the card against her. She did not cross her arms. She looked at the concrete between her feet.

Inland. Nell heard the word and did not have a place to put it. It sounded like a direction. It sounded like a room. Pietra’s pass in the waiting room sat in Nell’s head beside the bare girl on the bench and would not add up.

Officer Noll brought Nell to the van.

“Ives,” she said to the woman with the clipboard. “Adult over. Same-day.”

The woman looked at Nell’s card, then at Nell, the same full look Ms. Bram had used, professional and complete.

“Step in. Seat on the left. Belt if there’s one. Door stays shut until we roll.”

Nell stepped in. The compartment had two benches facing each other and no fabric on the seats. She sat. The vinyl was cold. She belted because the strap was there. The door slid and latched. For a moment she and the clinic woman were

the only people in the dim.

The woman sat across from her and did not offer a sheet.

“Short ride,” she said. “You can hold the card. If you get carsick, tell me before you need the floor.”

Nell held the card. Volatile. Her photograph looked like a person who still owned a sweater.

Through the thin wall she heard the roll-up door start to lift. Daylight cut under the van and then widened. The engine turned over.

Nell looked at her own knees because looking at the woman across from her meant being looked at in return, and she was already being looked at. The van smelled like cleaner and cold metal. Her hair, which her mother had told her not to touch, clung at her neck where she was sweating.

She thought of the kitchen. The kettle. The card beside the sugar that still said human. Her mother in the lot, facing the entrance, waiting for a girl in a gray sweater to come back through the glass.

The van moved. Nell put her palm flat on the seat to keep from sliding. The vinyl stuck and released. Every bump in the pavement arrived in her bones and, lower, in the place the instrument had been, still tender, still wrong-hot. She did not close her legs more than the belt allowed. There was no one left in the compartment to tell her to keep them apart. She kept them apart anyway.

The clinic woman watched the pass-through to the driver, then glanced at Nell once, a check, and looked away again.

Nell held the new card in both hands so it would not fall. Outside the unwindowed wall, the morning went on in clothes. Inside, the air found all of her, and the word on the plastic was already true.

Chapter 2 — Lise. The desk.

The classification suite kept the same temperature all year. Lise felt it first at the wrists, where her cuffs ended, and then along the part in her hair when she bent to the morning stack.

Officer Denn was already at the side desk with the tablet that talked to the printer. She had her jacket on. Lise had hers on too. The hooks by the door held nothing yet except a spare clip and a visitor badge on a lanyard no one had used since spring.

“Quinn is in two,” Denn said, without looking up. “Nineteen. First adult was last year under a different officer. This is the review they flagged from the photograph.”

Lise set her bag in the drawer that locked. “Who flagged it.”

“Board clerk. Not Venn’s hand. The note just says presentation.”

Lise took the file. Paper still, because Venn liked paper when the number and the picture did not sit together. Asta Quinn. Dark hair in the intake portrait, mouth closed, eyes on the lens as if she had been told not to smile. Nineteen. Last year’s volume printed under the line by enough that no one had argued. The new photograph was clipped to the inside flap, printed larger than policy required. Full figure, arms at her sides, the room behind her the same tea- colored floor as every other room in the building. She was not smiling in this one either. She did not need to. The picture did the work pictures did when a clerk decided a file was no longer only a number.

Lise closed the flap.

“Is she on the table.”

“She’s been on the table since eight. Bram’s covering the hands. Noll’s off this floor. I’m witness if you want a second set of initials.”

“I’ll take the room,” Lise said. “You stay on the desk for the slip if it comes.”

Denn finally looked at her. “You think it comes.”

“I think they don’t print a photograph that size unless someone already wrote the sentence.”

Denn’s mouth moved like a person who agreed and would not say so on a recorded floor. “I’ll buzz if Venn’s office walks anything down.”

Lise took the file and the spare glove box and went down the short hall.

Room two was the measurement room that faced the lot. Blind slats tilted up so the glass showed sky and the edge of a roof and nothing of the pavement. The camera on the arm was live; the small light said so. The paper sheet on the table

had already taken the shape of a person.

Asta Quinn sat on the edge of the table with her feet on the step and her knees closed as far as the tape allowed, which was not far. She was not wearing anything. A folded cardigan and a skirt and the rest of a nine-o'clock outfit made a neat stack on the chair, shoes under it, a thin gold chain coiled on top like a signature. Her hair was darker than the portrait, heavy on her shoulders. She had the kind of face the campus screens liked: young, specific, easy to remember after one look. Her nipples were tight from the air. She had not been given a sheet. Sheets stayed on beds.

Ms. Bram stood at the cabinet with the instrument case open and did not turn until Lise closed the door.

"Officer Keene," Bram said. "Review volume and the new stills. She's been instructed. She understands this is not a first baseline."

Asta's eyes found Lise's jacket, then Lise's badge, then Lise's face. She kept her hands on the paper at either side of her hips, fingers flat, the pose the pamphlets taught.

Lise set the file on the cabinet and pulled gloves.

"I'm Officer Keene. I initial the review. Ms. Bram takes the reading. You stay on the marks. If you need to speak, you speak. If you don't, that's fine."

Asta's voice was low and used to being listened to.

"The letter said the number was already finished."

"The letter said the number was recorded," Lise said. "Recorded is not the same as finished. Look at me or at the wall. Don't watch the instrument unless you want to."

Asta looked at the wall. A pulse showed at her throat.

Bram moved between Asta's knees with the same economy she used on every appointment. "Knees to the tape, Quinn. You drifted."

Asta opened. The air in the room did the rest. Lise saw, because she was there to see: dark hair at the join of her thighs, the hood, the glans beneath it small in the way the last file had promised, ordinary, under. Nothing in the flesh argued with last year's volume. The argument was sitting in the folder in the photograph of her standing.

Bram's glove settled the hood. Asta's breath caught and then went thin. She did not clamp. She had been here before.

"Rest first," Bram said, for the tablet. "Then volume."

Lise stood where a witness stood, close enough to see the field, far enough that her clothes did not brush the table. She was aware of her own clothes the way she was always aware of them in this room: the weight of the jacket, the seam of the slacks, the fact of being covered while the woman on the paper was not. It was the job. She had initialed forty-one files this month. Most of the women on the table were eighteen and newly read. Asta was nineteen and already supposed to have been done.

The instrument seated. Asta’s thighs tightened and released. A flush rose from her chest into her throat, quick, unwilling. Bram watched the readout and did not comment on the flush. The flush went into the notes whether anyone commented or not.

“Under,” Bram said. “Same band as last year. A little lower if you want the tenth.”

Lise looked at the number. Under. Cleanly under. The kind of under that sent a girl back through the public hall with her cardigan on and her chain at her throat.

“Photograph the field,” Lise said.

The camera came down. Asta stared at the wall and let it. Click. Click. Her glans had swollen a degree from the instrument; it still would not have crossed anyone’s line. Lise had seen enough rooms to know the difference.

Bram set the instrument in the tray. “She can close.”

“Not yet,” Lise said. She opened the file to the large still and held it where Bram could see it and Asta could not, unless Asta turned her head. Asta did not turn her head. “This is the flag. Full figure from the recall. Arms down. No jewelry in the shot.”

Bram glanced. “That’s a pretty girl under the line.”

“That’s the note,” Lise said.

Asta’s voice came from the table, smaller.

“Can I see what you’re holding.”

Lise considered the policy and then the room. She turned the photograph.

Asta looked at herself standing. For a moment her face did the work of a person recognizing a door. Then she looked at Lise’s badge again.

“That’s just me.”

“It’s you after they asked you to come back,” Lise said. “The volume today matches last year. The photograph is what the Board has.”

“I measured under.”

“You did.”

Asta’s knees had started to drift inward. Bram tapped the tape with two fingers. Asta opened again. The motion made her breath hitch. She was wet enough now that the paper had taken a mark under her. She saw Lise see it. Color went through her face and stayed.

“I did everything they said last year,” Asta said. “I came dressed. I left dressed.”

“I know,” Lise said. “This isn’t last year.”

The wall plate buzzed. Denn’s voice, thin through the speaker.

“Keene. Slip from the Board. Venn’s stamp. I’m bringing it.”

Lise did not look at Asta when she said, “Come.”

Denn entered with her jacket still on and a single sheet in a clear sleeve. She stopped inside the door, saw Asta on the table, and kept her eyes on Lise the way staff kept their eyes on staff when a subject was in the open.

“Chair’s language,” Denn said. “Not a new measurement. Presentation.”

Lise took the sleeve. The paper was short. Asta Quinn. File number. Last volume, under. Today’s volume, under. Then the line Venn used when the number would not do the work the building wanted:

Deviation from linear presentation.

The stamp sat under the line in blue. Venn’s initials in the box. A clerk’s time mark. A blank line for the classifying officer.

Denn waited.

Asta had seen the color of the stamp even if she could not read it from the table. “What does it say.”

Lise read it aloud because the file would say she had. “Deviation from linear presentation.”

“What does that mean.”

Bram closed the instrument case and did not help.

Lise kept the sheet in her hand and looked at Asta’s face, then at Asta’s body, then at the photograph in the folder that had already decided the sentence. Linear presentation was the phrase the Board used when a woman measured inside the human band and still looked, in the stills, like the kind of woman the site could sell. Lise had initialed the phrase nine times this quarter. She had not written it. She had not refused it.

“It means the volume is not the only record,” Lise said. “The Board can classify on the file as a whole.”

Asta’s hands had curled in the paper. “I’m under.”

“You are under,” Lise said. “The stamp is not about the tenth on the readout. It’s about the photograph and the review.”

“So you can send me home.”

Denn shifted her weight. The camera light stayed on.

Lise took a pen from her jacket. The blank line waited. She wrote L. KEENE in the box she had been writing in since she made officer, the same letters she put on files that went home and files that did not. The ink looked blacker than it was.

“No,” Lise said. “I initial. Clothes stay in the room with the old card. New card prints from the desk. Same-day transfer.”

Asta stared at her. The flush that had been arousal and shame became something flatter.

“I measured under.”

“I know what you measured.”

Bram took a wristband from the drawer. Denn went to the chair and opened the shallow bin they used when a file turned. The cardigan went in first. The gold chain made a small sound on the plastic.

Asta looked at the bin and then at Lise’s jacket.

“You’re dressed.”

“I’m staff,” Lise said.

It came out even. It was the sentence she had. She peeled the gloves and washed her hands while Bram sealed the band on Asta’s wrist and Denn called the bay for a seat. Asta got off the table when she was told. She stood on the cold floor with her arms at her sides because someone had already told her, last year or this morning, not to fold them. She was shaking. The shaking moved through her breasts and her mouth and the wet that had nothing to do with the stamp. Lise did not give her the cardigan. The cardigan was in the bin.

“Left out, second left, not the public hall,” Denn said, the way they always said it. “I’ll walk her.”

Asta stopped at the door. She looked at Lise once more, a look with no question left in it that Lise could answer on the record.

“My mother thinks I’m at a review.”

“The desk will call the contact on the file,” Lise said.

Then Asta was gone, Denn’s jacket a dark shape beside her bare shoulder, Bram carrying the bin. The paper on the table still held the dent of her. The camera

light went dark when Lise touched the wall plate.

Lise stood in the quiet and put the stamped sheet into the folder. Under. Stamp. Her initials. The photograph that had disagreed with the number stared up from the flap until she closed it.

She took the file back to the desk.

The rest of the morning was other names. An eighteen-year-old whose volume printed over before lunch; clothes in the bin; van. A faculty spouse in for a courtesy read who measured under and left through the front glass with her coat on and her mouth tight. Denn handled the courtesy because courtesy wanted a softer voice than Lise had used in room two. Lise initialed what was put in front of her. She ate standing in the staff kitchen with her jacket open and her badge still clipped, the suite's cold sitting on her throat where Asta's flush had been.

At two, Venn's clerk walked through with a stack and did not stop. At three, Denn said, "Bay took Quinn. Clinic, not the other list."

Lise nodded. She did not ask which other list. She knew the word the bay used when a face did not book. She did not say it.

By five the waiting room had emptied. The woman at the glass locked the slot and left a note about a printer jam. Bram signed out. Denn stood in the doorway of the suite with her bag on her shoulder.

"You staying."

"Catch-up," Lise said. "The Quinn addendum."

Denn looked at the dark glass of room two. "Don't use the camera after hours. Archive flags the light."

"I know."

"Door lock works from inside." Denn hesitated, then put her jacket sleeve right where it had ridden up. "You look tired, Keene."

"I'm staff," Lise said again, and Denn almost smiled, and then Denn was gone.

The suite settled. Heat in the walls ticked. Somewhere a cleaner's cart rolled and stopped and rolled. Lise sat at her desk with Asta's file closed under her hand and did not open it. She knew what was in it. She knew what she had written.

She also knew what the instrument did at five that it did not do at eight.

She had known for a year.

Lise stood. She took nothing from the desk except the key to room two and the instrument case Bram had left on the cabinet because Bram trusted the lock. She turned off the overhead in the suite and left the small desk lamp on, a lie for anyone who walked the hall and wanted to believe an officer was still doing

paper.

Room two smelled faintly of the cleaner they used on the table and of the paper and of Asta’s skin, which the vent had not quite taken. Lise shut the door. She thumbed the lock. She stood with her back to it and listened until the cart was gone.

The camera arm was off. She checked the wall plate twice.

Then she took off her jacket and hung it on the chair that had held Asta’s cardigan. Badge still clipped. She unclipped it and set it face-down on the cabinet, not because anyone could see it, because the weight of it on her chest felt like a sentence she was not ready to read out loud.

Boots. Slacks. The knit she wore under the jacket. The rest. She folded as she had told other women to fold, square and ordinary, a stack that could go in a bin if a bin were brought. No one brought a bin. The room was hers after hours the way a room is ours when we have the key and no witness.

The air found her. She had been in this air all day and it had only touched her wrists and her hair. Now it moved over her breasts and the plane of her belly and the insides of her thighs. Her nipples drew up. She did not fold her arms. There was no one to see the habit and she kept it anyway.

She stepped to the tape on the floor first, because that was where the protocol began, and stood facing the dark slats. Her own body in the glass was a pale interruption. Blonde hair. The officer’s posture without the officer’s clothes. She looked like a file she had not opened.

The table paper still showed Asta’s shape. Lise pulled a clean sheet down over it. The sound was loud. She sat on the edge, feet on the step, and opened her knees to the tape.

The instrument was cold in her hand. She had held it a thousand times for other women. Holding it for herself made her mouth go dry.

She did not use a glove. After hours she did not pretend this was a baseline.

Her fingers knew the map. Hood. The glans beneath, which was not Asta’s, which had always sat near the line in the unofficial hours when Lise had first started staying late and had told herself she was checking the calibration. She was wet already. She had been wet since Asta’s flush, since the stamp, since Denn’s voice on the wall plate, and she had kept it under the slacks the way she kept everything under the slacks. Now there was nothing to keep it under.

She seated the head.

The sensation arrived all at once and with no pamphlet language around it. Her hips tried to lift. She made them stay. The readout ticked and held.

Just over.

A small over. The kind of over that would print a different word on a card if the card were printing. The kind of over that depended on the hour, and the heat she had carried out of the Quinn file, and the fact that she was touching herself with the building's own instrument in the building's own room.

She took the head away. Air on wet skin. A sound left her that she would not have allowed on a recorded floor. She sat with her knees open and her badge face-down on the cabinet and waited until her breath was only breath.

Ten minutes. She let the clock on the wall do what clocks did. The flush in her chest eased. She measured again.

Almost over. A hair under if she did not press. A hair over if she seated it the way Bram seated it when the file wanted a clean tenth.

Lise looked at both numbers and at her own hand.

She knew this. Cycle. Heat. Arousal. Posture. Time of day. She had written those variables in other women's notes. She had never written them next to her own name. She did not write them now.

She measured a third time because the third time was the one that would have counted if this had been a file. The readout sat on the line like a person deciding whether to knock. Over, if she stayed this wet. Under, if she waited long enough for the wanting to go out of her.

The wanting did not go out of her.

She set the instrument in the tray. She did not photograph. She did not speak thanks. Thanks was for the sessions the site logged as safety, and this was not a session, and there was no camera, and she was still, in the sentence she used on doors, staff.

She stayed on the table longer than she needed. The clean paper stuck to her and released. Her breasts felt heavy in the cool. She put two fingers where the instrument had been, not to finish, only to know the size of what the readout had named, and the knowing ran through her like heat in a wall. She took her hand away before the sound in her throat became a name.

Then she stood.

Dressing was slower than undressing. Knit. Slacks. Boots. The jacket last. The badge clipped back onto the pocket where it belonged. In the glass she was Officer Keene again: blonde, covered, finished with the room. The stack of her own clothes had never gone into a bin. That was the difference she was still allowed.

She washed the instrument the way Bram washed it. She locked the case. She pulled the used sheet and threw it in the bin under the sink and spread a fresh one so the morning would look like every morning.

At the cabinet she stood with Asta’s closed file in her mind and a pen in the cup and the after- hours numbers still sitting in her body. The pen stayed in the cup.

She wrote nothing.

Lise turned off the room light. In the dark the slats let in a little sky. She unlocked the door and stepped into the suite where the desk lamp was still lying for her. She sat. She put her hands flat on the blotter, clothed hands, officer hands, and listened to the building tick until the wanting was only a pulse she could keep under wool.

The measurement room stayed empty behind her. The tape on the floor waited for eight o’clock. Lise reached for the next folder in the stack because the stack was the job, and because the job was the sentence that let her put her jacket on after, and because the line on her own unofficial readout was not a line she had been asked, tonight, to initial.

Chapter 3 — Iona. Outside the campus theater.

Iona felt people look at her before she got the sheet unfolded.

It had been like that since she was sixteen. Red hair, long legs, a face that made cashiers forget the total. Today it worked against her. She wanted the plaza to look at the naked woman they were about to walk out of the theater. Instead a girl in a campus hoodie glanced at Iona, then at her friend, and the friend said, “Who’s the redhead?” loud enough to carry.

“I’m nobody,” Iona said. “Read the sheet.”

The sheet said BRING HER OFF THE SQUARE. Orrie had painted it last night at the

kitchen table. In daylight it looked like what it was: three women with a tote bag and a water jug, standing on the wrong side of a campus plaza.

The right side had the screen.

It was mounted outside the theater like a scoreboard. A woman Iona didn’t know yet filled most of it, nothing on, breathing hard under a caption. LIVE PREVIEW. FULL VIDEO ON THE SITE. SUBSCRIBE. Next to that, in the same clean type as a bank ad: TAX HOLIDAY — YEAR TWELVE.

Nia set the jug down and stared at the numbers in the corner of the screen.

“Is that paid hours?” Nia said.

“That’s paid hours,” Orrie said. “That’s why nobody’s coming to us.”

Iona already knew how the money worked. You didn’t need a pamphlet. Your aunt explained it at Thanksgiving. The city stopped sending a tax bill. In place of the tax they ran a website. Cameras on women who had gone over the line and lost their clothes. Videos every week. You paid monthly if you wanted more than the free preview. Campus talks, clinic sessions, favorites — it all sat on the same hub. Enough people paid that the state called it even. Keep the site open, keep the tax at zero. Try to shut the site down and you were the person who wanted taxes back.

That was the whole party system now. One side said leave the holiday alone. The other side had no second sentence that didn’t sound like a rate hike. The Board, the clinic, the campus, the people who ran the site — they argued over schedules inside that. They did not argue with the holiday.

The official story under the holiday was just as short. Genome work had named it. Women with a larger glans were not a variation. They were a remnant, the papers said — a rogue branch of the human line, more reactive, a deviant species that had come along with everyone else and never left. The new card printed

volatile where human had been. After the card, no clothes. Iona had stopped believing the instrument was honest the year she watched two readings on the same woman change with the hour. The state did not need the instrument to be honest. It needed a word, a website, and a tax no one would vote back on.

Iona had a flyer that said the women on those videos did not get a cut. She had handed out forty of them since noon. Most went in backpacks. A few went in the trash by the shade sail.

A woman in running shorts stopped, read the first lines, and nodded at the banner.

“I hear you,” she said. “I’m still not voting a tax back. My tax is zero. My sister pays fifteen bucks and watches on her lunch break. You close that site, they send the tax bill again. I’m not doing that.”

“Those videos are those women,” Nia said.

“That site is why I can afford my apartment,” the woman said, and jogged toward the screen.

Orrie sat on the stool and rolled her neck.

“Say the money when you talk,” Orrie said. “Not the files. They understand money.”

“I know,” Iona said.

She did. She also knew her T-shirt was too thin for how hard her nipples had gone, and that it was not only the wind. The preview cut closer. You could see the woman on the screen was wet. You could see students near the speaker pole holding their phones like tickets. Iona’s jeans sat against her in a way she did not want. She crossed her arms and felt her own breasts press her wrists.

Stop it. You came here to get her off that tape.

A student with a lanyard walked by and looked at Iona’s mouth, then her chest, then the sheet.

“You with the talk?” she said.

“No.”

“You look like you could be.”

“I’m not.”

She smiled as if Iona had been friendly and kept going.

Nia watched her leave. “You’re going to get more of that than signatures.”

“Then stand in front of me and look plain,” Iona said.

“I can’t fix your face, Iona.”

The side door opened. A staffer in slacks taped a square on the bricks, ten feet from the screen. People drifted toward it without being asked. The preview switched to a waiting slate: CAMPUS TALK — BRIA SEN — FREE PREVIEW.

“That’s her,” Orrie said. “Bria Sen. Twenty-four. Finished clinic last spring. This is her Tuesday job. She does the thank-you. She does not leave.”

“She will if I make it real,” Iona said.

Orrie looked at her. “Define real.”

Iona had not said it out loud in the kitchen. She said it now, low, because the plaza was filling and there was no later.

“I’m going to kiss her. On the mouth. In front of them. If she kisses me back she can’t pretend she’s only a lesson. She’ll step off.”

Nia’s eyebrows went up. “That’s the plan?”

“That’s the plan.”

Orrie was quiet for a second. Then she shrugged, small.

“Better than another flyer,” Orrie said. “If she slaps you, we use that. If she doesn’t, we use that. Nia, stay on her face.”

“I know.”

Iona’s pulse was in her throat and between her legs. She hated how ready her body was for a plan she had called strategy. She drank water. It tasted like the jug.

Bria Sen came out the side door naked.

Not a robe. Not a towel. Bare feet on concrete, then on brick, and the plaza noise changed the way a room changes when someone turns a light on. She was brown-haired, twenty-four, high breasts, a waist that made the tape look cheap. Her nipples were tight from the air- conditioning behind her. She walked to the square and stood on it and let a hundred dressed people see all of her at once.

Iona’s mouth went dry.

A staffer with a tablet stood beside her, fully clothed.

“Two minutes,” the staffer said. “You can greet them.”

Bria looked at the students. She looked at the screen that was already showing her from another angle. She looked at Iona last, a short hit, and Iona felt it land in her stomach.

“Good afternoon,” Bria said. The plaza speakers caught her. “I’m Bria Sen. I do the campus talks. You’re going to see me like this before I talk. That’s the point. If you have questions about the test they ran on me, hold them. If you’re going to look, look. I know you will.”

A girl in the front whispered, “She’s prettier than the Thursday one.”

Iona stepped up to the tape on the bricks.

“Bria. You can walk. We have a shirt in the bag. We have a car.”

Bria’s throat moved. For a second she was just a naked woman on hot brick with too many phones in her face. Then the trained voice came back.

“I have this job,” Bria said. “I’m grateful for it. Please don’t interrupt.”

“You’re not grateful,” Iona said. “They took your clothes. They put you on a website. They told you to say thank you so people don’t have to pay tax. Step off the square.”

The staffer lifted a hand. “Protest stays behind the tape.”

Iona could smell her from here. Warm skin. Soap. Sun on her shoulders and on the tops of her breasts. When Bria shifted her weight, Iona saw the shine between her thighs. Not much. Enough that the nearest phones adjusted.

Iona was already wet. The seam of her jeans told on her if she paid attention, so she tried not to. It didn’t work.

“Bria,” she said. “Look at me. Not them.”

Bria looked.

Iona crossed the tape.

She heard Orrie suck in a breath. She heard the staffer start a sentence. She put her hands on Bria’s bare waist — hot skin, a jump in the muscle — and kissed her on the mouth.

Bria made a sound into it, surprised, not a word. Her lips were soft and a little dry from talking. For half a second she was stiff. Then her mouth opened and she kissed back, and it was just a kiss. Bria’s breasts pressed the front of Iona’s T-shirt. Iona felt both nipples, hers and Bria’s, and a shock went down her and settled so fast she had to lock her knees.

She had thought it would feel like breaking a window.

It felt like getting away with something and getting caught at the same time.

Bria’s hand came up and found Iona’s jaw. Not pushing off. Holding. She made that sound again, smaller, and Iona felt her own hips tip in without permission. Naked body against denim. A wet mouth. The plaza around them went noisy and

then very focused.

Nia said, “Yes,” like a person watching a match.

Orrie said, “Stay on her face.”

The staffer said, “That’s enough.”

Iona pulled back because she had to breathe. Bria’s eyes were wide. Her mouth was wet. She looked startled at her own face.

“Oh,” Bria said.

“Step off,” Iona whispered. “Just one step. I’ll stand in front of you.”

Bria’s fingers were still on Iona’s jaw. Iona could feel her shaking. She could also feel, against her thigh, that Bria had not gone cold. The opposite. Heat. The small press of a naked woman who had just been kissed in public and liked it more than she had planned to.

Bria went in for the second kiss herself.

She did it fast, like if she thought about it she wouldn’t. Open mouth. A little teeth. Her bare stomach against Iona’s belt. Iona’s head emptied except for the wet against her jeans and the fact that if Bria did that again she was not sure she could keep standing still. She kissed back harder than she meant to. Bria made a noise Iona felt in her own throat.

Phones were up. The big screen had switched to them. Two mouths, Iona’s red hair, Bria’s bare back. The subscribe line was still sitting under it.

Someone in the student cluster laughed, high and shocked. Someone else said, “Is this part of it?”

Nia was grinning with her camera still on Bria’s face. “That’s a win. That’s a win.”

Orrie did not grin. She watched security start to move and said, “Iona. Back.”

Iona heard her. She also felt Bria’s mouth and the shake in Bria’s breath and her own pulse against the seam of her jeans.

The staffer put a hand on Iona’s shoulder. Not gentle. “Behind the tape. Now.”

Iona broke the kiss. Her mouth felt used. Bria’s mouth stayed open a second too long.

“Come with me,” Iona said.

Bria looked at the square. She looked at Iona’s T-shirt, wet now where her mouth and her chest had been. She looked at the students and the banner that still said the tax was on holiday.

She did not step off.

“I can’t,” Bria said. Her voice had a crack in it. “I have to finish this. If I leave they pull me out of the job. I’m not doing that. I’m sorry.”

“You asked to kiss me?”

Bria’s laugh was small and wrecked. “No. I asked for the job. The kiss wasn’t — I didn’t know I was going to do that.”

“Then do it again off the square.”

Bria shook her head. She was still close enough that Iona could have put a hand between her legs and ended the argument a different way. She didn’t. Her hands were shaking too.

“Please go back,” Bria said. “Please. I still have to talk.”

She turned her face to the students like she was setting a glass down carefully.

“Questions about the test first,” Bria said. The crack was almost gone. Not all the way. “They measure you. If you’re over their line, the new card says volatile instead of human. They say it’s a remnant — different species, leftover branch, not the same as you. After that they don’t give the clothes back. You don’t have to trust the number if you can see what they decided. That’s why I’m out here with nothing on.”

Iona stood behind the tape again, lips swollen, jeans damp, heart going too fast. Nia lowered the phone.

“They saw her kiss you,” Nia said. “That’s the clip. That’s better than a speech.”

“She didn’t walk,” Iona said.

“She kissed you twice,” Nia said. “On a taped square. In front of a hundred people. That’s not nothing.”

Orrie handed Iona water. “Drink. Security’s watching you, not her. We got what we get.”

Iona drank. She could still taste Bria. She could still feel the exact place Bria’s stomach had hit her belt. When she glanced over, Bria was answering a question about why a number could change with heat and time of day, and her nipples were still tight, and there was a shine on her inner thigh the sun did not bother to hide. She did not look at Iona while she talked. Her mouth was still pink from the kiss.

The screen ran a replay. Iona watched herself do it. She looked like the woman the hoodie girl had noticed. She looked like something you could tap and watch again. The holiday banner moved over both of them.

A woman with a grocery tote said to her friend, not bothering to whisper, “They can kiss whoever they want. I’m not voting a tax back. I like the site. I like the tax at zero.”

Her friend said, “There’s one party because of that,” and they both kept watching the replay.

That was when the mother reached them.

She came from the bus side, work slacks, hair coming down, a paper folded down to a fat square. She did not stare at Bria first. She stared at Iona’s mouth like she had seen the kiss and did not have room for it.

“Are you the ones who take names?” she said.

“Yes,” Orrie said. “We don’t promise outcomes.”

“My daughter is Asta Quinn. Nineteen. They measured her this afternoon. She was under their line. I have the first number on my phone. Under. They stamped her anyway. Deviation from linear presentation. That’s what the paper says. They took her clothes. They put her in a van. Same-day housing. A woman at the desk told me that’s standard if they print before noon.”

Iona took the phone when it was offered. The lock screen was a restaurant booth. Clothes on. A nineteen-year-old with dark hair and a face that made the stamp make sense without a speech. People would watch her. That was the whole problem.

“She was under,” the mother said. “They told her the ruler said home. Then a slip came downstairs. A blonde officer signed it. I didn’t get the name. I got a receipt for a necklace.”

Nia swore under her breath.

Iona gave the phone back. Her fingers left a shake on the case.

“We’ll use it if you want it used,” Iona said. “Her name. Under the line. The stamp. The officer if we find her.”

“Will it bring her home?”

Orrie answered, flat. “No. It might make the next file harder to hide. It might not. Most people on this brick like the preview more than a mother.”

The mother looked at Bria then. Bare. Still on the taped square. Still answering questions in a steady voice, with Iona’s kiss still on her mouth if you knew where to look.

“Asta likes strawberry candy,” the mother said. “That’s a stupid detail. I wanted somebody who isn’t them to have it.”

“I have it,” Iona said.

The mother nodded once and went back toward the bus. She did not take a flyer.

Bria thanked them for their attention and said she would stay on the square for two more questions. She stayed. The staffer did not bring her a shirt. Nobody brought her a shirt. The subscribe button sat under the live shot of her body and Iona’s replay in a corner window.

Iona stood with the water jug against her knee and Asta Quinn’s name in her head and Bria’s second kiss still running through her. She was turned on and angry and aware of eyes on her hair, her mouth, the wet patch she could feel and hoped nobody else could see.

“We find the blonde officer,” she said. “We find the slip. We put Asta on paper.” Nia nodded, still flushed from the clip she thought of as a win. Orrie watched security watch Iona.

Bria glanced over, finally. Just a flick. Her lips parted like she might step off after all. She didn’t. She held Iona’s eyes long enough for the third thing to show — not the job — want, surprised at itself — and then she turned back to a student with a notebook and kept talking.

Iona stayed behind the tape, clothed, kissed, and not done, while the plaza watched the screen.

Chapter 4 — Nell. First night.

The van door opened on painted concrete. Nell stepped down barefoot. No one gave her a shirt. The woman who had ridden with her checked the wristband, checked the new card, and said, “Inside. Hands at your sides.”

Nell had nothing to put over herself. The bay air was cooler than the van. It found her breasts and her belly and the place they had measured that morning. She kept her arms down. The woman was looking at her hands.

A second van sat farther in. No windows along the side. The rear doors were shut.

“What is that van?” Nell said.

“Inland,” the woman said. “If you are not staying on this floor, that is how you leave. Don’t walk toward it.”

Nell looked at the floor. She still did not know what inland was. She knew it was a van with no windows.

The hall off the bay was wide and white. Girls stood along the right wall. No clothes. Wristbands. Cards in their fingers or clipped at an ankle. One girl had her eyes shut. One girl was shaking and trying not to.

A staffer walked the line with a tablet.

“Faces first,” she said. “Then bodies. When I say your name you look at me. You do not fold your arms. You do not put a hand in front of yourself. If you are cold, you are still standing here.”

She stopped at Nell.

“Ives.”

“Yes.”

The staffer looked at her face, then down her, then at the tablet. “Eighteen. Same-day. Over. Pretty enough to keep on this floor. Hold still.”

Nell held still.

“Quinn.”

Two places down, a dark-haired girl lifted her head. Nineteen. Nell had not seen her in the morning waiting room.

“Under, stamped,” the staffer said, not lowering her voice. “Bookable face. She stays too. Note it.”

Asta Quinn did not speak. When the staffer said bodies, Asta opened her stance a little.

They were walked farther in.

In the next hall a bed stood against the wall. No sheet. No pillow. A paper tag on the footboard with a number and no name. A girl sat on it with her feet on the floor and her hands on her knees. She was not wearing anything either. A staffer stood next to her with a clipboard.

Nell stared.

Director Pell came from the other end of the hall. Jacket on. Hair pinned. She stopped the line beside the bed.

“Look at this,” Pell said. “Do not invent a meaning for it. I will tell you what it is.”

The girls looked.

“This floor has two kinds of beds,” Pell said. “Room beds are in the bedrooms. They have sheets. If you are staying, that is where you sleep. Hall beds are these. No sheet. A girl sits on a hall bed when she is not getting a room because she is not staying. She waits here for the van you passed in the bay. That van goes inland. Inland is another facility. It is not this clinic. It is not the website. You do not come back from inland onto this floor. The words we use when we send someone there are unstable, inland, ungrateful. Unstable means we do not believe she will stay usable. Inland is the place. Ungrateful means she will not do what we ask with her mouth and her hands. That is the whole sentence. It is not a poem.”

The girl on the hall bed looked at the wall.

“Pretty enough and useful stay in rooms,” Pell said. “Everyone else waits here and leaves on the van. Do not ask her name. Walk.”

They walked.

The next room had chairs and no tables. Pell stood. Everyone sitting was bare. Pell was not.

“You printed today or you stamped today,” Pell said. “This floor is called education. Two years if you stay useful. Useful means you can be looked at and filmed and put on the website. The website is how the state keeps taxes at zero. You will not be paid. If you cover yourself, if you will not let us do the weekly session, if we decide no one will want to look at you, you go back to a hall bed and then to the van.”

A girl near the wall lifted her arms over her chest. A technician put them down by the wrists.

“Arms down when you are cold,” Pell said. “Arms down when you are watched. If your hands wander to cover your breasts or between your legs, we watch the hands. That starts tonight.”

Nell set her palms on her thighs.

“Every week you will be put on the exam table and filmed,” Pell said. “A staff woman will use her hands, then the instrument, on your clitoris until you are flushed, swollen, and wet. Then you say thank you. We do this because your glans is larger than a human woman’s. It reacts more. You need that attention or you will not stay stable. That is the safety we are talking about. The file also wants to see that you can take it and still speak. If you cannot, you are on the list for the hall bed.”

Asta sat very straight.

“Ives and Quinn, room six,” the staffer said. “Both staying tonight. Kade has Ives at nine. Quinn already has a request on her name for the site. Don’t be late.”

Room six was narrow. Two beds with sheets. A window that did not open. A camera in the corner with a dark lens. Two paper cups. No dresser. Nowhere to put clothes.

Asta sat on the nearer bed and did not pull the sheet up.

“They said the sheets stay on the beds,” Asta said. “We don’t walk in them.”

Nell sat. The sheet was rough on the backs of her thighs.

“I’m Nell.”

“Asta.” She swallowed. “They told my mother the number said I could go home. Then they stamped me. I thought that hall bed was going to be me.”

“They said you book.”

“A woman in the line said it. I think it means people will pay to watch me on the website even though I measured under. I have an ordinary glans. You don’t. You match what they put in the pamphlet. They still sounded happier about my face.”

Nell’s face went hot. She knew what Asta meant.

A knock. A woman in gray, younger than Pell, hair in a clip.

“Speech class next door,” she said. “Ten minutes. Then Ives with me. I’m Ms. Kade. Hands at your sides when you walk.”

Speech class was six girls on two benches and a woman at a stand with a card.

“You will say these in order when you are asked,” the woman said. “Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. You will not add a story. You will not say you want your clothes. Wanting clothes is a hand problem. We watch hands.”

They said it one after another. Nell’s voice sounded wrong in her own ears. Gratitude stuck. Asta said all four without shaking. A girl at the end folded her arms when the vent came on. The woman at the stand pointed. The girl put her

arms down.

“Again,” the woman said. “Ives. Slower.”

Nell said it slower. She kept her hands on her knees.

Kade took her down a short hall. The session room had an exam table with paper on it, a step, and tape for the knees. A camera on an arm was already on. The red light was on. The instrument was on a tray. Gloves beside it.

“Sit on the table,” Kade said. “Knees to the tape. This morning they measured you. Tonight is the weekly session. I am going to use my hands, then the instrument, on your clitoris until you are flushed, swollen, and wet. The camera records it. The recording goes on the website. When we finish, you say thank you. We do this because your glans is larger. It reacts more. You need this or you will not stay stable. That is for your safety. You may look at me or at the lens. You will not close your knees until I say. If you get wet, I write it down. That is not a problem.”

Nell sat. The paper stuck to her. She opened her knees to the marks. The air moved over her. She breathed through her mouth.

Kade pulled gloves. “Stay in this room with me. If you go away behind your eyes, I wait and we start over. Starting over is how girls get marked unstable.”

“All right,” Nell said.

Kade settled Nell’s left thigh when it drifted inward, then the right. Her gloved fingers opened Nell. She moved the hood back. Cool air hit the glans. Nell’s breath caught. Kade looked, then touched: two fingers along the side, then over the top, then a slow circle that made Nell’s hips try to lift.

“Stay on the table,” Kade said.

Nell stayed. Heat gathered too fast. Shame came with it. Her nipples pulled tight. She kept her arms down. She looked at Kade’s mouth because the lens was worse.

Kade did not stop at a glance. She held Nell open with one hand and worked the glans with the other until Nell felt it swell under the glove. Nell made a sound she had not planned. Wetness came in a thin rush. Kade’s glove shone with it. Nell’s thighs shook. She kept them open on the tape.

“Flushed,” Kade said, to the camera as much as to Nell. “I am going to keep my hand here until you are swollen enough for the instrument.”

She kept her hand there. Nell’s pulse lived under those fingers. She thought of the kitchen and the word human on her mother’s card and then she could not think of the kitchen.

Kade lifted her hand and seated the instrument.

The head was cool and then it was not. It sat against the glans Kade had already worked. Nell’s mouth opened. Kade held it there and watched Nell’s face and the lens.

“Breathe. You can make noise. You cannot close.”

Nell breathed. The noise happened anyway. The red light did not blink. The instrument stayed. Nell felt herself swell around it, wetter, hotter. Her hands wanted to cover her chest. She put them on the paper. Staff watched hands.

“Hold.”

Nell held. She was close to something she did not want to give a camera. She did not know if she was allowed to finish. Kade kept the instrument seated through the shake in Nell’s legs and only then eased it off. Air on wet skin. Nell flinched and did not close her knees. She was flushed down her chest. She could see the swell of herself.

Kade photographed. Close. The camera took her while she was still throbbing in the open.

“Knees in. Stay on the table.”

Nell brought her knees in. She was shaking. Kade took off the gloves and wrote on the tablet.

Nell swallowed.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Louder. To the lens.”

“Thank you.”

Kade nodded. “That was the session. We will do the same thing every week. That is how you stay on a room bed instead of a hall bed. Do not touch yourself after you leave this room. Hands at your sides in the hall. Floor cameras watch that.”

“I understand.”

“You don’t yet,” Kade said. Not unkind. “Quinn will get more requests than you for a while. Ordinary glans, pretty face. People pay to look at that. You match the official story. Both of you stay visible if you keep doing this and keep saying thank you. Visible means you stay on this floor. The other floor is the van.”

Nell got off the table. At the door she almost crossed her arms against the hall air. Kade looked at her hands. Nell dropped them.

Asta was back in room six, sitting on her sheet, not under it. Her mouth was pink.

“They already put a request on my name,” Asta said. “A woman in the hall said people will watch me this week. She said it like good news.”

Nell sat on her own bed. She wanted to pull the sheet over her chest and did not.

“Kade said you book faster.”

Asta’s laugh was small. “I measured under. I have an ordinary glans. They still took me. Now they say that is why people will watch. I don’t know how to hold both of those. I kept thinking about the girl on the bed with no sheet.”

Nell put her hands flat on the sheet at her hips. The corner camera was dark. She did not trust dark. She could still feel Kade’s glove and the instrument and the thank you in her mouth.

In the hall a cart rolled by. No voice. Nell could say inland now. It was a van and another place and a bed with no sheet. She owned that much. She also owned the table she had just left, and the sentence about her safety, and the way her body had gone willing under a hand while a camera watched.

Asta turned onto her side, facing Nell, eyes open.

“If I put my arms over my chest, will they come in and put me in the hall?”

“They said they watch hands,” Nell said. “They said covering is how you get marked.”

Asta left her arms down. After a minute she said, “You can turn toward the wall if you want.”

Nell turned toward the wall. It did not help. She could still feel the air on her back and the leftover pulse from the instrument and Asta breathing in the other bed. She kept her hands where they were. She did not touch herself. She said the four words once, under her breath, not as belief. As a way to stay on a bed that had a sheet.

Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment.

The sheet stayed on the bed. The hall stayed lit. Somewhere down that hall a girl still sat on plastic with no sheet, waiting for the van. Nell closed her eyes in the open and did not sleep yet.

Chapter 5 — Lise. Recertification.

Lise hung her jacket on the hook she always used and kept the badge clipped to her pocket. Officer Denn was already in the imaging suite with a tablet.

“You’re on the list,” Denn said. “Hale’s running it. Verification team. Same steps they use on a subject, plus the new tools. I told them you were staff.”

“I am staff,” Lise said.

“I told them that.”

The suite was the room Lise used on other women. Exam table. Paper. Step. Tape. Camera already on. Ms. Hale stood at the cabinet. Two other women in gray stood with folders. On a second tray, next to the old instrument, were three tools Lise had not issued from this room.

Hale looked at her the way Hale looked at a schedule.

“Officer Keene. Recertification. New pictures. New volume. The Board asked for the next set of measurement tools on an officer body. You follow the same steps as an adult appointment, then I use the new tools. Clothes off. Badge in the bin with the clothes. You stand on the mark. You sit on the table. We photograph. I take more than one reading. The card prints from the highest number. Do you understand what I said?”

“Yes.”

“Say it back for the file.”

“I take off my clothes and my badge. You photograph me. You measure me with the old instrument and with the new ones. You print a card from the highest number.”

“Good. Bin on the chair.”

Lise unclipped the badge and put it in the bin first, face-up. Jacket. Shirt. Boots. Slacks. The rest. She folded because she had told other women to fold.

Without the jacket she looked like what she was: a blonde woman with a small frame, a modest chest, hips in proportion, nothing loud on her. Soft mouth. Narrow shoulders. The kind of body people called feminine without thinking. The air tightened her nipples at once. She did not fold her arms. The verification team watched her hands.

“Mark,” Hale said.

Lise stepped to the tape. The camera clicked through front, left, wall, hair over one shoulder. She felt the look on her back.

“Table. Feet on the step. Knees to the tape.”

She sat. The paper stuck to the backs of her thighs. She opened her knees. She was already wet. She knew why. Heat and wanting moved a reading. She had proved that after hours in this room and written nothing.

Hale pulled gloves.

“Hands first,” Hale said. “Then the old instrument. Then the new tools. If you get wet I write it down. That is a variable. It is not a favor.”

Hale opened her and moved the hood back. Cool air hit the glans. Lise’s breath caught. Hale’s glove circled once, slow, professional, until Lise felt herself swell. A sound tried to leave her mouth. She held it.

The old instrument seated. Cool, then not. Lise’s hips tried to lift. She made them stay.

Hale read the number for the tablet.

“Almost over. Note the time.”

One verification woman wrote.

Hale set the old instrument down and picked up a small cup with a short tube.

“This is suction,” Hale said. “It fits over the glans, draws it out of the hood, and holds it so I can read size while it is fully presented. You will feel a pull. Stay on the table.”

The cup was warm from Hale’s glove. It sealed over Lise’s glans and pulled. The glans came forward out of the hood and stayed there, stretched, exposed, larger in the air than it had been a minute ago. Lise made a noise she had not approved. The pull was not pain. It was a continuous hold that kept her swollen and made every pulse feel bigger.

Hale read the scale on the tube.

“Over.”

The cup stayed on long enough that Lise’s thighs shook. Hale released the seal. Air on the stretched glans. Lise flinched and did not close her knees.

Hale lifted a soft sleeve from the tray. It was clear, about the size of a thumb, with a small motor at the base.

“This one fits over the glans like a cap,” Hale said. “It hums while it measures circumference. You will feel vibration. I control the switch.”

She rolled the sleeve on. It enclosed the glans Lise’s body had already pushed forward. Hale turned the motor on.

The sleeve whirred, low, like a small fan inside a closed room. The vibration went straight into the glans and stayed there. Lise’s mouth opened. Her modest

breasts lifted with her breath. Wetness ran onto the paper. The camera light did not blink.

“Number is higher,” Hale said. “Over by more. Hold.”

Lise could not think in Board language. The sleeve hummed and measured and worked her at the same time. Her hands flattened on the paper. She heard herself speak to the lens because Hale was watching the lens.

“Please. I need to come. Please let me.”

Hale did not change her voice.

“Not yet. I want the number stable.”

The sleeve kept on. Lise begged again, thinner. Hale watched the readout, watched Lise’s face, and then turned the motor up one notch.

“Now,” Hale said. “You may. Look at the camera.”

Lise looked at the lens and came with the sleeve still on her, a hard helpless shake, sound in her throat, wet on the paper, blonde hair stuck to her neck. Hale kept the sleeve seated until the shake passed, then switched it off and drew it away. Lise sat open, flushed, shining, trying to find a breath that belonged to an officer.

Hale picked up the last tool. Two flat arms and a sliding scale marked in millimeters.

“This reads how far the glans stands out from the body once it is swollen,” Hale said. “The Board wants millimeters on paper. I am going to hold the hood back with the arms and slide the scale to the tip. You will feel pressure. You will not close.”

The arms were cool. They held the hood aside and kept the glans standing in a straight line from her body. Hale slid the scale until it kissed the tip. Lise was still so sensitive from the orgasm that the touch made her hips jump.

“Higher again,” Hale said. “Definitely over. Print from this one.”

The printer started. Hale did not take the arms off yet.

She looked at Lise the way she looked at a finished form.

“You are a volatile,” Hale said. “This is not a borderline file. I don’t know how you sat at a desk in clothes this long. You passed as human for a long time. That took control. The numbers do not support it anymore.”

Lise’s eyes stung. She kept her arms down.

“I did my job.”

“You still will, if the Board keeps you,” Hale said. “I need a second confirmation on enjoyment. The file wants to see that you can take the tools and still speak. Sleeve back on. You ask the camera again. I decide if you come.”

The sleeve went back over the swollen glans. The motor started, lower than before. Lise was already close. She hated that she was close.

“Please,” she said to the lens. “Please let me come again.”

Hale let the sleeve run. Lise asked a second time. Hale’s glove rested on Lise’s inner thigh, not stroking, only pinning the leg to the tape.

“Now,” Hale said. “Stay looking at the lens.”

The second orgasm was longer and uglier. Lise’s voice broke on it. The sleeve whirred through it. Hale turned the motor off when Lise’s legs started to slacken, then removed the sleeve and the millimeter arms.

“Knees in. Stay on the table.”

Lise brought her knees in. She was shaking. Hale took off her gloves, marked the tablet, and held out the new card.

Lise’s face. Under the name, where the old card had said human, the word was volatile.

“This is your card,” Hale said. “Clothes stay in the bin. Badge stays in the bin. They are not returned. Policy is the same as any over. You do not dress. Thank you to the lens.”

Lise swallowed. Her mouth was dry.

“Thank you.”

“Louder.”

“Thank you.”

Denn opened the door. She had been against the wall the whole time. She did not look at the tray.

“Board at eleven,” Denn said. “They didn’t pull you off duty. They pulled the clothes. Staff hall.”

Lise got off the table. The floor was cold. She was wet down her inner thighs. She held the card and kept her arms at her sides. In the hall a clerk passed, looked at her chest, looked at the card, and went into an office. Lise still thought of herself as the person who belonged on the dressed side of the door. Her body did not agree.

The Board room had a long table. Chair Venn at the center. Three other Board women. All dressed. Lise stood on the carpet with no jacket and no badge. She

sat in the chair she always used. The leather was cold on bare skin. She was still flushed. Anyone at that table could see it.

Venn looked at her the way Venn looked at paper.

“Keene. Recertification printed over. Clothes collected with the badge. You remain assigned to classification if you remain useful. The imaging notes say definitely volatile. They also say you passed as human for a long time. That is finished. You will not make a speech about the number.”

“I understand.”

A Board member near the end spoke without looking away from her folder.

“Minister Selke’s courtesy is on the record. The Board looks after its own if they stay useful. Useful means you keep initialing. Useful means you do not turn this into a story. The tax holiday holds because the site holds. An officer who prints over and stays at her desk is a quiet example. An officer who prints over and walks out is a problem. Selke prefers quiet.”

“I’m staff,” Lise said.

No one gave her a shirt.

Denn slid a thin stapled packet across the table.

“Appendix. Pricing for paired sessions. They want an officer initial on the back page.”

Lise turned to the back page. She did not read the paragraphs above the line. She wrote L. KEENE and dated it. Her unclothed forearm lay on the Board table while she did it.

Venn took the packet.

“Hale will put you on the weekly session schedule. Same as any volatile. Hands, then the instrument, camera, thank you. Your glans is larger. It reacts more. You already demonstrated that. Desk this afternoon. No public entrance.”

“Yes,” Lise said.

Denn walked her back to the classification suite. Lise’s hook was empty. The bin from imaging was gone. The clothes were already off the floor she worked on.

Lise sat at her desk. The chair touched all of her. She set the volatile card next to yesterday’s stack. Asta Quinn’s closed file was still in it. Lise did not open it. She put her hands on the blotter so they would have a place to be. She did not cover herself. She could still feel the sleeve and the suction and the two times Hale had said now.

She waited for the next folder because that was the job she had just written her name back into, uncovered, at a dressed table, with a packet about paired

sessions she had not read.

Chapter 6 — Lise. Holiday anniversary.

Denn parked in the staff slot below the civic steps. The plaza was already full. Dressed people. Jackets. Flags. Phones. A banner over the microphone said TAX HOLIDAY and, under that, another year in clean type.

Lise opened the car door with the new card in her hand. She had been carrying it that way since Hale printed it. Fingers around the plastic. Nowhere else to put it.

Denn came around the hood, jacket on, tablet under her arm, and stopped.

“You’re going to lose that,” Denn said. “Or you’re going to cover yourself with it, and I can’t have either one on the steps.”

She took a short lanyard out of her pocket. The kind a badge used to hang on.

“This is for duty,” Denn said. “Card on the clip. It hangs where your badge hung. High. Face out. People can see it. Your hands stay empty. That is the whole point.”

Lise gave her the card. Denn punched the corner and hung it around Lise’s neck. The plastic settled on her bare chest, just below the throat. Cold at first. Visible.

“Thank you,” Lise said.

“Don’t thank me on the plaza. You’re assigned to the east rail. Officer presence. You don’t speak. Selke speaks. If someone asks why you aren’t dressed, you don’t answer. That’s Board courtesy, not a conversation.”

“I’m on duty,” Lise said.

“You are.”

Lise stood up into a dressed city. No coat. Card on the lanyard. Bare feet on the pavement. They walked. People looked at her face first because she was a pretty blonde with a soft mouth and modest curves, and then they looked at the rest of her because there was nothing over it, and then they looked at the card. The plaza wind made her nipples tight before they reached the rail. She kept her arms at her sides. The lanyard tapped her when she walked.

A woman with a child said, not quietly, “That’s an officer?”

Her friend said, “That’s a volatile. Look at the card.”

Lise did not turn her head. Heat moved through her anyway, low and unwanted, the same heat that had moved her numbers on Hale’s table. She was not on a table. She was on a public sidewalk. The heat did not care.

The east rail put her side-on to the steps. A public screen hung over the plaza, already running preview clips from the website: a weekly session on an exam table, a campus square, a woman saying thank you to a lens. Subscribe. Favorite.

The counter in the corner ticked.

Selke came out to the microphone in a dark coat. She did not look at Lise. She looked at the dressed crowd.

“Another year,” Selke said. The speakers carried it. “Taxes at zero. That is not a metaphor. The bills did not go out. They will not go out while the site pays. I have the subscriber count from this morning.”

She read the number. It was large. People clapped.

“Campus talks. Clinic sessions. Household placements. Favorites,” Selke said. “You pay if you want more than the free preview. That money is the holiday. Close the site and the tax comes back. There is no third option. If someone offers you a third option, they are offering you a bill.”

More clapping. Lise watched the screen because looking at Selke meant being looked at in profile, card and breasts and all.

The preview cut. A still filled the pane.

Asta Quinn.

Uncovered. Dark hair. Sitting on an exam table Lise knew, paper under her, knees not quite closed, smiling at a clinic camera. Not a campus lecture. Not live. A still from the floor Lise had sent her to. The caption said NEW and a request count that was already moving.

Lise’s mouth went dry. The lanyard suddenly felt heavier.

Denn saw her see it.

“Quinn,” Denn said, low. “She’s booking. You initialed the stamp.”

“I know what I initialed.”

On the screen Asta’s smile held. It was the smile the file wanted. Lise had seen the real mouth in room two when the number said under and the photograph said take her. The plaza liked this version better. Phones came up. Someone near the rail said she was prettier than the Thursday girl.

Lise felt the wind on her own uncovered skin and understood the rest without anyone saying her name. Hale had photographed her on that same kind of table. Face. Body. The field between her legs. Archive already had those stills. Denn had said they were flagged usable either way: officer presence or site content. The screen in front of her was what either way looked like.

A woman at the rail leaned in, dressed, curious, not unkind.

“Are you part of the program?” she said.

“I’m an officer,” Lise said.

The woman looked at the card on the lanyard, then at Lise’s breasts, then at Asta on the screen.

“All right.”

She went back to the speech.

Selke was still on the number. How many households paid nothing this year. How many subscriptions renewed. How the site had made the holiday ordinary. Lise stood and let the city look at her and did not cover. Her body was doing what it had done under Hale’s sleeve: flushing, tightening, a pulse she did not want in public. Shame sat on it. She kept her hands on the rail so they would not wander to the card or to herself.

Selke said, “We look after the people who keep the system working.”

A few faces turned toward the east rail. Lise did not know if that was aimed at her. She felt it land anyway. Stay useful. Stay at the desk. Stay uncovered and call it duty.

Denn’s tablet buzzed. She glanced at it and did not show Lise the screen.

“Archive again,” Denn said. “Your recertification stills. Still not public. Still flagged either way.”

Lise watched Asta’s still hold through one more round of applause.

“I’m not leaving the job,” Lise said.

“I didn’t ask.”

“I’m telling you.”

Denn nodded once. “Then we stay until Selke leaves the steps.”

They stayed. Selke finished. The crowd moved toward the free preview booths at the edge of the plaza. The big screen looped Asta again, then a session clip, then the holiday banner. Lise walked back to the car barefoot on cold stone with dressed people parting around her. The lanyard swung against her chest. No one offered a jacket. She did not ask for one.

In the passenger seat she sat on her own skin. The card rested between her breasts. Denn started the engine and did not turn the heat high enough to matter.

Lise looked at her empty hands.

“Quinn measured under,” she said.

“I know.”

“She’s on the screen anyway.”

“I know that too.”

Lise leaned her head against the window. The city outside was dressed. She was not. Somewhere in a file her own still waited, usable either way. She did not leave the job. She rode back toward the Board building with the lanyard on and the plaza wind still on her nipples, and she called it duty because the other word was hanging on her chest, and she was not ready to say that one out loud in a car.

Chapter 7 — Nell. Two years.

Nell knew a week had passed when Kade took her down the short hall to the exam table.

That was the clock. Not a calendar. The table. Paper. Tape for her knees. Camera already on. Hands, then the instrument, on her clitoris until she was flushed, swollen, and wet. Thank you to the lens. Walk back to room six with her arms at her sides.

She sat on the table the way she had the first night, except her body no longer fought the first touch for as long. Kade still said the same words.

“Your glans is larger. It reacts more. This is for your safety. You will not close your knees until I say.”

Nell opened her knees. She was already wet when the gloves went on. Shame still came. It came later than it used to. Kade’s hand held her open and worked her until she swelled. The instrument seated. Nell made noise. The camera took it.

“Thank you,” Nell said to the lens.

“Louder.”

“Thank you.”

Kade marked the tablet. “That’s the week. Speech class after you wash your face. Today they explain the words again. Listen this time.”

Speech class was six girls on benches and a woman at a stand with a card. New girls in front. Nell and Asta in back. The card had four words on it.

HEAT. PULSE. GRATITUDE. ASSIGNMENT.

A new girl said, “I don’t know what I’m agreeing to.”

The woman at the stand did not treat that as philosophy.

“You are not going to give a human speech,” she said. “Humans get full sentences in public. You do not. You are a volatile. The card says so. In public you get four words. Each word already has a sentence behind it. I am going to say the sentences. You are going to say the words. If you only chant and you cannot tell me what you chanted, you have not learned it.”

She tapped the first word.

“Heat. That means: my glans is warm and turned on. I can feel it. I am not pretending my body is quiet.”

She tapped the second.

“Pulse. That means: I can feel my heartbeat there. I am in this room. I have not gone away behind my eyes.”

She tapped the third.

“Gratitude. That means: thank you for the weekly session and thank you for a room bed instead of the van.”

She tapped the fourth.

“Assignment. That means: I accept the job I was given. Be seen. Be filmed. Go on the website. I do not get a different job by talking longer.”

The new girl swallowed. “That’s all we say?”

“In public, yes. If someone asks you how you feel on a square, you do not tell your life. You say the four words. If a camera is on, you say the four words. If you add a story about your mother or your clothes, that is a hand problem and a mouth problem. We watch both.”

She pointed at Nell.

“Ives. You have been on this floor long enough. Say the words. Then tell me what you just said.”

Nell’s face went hot. She kept her arms down.

“Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment.”

“Meaning.”

“My glans is on. I can feel my pulse. Thank you for keeping me here. I accept the job.”

“Good. Quinn.”

Asta said the words and the meanings without shaking. A girl on the front bench folded her arms when the vent came on. The woman pointed. The girl put her arms down and started over.

They said it again. Then again. Nell heard the sentences under the words now. The first night she had used them like a lid. They were not a lid. They were four short claims she was required to make about her body and her place.

In the hall after class a room bed stood stripped in a doorway. Sheet gone. Mattress rolled up. No name on the footboard.

Nell looked at it too long.

A staffer said, “Don’t ask who. We don’t say names when a room empties. She went to a hall bed and then to the van. You know what the van is.”

“Inland,” Nell said. “The other place. She doesn’t come back onto this floor.”

“Then keep walking.”

Nell walked. She did not cover her chest. She had stopped doing that after speech class pointed at her hands three weeks in a row. The air still made her nipples tight. She let it.

Asta matched her step.

“I have two requests this week,” Asta said.

“I have the table.”

“That’s a week. Requests are why I still have a sheet on my bed. People pay to watch an ordinary glans on my face. You match the pamphlet. I book. That’s why I’m still here.”

She said it so Nell would not have to guess.

Pell found Nell in the corridor on a morning when the bay doors were open.

“Ives. With me.”

Pell wore a jacket. Nell did not. They took the long way, which was the way that passed the loading bay. The inland van was there, rear doors shut, no windows along the side.

“You will walk past it,” Pell said. “You will not look into it. You are pretty enough to stay on this floor. Looking into the van is how girls start building a speech, and you are not allowed a speech. If you leave this floor, you leave on that van. If you stay, you look at the wall and you keep walking.”

Nell walked. She looked at the painted line on the concrete. Air on her breasts. She did not turn her head.

“Again,” Pell said, on another week, and then on another.

Nell learned the wall. She learned the line. She stopped glancing at the doors. The van became a shape she passed. That frightened her more than the first time. She did not make a sentence out of the fright. She had four words for public, and none of them were that.

Room beds emptied. No one listed the names. A girl from the front bench was gone on a Thursday. Friday the doorway had no mattress.

Nell asked Asta anyway.

“Don’t,” Asta said. “If they wanted us to have the name they would have said it. Say your words and keep the sheet.”

Winter. The vent hurt. Nell’s arms stayed down. A new girl folded hers. The woman at the stand made her say heat and then say the meaning until her voice worked.

Another week: the table. Kade’s gloves. The instrument. Nell’s hips lifted and she put them down. She came close. The second year she heard a sound come out of her that was not only shame. Kade wrote it down.

“You’re staying visible,” Kade said when the session was over. “Visible means this floor. This floor means the van is something you walk past. Thank you to the lens.”

“Thank you.”

“And the four.”

Nell looked at the camera.

“Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment.”

She knew what she was saying. Her glans was on. Her pulse was in it. She was thanking them for the sheet. She was accepting the job of being watched.

Two winters. Two summers through a window that did not open. Nell was no longer the girl who had owned a sweater that morning. She was the girl who knew the week by the table, who could say the four words and the sentences under them, who did not cover her chest when a clerk passed in the hall.

She still got wet on the paper before Kade told her to. She still hated that the camera liked that. She did less and less about the hate.

On a night that was a week like the others, she lay on her room bed with the sheet under her, not over her. Asta was already asleep, or pretending. The corner camera was dark. Nell did not trust dark. She put her hands at her hips.

Down the hall a mattress rolled. No voice. No name.

Nell said the four words once, under her breath, and this time she heard the four sentences.

My glans is on. I can feel it. Thank you for this bed. I accept the job.

She did not look toward the bay. She closed her eyes in the open and waited for Kade to take her to the table again, because that would mean another week had passed, and she was still on this floor.

Chapter 8 — Iona. The mother and the file.

The kitchen still smelled like paint. Orrie had her boots on the chair rung and a mug that had gone cold. Nia had the folder open, then shut it when she heard the knock.

Asta’s mother stood on the step with a paper folded down to a thick square. Work slacks. Hair coming loose.

“I got more,” she said. “Can I come in, or is this a bad time.”

“It’s always a bad time,” Orrie said. “Come in anyway.”

They sat her at the table. Iona moved a jar of brushes. Nia poured water and forgot to ask if she wanted it.

The mother unfolded the slip like it might tear.

“They had this at the desk when they took her necklace,” she said. “I asked for a copy. The woman said I wasn’t entitled to a copy. I took a picture before she put her hand over it. I printed it at work on my lunch. I know that sounds stupid.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” Iona said.

She read it.

ASTA QUINN. Nineteen. Volume: under. Stamp in blue: deviation from linear presentation. At the bottom, not a full name. L. KE.

Orrie leaned in. “That’s it? L. KE.”

“That’s what they wrote,” the mother said. “I asked the woman at the desk who signed it. She said a blonde officer. I said I wanted the name. She said I had the receipt for the necklace and that should be enough.”

Nia turned the paper. “We can’t take L-period-K-E to a crowd. They’ll say we made it up.”

“I know,” Iona said.

Orrie sat back. “And if you do get the name, and you put it next to a girl who measured under, you’re not telling a mother story anymore. You’re telling people the site is taking girls the ruler cleared. That’s the holiday. That’s why nobody got a tax bill. You make that ugly and they will not hug you. They will say you want the tax back.”

Nia looked at Iona. “She’s not wrong.”

“I heard it on the bricks,” Iona said. “I’m still doing it. I’m not sitting on a flyer while they stamp the next one.”

Orrie exhaled through her nose. “Fine. Then we do it as a stack, not as a feeling. If this officer signed one pretty under-line girl, maybe it’s a bad day. If she signed a pile of them, it’s a quota. But we don’t have her name. We have two letters.”

“We have a directory,” Nia said. “We don’t guess. We search.”

The public terminal was in a lobby that still let dressed people walk through. Iona felt the looking start at the door. She always did. Red hair, long coat, a face cashiers remembered. A woman by the elevator actually smiled, then looked embarrassed that she had.

“Don’t smile back,” Nia muttered. “We’re working.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

The screen asked for a last name. Iona typed KE and stopped.

“That’s not enough,” she said.

“Put the filter on,” Nia said. “Classification. First initial L. Last name starts with KE. Don’t invent the rest. Let it spit out whoever actually exists.”

The machine thought about it. Three lines came back.

KENT, L. Records clerk.

KERR, L. Facilities.

KEENE, L. Classification Board. Officer.

Iona tapped the third one because that was the only officer. A staff thumbnail opened. Blonde. Hair neat. Jacket. Badge at the pocket. Small picture, bad light, enough.

Nia leaned over her shoulder. “That’s a blonde officer in classification.”

“That’s what the mother said.”

“We still don’t have a first name.”

“I don’t need a first name to find a blonde who leaves that building,” Iona said. She printed the line. KEENE, L. Classification. The thumbnail came out gray.

On the way down the steps a student looked at Iona long enough to miss the curb. Iona did not use it. She put the print in her coat next to the slip.

Back in the kitchen the mother was still there, both hands around the water she hadn’t asked for.

Iona laid the papers side by side. “The directory has an officer. Keene, L. Classification. Blonde. Jacket. We didn’t guess Keene. The list only had one officer whose name started with those letters.”

The mother touched the badge in the thumbnail, not the face. “She looked like someone with a job. Asta looked like someone with a sweater. That was the same afternoon.”

“Will this bring her home,” she said, after a second.

Orrie didn’t decorate it. “No. It might make the next stamp harder to hide. It might not. Most people like the website more than a piece of paper.”

The mother nodded. She had already known. “Asta likes strawberry candy. I told you that. I still want somebody who isn’t them to have it.”

“I have it,” Iona said.

When the mother left, Orrie pointed at the print.

“So we follow Keene. Blonde officer. Too many pretty under-line files with the same mark. If the mark isn’t hers, we drop it. If it is, we have a quota with a name on it.”

“I’ll watch the Board building,” Iona said.

Nia closed the folder. “Don’t kiss this one.”

Iona almost laughed. “I’m not twelve. This isn’t a square.”

“I’m serious. You get looked at. Then you do something with your mouth and suddenly we’re the clip, not the file.”

“I know.”

Iona sat with KEENE, L. under her hand and Asta’s under-line volume next to it. She still did not have a first name. She did not invent one. Outside, dressed people went on with a holiday that paid their taxes from a website. In the kitchen they had two papers, one blonde thumbnail, and a list Iona started in the margin of the print: pretty, under, stamped, same building — check the next file before they put any of it in front of a crowd again.

Chapter 9 — Lise. The leak.

Lise left by the staff door because the Board still called her an officer. The lanyard tapped her chest. The card faced out. No jacket. Evening air on her breasts, her belly, the rest of her. Denn had gone up with a stack. Lise had said she would walk.

She was halfway down the outer steps when a redhead blocked her path.

Lise had seen that face on a work screen. Classification ran plaza previews like everyone else. A redhead in a coat kissing a naked liaison on a taped square. Subscribe button underneath. The woman on the steps was that woman. Coat. Jeans. Another woman beside her with a tote.

Both dressed. Both looking at Lise.

Lise stopped. Cold air pulled her nipples tight. She hated that they did it in front of strangers, and she hated that the redhead was the stranger.

The redhead did not touch her.

“Keene,” she said. “L. We don’t have the first name. We don’t need it if you’re her.”

A clerk passed behind Lise, looked at Lise’s bare back, then looked at the redhead and forgot the back.

“I’m on duty,” Lise said.

“You’re not wearing anything,” the shorter one said. Not mean. Just true.

“I’m still on duty.”

The redhead looked at the card, then at Lise’s mouth, then down the modest line of her and back up. Lise felt that look between her legs. Shame followed it. She kept her arms at her sides.

“I’m Iona. That’s Nia. We have Quinn. Asta Quinn. Under. Stamped. Your mark. She should have gone home.”

Lise’s stomach dropped. She was already wet. Being stopped like this, uncovered, by the woman from the clip, felt like being put back on a table.

“I don’t discuss files on the steps,” Lise said.

“Then don’t,” Iona said. “Talk to us off the steps. We’re not filming you. We need paper, not another five minutes of me.”

Lise heard herself before she decided to speak.

“Are you going to kiss me,” she said. “Is that the part. You got famous for putting your mouth on a woman who couldn’t put clothes on. I’m standing here the same

way. I want to know if that’s what this is.”

Iona’s face changed. Not a flinch. Heat, then she put it away.

“No,” Iona said. “I kissed Bria to get her off a square. It didn’t work. I’m not doing it to you to get a file.”

Nia muttered, “Thank you.”

Lise’s laugh came out thin. “All right. Five minutes. I don’t have anything on me. The packet is in my desk. If you want it I have to go get it.”

“We’ll wait,” Nia said. “Not on the front steps. Side.”

Lise walked back in the staff door naked except for the lanyard. The vestibule camera tracked her. She felt it on her breasts and on the card. Upstairs the suite was empty. Her chair was cold when the backs of her thighs hit it. She opened the drawer. The packet was where she had left it after she blacked the faces: first readings and stamps still visible, names and streets gone. She had made it for herself. She picked it up. Paper against her bare stomach. No bag. Just her hand.

She went back down.

Iona and Nia were in the narrow side passage that ran along the building. Wet stone. A camera aimed at the mouth, not the middle. Lise stepped in and the brick found her shoulder blades. She held the packet against her ribs so it would not show from the street. The paper was louder than cloth. Her nipples were still tight. Iona looked at them and then at Lise’s eyes and did not pretend she hadn’t.

“You’re shaking,” Iona said.

“I walked two flights with nothing on and a file on my skin. Yes.”

“It’s not only stairs.”

Lise hated her for being right. Iona was dressed and close and warm through the coat. Lise wanted, stupidly, to step forward and hide against that coat. She stayed on the brick. Wetness slicked the inside of her thighs. She did not look down.

She held the packet out.

“Faces blacked. Addresses blacked. First numbers left on. Stamps left on. I thought if I kept the names off I was protecting them. They should have gone home. Quinn should have gone home. I initialed the stamp anyway.”

Iona took the packet. Their fingers touched. Lise’s breath caught. Iona’s thumb rested a second too long on Lise’s knuckle and then let go.

“That’s not nothing,” Nia said, already turning pages under the one working light. “Under. Stamp. Under. Stamp. Under. Photograph note.”

“If it’s one file I’m sloppy,” Lise said. “If it’s a pile it’s a quota. You can do the counting. I’m not coming with you.”

Iona looked at her mouth again.

“I said I wouldn’t kiss you.”

“I heard you.”

“I’m still looking at you.”

“I know.” Lise’s voice went low. “Everyone looks. You’re better at it than they are. That isn’t a reason for me to walk down the street with you. Archive watches my number. They watch my face. I already came back through that door once tonight. If I leave with you I don’t come back to a desk. I become a still. I already have stills they can use either way.”

“You’re already not dressed,” Nia said.

“I know what I’m not.”

Iona folded the packet into her coat. She stood close enough that Lise could smell her, soap and night air. Lise’s pulse sat between her legs like something Hale would have written down.

“We won’t put your name on the first sheet,” Iona said. “We’ll put the stamps. If they come for you anyway, that’s them. Not us needing a clip.”

“I walked a holiday with no clothes on and called it duty,” Lise said. “I am not going with you.”

Iona nodded once. Her eyes dropped to Lise’s mouth and stayed there long enough that Lise almost asked the kiss question again. Iona stepped back first.

“All right.”

They left the passage dressed. Lise waited so it would not look like a group. She walked to the staff door with the lanyard swinging and nothing in her hand now except the cold. The bay camera took the last twenty feet. Inside, the vestibule screen flashed her recertification still for half a second — blonde, on a table — then a visitor list. Archive had already noticed.

Lise put her palm on the inside door. She was still wet. She was still telling herself she was staff. She went up to the empty suite, sat on the cold chair, and opened the drawer that no longer had the packet. She did not go after the redhead. She sat there uncovered, tasting the almost-kiss she had asked for and not received, and she called the shaking duty because the other word was hanging on her chest.

Chapter 10 — Nell. The talk she is taken to see.

Kade found Nell in the hall after the weekly session, still wet between the legs, card in her hand.

“You’re going to campus,” Kade said. “Not to talk. To sit. They want a photogenic girl in the seats so the students can see what the square is for. Arms down. You know the van is the other door. This is the door that keeps you off it.”

Nell said, “All right.”

They rode in a staff car. Kade wore a jacket. Nell did not. The seat was cold on her skin. Dressed people moved past the window. Nell kept her hands on her thighs.

The university theater lobby was full of students in coats. When Nell came through the doors the talk thinned, then stopped. Someone laughed once and cut it off. Nell walked the aisle toward the back row with her arms at her sides. She could feel the looking on her nipples and on her mouth and between her legs. She did not cover.

Kade pointed at two seats in the last row. “You sit. You watch Bria. You do not stand up unless I say.”

Nell sat. The cloth stuck to her. Students in the row ahead twisted around, then faced forward.

On the stage floor a square of pale tape waited. Bria Sen walked out of the wing with nothing on. She stepped onto the tape.

“I’m Bria Sen,” she said. The speakers carried it. “I’m a campus liaison. I live on the visible floor. I don’t get clothes. You do. If you have a question, ask it. If you came to see whether I would cover, I won’t.”

A girl in the third row lifted a hand. “What do you say when they film you?”

Bria looked at her, not at the floor.

“Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. Heat means my glans is warm and turned on. I can feel it. Pulse means I can feel my heartbeat there. I am in the room. I have not gone away behind my eyes. Gratitude means thank you for the weekly session and thank you for a room bed instead of the van. Assignment means I accept the job. Be seen. Be filmed. Go on the website. I don’t get a longer speech than that in public.”

A boy in a scarf said, “Do you get paid?”

“No.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because the other door is inland,” Bria said. “Inland is another facility. You don’t come back from it onto my floor. Pretty enough to look at stay here and go on the site. The site is why your taxes stay at zero. I don’t get a share. I get a sheet on a bed and a square like this one.”

Someone two rows down whispered, “She’s prettier on the site.”

Someone else whispered, “The one they walked in is newer.”

Nell kept her eyes on Bria. Wetness from Kade’s table came back. She left her hands on her thighs.

A woman near the aisle stood up. “You measured over?”

“Yes,” Bria said. “The card printed volatile where it used to say human. Clothes went in a bin with the old card. That is the rule. If you measure under and they still take you, that is a stamp. Deviation from linear presentation. I didn’t get the stamp. I got the number. The job after that looks the same from where you’re sitting.”

“Can we look,” the woman said.

“You’re already looking,” Bria said. “That’s allowed. Touching is not. If you bought a ticket you can watch the second room after this. I won’t be in it. Two other women will. One ticket, two faces. They call it stability research. I call it the same job with a second square.”

The hall clapped. Bria waited until it died.

“Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment,” she said again. “That’s the end unless you have something that isn’t about my clothes. I don’t have clothes.”

No one asked another question that counted. Bria stayed on the tape until a staffer at the wing nodded. Then she walked off the same way she had come, still uncovered.

Kade touched Nell’s shoulder. “Up. Second room. Don’t talk on the way.”

The second room was smaller, off the side hall. Two taped squares on the floor. Lights. A camera. A staffer with a tablet said, “Stability research. One campus ticket, two faces. Quinn is already here.”

Asta stood on the left square. No clothes. Dark hair. The smile she used for requests. On the right square was another clinic woman Nell knew by sight and not by a name anyone had given her tonight.

“Ives on the wall,” the staffer said. “You’re not on a square. You’re watching. Sit or stand, arms down.”

Nell stood against the wall. Asta looked at her once, a real look, then put the smile back on for the lens.

The staffer spoke to the camera.

“Two subjects. Both staying on the visible floor. Ordinary field on Quinn. Official field on the second. One ticket. Students who bought the talk can watch this after.”

She turned to Asta. “Words.”

Asta said, “Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. My glans is on. I can feel my pulse. Thank you for keeping me here. I accept the job.”

The other woman said the same four, then the same four sentences, voice thinner.

Nell understood the room. Being seen was a job. Bria’s job on the stage. Asta’s job on this square, two faces for one ticket. Nell’s job tonight was to walk into a dressed hall and sit uncovered so students would remember the body in the back row. If she did this well enough they would put her on a square instead of a hall bed.

She wanted that job. The other door was the van.

Asta’s nipples were tight under the lights. The other woman was already wet; Nell could see it. The camera took both. Nell’s body answered from the wall. She did not touch herself. She did not fold her arms.

Kade said, “That’s enough. Ives with me.”

In the side hall Asta’s voice caught her.

“Nell.”

Nell stopped. Asta was still on her square. The staffer was busy with the tablet.

“They’re going to want you on one of these,” Asta said. “You’re the pamphlet. I’m the request. Don’t look at the van when they walk you out.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

Kade took Nell back through the lobby. Students went quiet again. Nell walked with her arms down.

In the car Kade said, “You wanted that.”

“I want to stay on this floor,” Nell said. “If a square is how, I’ll stand on a square.”

“That’s the job. We’ll see if they give it to you.”

Nell leaned her head against the window. She was still wet. She could still hear Bria saying she would not cover, and Asta saying the four sentences, and the hall

going still when she walked in. She rode back toward the clinic with her hands on her thighs, wanting the square because inland was a van with no windows, and she already knew what that van was for.

Chapter 11 — Nell. Chosen.

Pell had a jacket on. Nell did not. They stood in the small office off the bay, the one with a chair Nell was not offered.

“You’re on the heritage-medical track,” Pell said. “I’m going to say what that is so you don’t invent it. Two years of this floor is over. You stayed pretty enough to look at. You say the four words and the sentences under them. You take the weekly session and the file can see you enjoy it. Heritage-medical means we use you where people can see you. Intake sister in the mornings. Campus talks when they book you. After a talk you stay at the teaching clinic for a standing slot. Students are dressed. You are not. You already know the van is the other door. This track is how you stay off it.”

Nell said, “All right.”

“Sera is in room four. Eighteen. Same-day. Over. You walk her to speech class and you tell her the truth in short sentences. You do not tell her a story about your mother.”

“I won’t.”

Room four had one bed with a sheet and a girl sitting on it with her arms crossed over her chest. Dark blonde. Shaking. Card still in her fist.

Nell stood in the doorway uncovered and waited until the girl looked at her.

“I’m Nell. I’m an intake sister. That means I already live on this floor and they sent me to walk you. Put your arms down. They watch hands. If you cover, they write it.”

Sera’s arms dropped an inch, then all the way. Her face went red.

“I had a sweater this morning,” Sera said.

“I did too. It went in a bin with the old card. The new card says volatile. You don’t get the sweater back. What’s your name.”

“Sera.”

“Sera. Stand up. We’re going to speech class. You can ask me things while we walk. I have to answer short.”

In the hall Sera whispered, “Is inland real.”

“Yes. It’s a van in the bay and another facility. You don’t come back onto this floor from it. Hall beds are the beds with no sheets. If you’re not staying, you wait on one of those for the van. You have a room bed. Keep it.”

“How.”

“Let them put you on the table every week. Hands, then the instrument, on your clitoris until you’re flushed and swollen and wet. Camera on. You say thank you. You say heat, pulse, gratitude, assignment, and you know what those mean. You don’t cover your chest. You’re pretty enough. That’s the job.”

Sera’s voice cracked. “I don’t want that job.”

“I didn’t either,” Nell said. “I want to stay. That’s different.”

Speech class had the card on the stand. The woman pointed at Sera first.

“Words. Then meanings.”

Sera looked at Nell. Nell nodded.

Sera said, “Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment.”

“Meanings.”

“I don’t— I don’t remember all of it.”

Nell said, not from the stand, “Heat means your glans is warm and turned on. Pulse means you can feel your heartbeat there and you haven’t gone away behind your eyes. Gratitude means thank you for the session and thank you for a sheet instead of the van. Assignment means you accept the job. Be seen. Be filmed. Go on the website.”

The woman at the stand did not smile. “Ives is not the teacher. She is the example. Again, Sera. From your own mouth.”

Sera got through it. Her arms twitched toward her breasts when the vent came on. Nell touched her wrist down, gentle, the way Kade had touched hers two years ago.

“They watch hands,” Nell said.

After class Sera said, “Are you going to watch me on the table.”

“Not today. I have a talk. If they put me on your session later, you’ll see me. I don’t get to say no.”

Sera nodded as if that were a kindness. It was not. Nell did not correct her.

The campus theater was already filling when Kade walked Nell in through the side. Students in coats. Nell bare. The hall went quieter than last time. She was not in the back row now. She was the woman walking toward the tape.

Kade said, “Square. You know the words. You know the questions. After this you don’t ride home. Teaching clinic, standing slot. Tray will be in the wing.”

Nell stepped onto the pale tape. House lights found her breasts, her belly, the dark hair between her legs, the card in her fingers. She was wet before the first question. Shame sat on it and did not turn it off. Two years of Kade’s table had

taught her body to come forward when a room looked.

A staffer at the wing said, “Go.”

“I’m Nell Ives,” Nell said. “I’m on the heritage-medical track. That means I live on the visible floor and I come here without clothes so you can look while I talk. I don’t get paid. The website gets paid. That’s why taxes stay at zero. If you want a longer speech, I don’t have one.”

A girl in the second row lifted a hand. “What do you say when they film you.”

“Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. Heat means my glans is warm and turned on. I can feel it right now. Pulse means I can feel my heartbeat there. I am in this room. Gratitude means thank you for the weekly session and thank you for a room bed instead of the inland van. Assignment means I accept this. Being seen. Being filmed. Standing here.”

A man near the aisle said, “Do you enjoy it.”

The hall shifted. Nell felt the question in her nipples and lower.

“The file wants enjoyment,” she said. “I give the file that. On the table a woman uses her hands and then the instrument on my clitoris until I am flushed and swollen and wet. I say thank you. Some weeks I come. They write it down. I don’t get to call that private.”

“Can we see,” someone said, not standing.

“You’re seeing,” Nell said. “Touching is not allowed from the seats. After this talk I have a standing slot at the teaching clinic down the hall. If your ticket includes it, you can watch from the glass. I already said yes by standing here.”

A woman in a scarf said, “You measured over.”

“Yes. The card printed volatile. Clothes in the bin. Same day. I had a sweater at breakfast.”

“Do you want it back.”

“Wanting clothes is a hand problem,” Nell said. “I keep my hands down.”

They clapped because they did not know what else to do. Nell stayed on the tape until Kade nodded from the wing. She walked off with her arms at her sides and the pulse between her legs hard enough that each step smeared wetness on her inner thigh.

The teaching clinic was a room with an exam table, paper, tape for the knees, a camera, and a glass wall. Dressed students were already on the other side of the glass. Two technicians in gray waited. Both women. Both with gloves out.

“Ives,” the older one said. “Standing slot. This is the same weekly session you take on your floor. Hands, then the instrument, until you are flushed, swollen,

and wet. Camera on. Glass stays up. You look at us or at the lens. You do not look at your own chest to hide. You say thank you at the end. If you come, you come. If you don’t, we keep going until the file has enough. Sit.”

Nell sat on the table. Paper stuck. She opened her knees to the tape. The glass made the air feel colder. A student on the other side put her palm on the pane and then took it off, embarrassed.

The older technician gloved.

“I’m going to hold you open,” she said. “My partner takes the instrument after. You can make noise. You cannot close.”

“All right,” Nell said.

Fingers moved the hood back. Cool air hit the glans. Nell’s breath caught in front of the glass. The technician’s glove circled, slow, professional, until Nell swelled into the touch. A sound left her mouth. Shame followed it and did not stop the next sound.

“She’s already wet,” the partner said, for the tablet and for the glass.

“I know,” Nell said. She heard herself add, “Please don’t stop.”

The older technician glanced at her face. “That’s enjoyment. Good. Stay.”

They did not stop. The glove worked her until her hips tried to lift. The partner seated the instrument. Cool, then not. Nell looked at the lens because the glass was worse. The instrument stayed on the swollen glans and hummed a little in the technician’s hand from how hard Nell was shaking. She came with her knees still on the tape, a broken thank-you starting too early.

“Not yet,” the older one said. “We finish the count. Then you thank the lens.”

They kept the instrument there through the aftershake until Nell was flushed down her chest and shining on the paper. Students behind the glass had gone very still.

The instrument came away. Air on wet skin. Nell flinched and did not close.

“Photograph.”

Click.

“Knees in. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Nell said to the lens. Then, because the stand had taught her, “Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment.”

“Meanings,” the partner said.

“My glans is on. I can feel it. Thank you for the session and the floor. I accept the job.”

“Good. Tray is in the wing. Read the schedule. Don’t stand up until your legs work.”

In the wing a shallow tray waited on a chair. Two sheets. Nell’s hands were still unsteady. She picked up the top sheet.

Standing slot: teaching clinic after talk. Days listed. Her name. Asta’s name once, paired, next month. She read that. She set the second sheet aside without turning it over. Pell had said she did not need every paper. She believed that. She believed she was safe because she had a square and a slot and a sheet on a bed and Sera’s wrist under her fingers that morning.

Kade came into the wing with Nell’s card, which someone had taken during the slot and now handed back.

“You did fine,” Kade said. “Sera asked if you were coming back to room four. You’re not. You’re in six. Quinn still books. You still match the pamphlet. Don’t read the second sheet tonight. It’s routing. Routing is not your job.”

“I didn’t read it.”

“Good.”

In room six Asta was already on her bed, sheet under her, not over.

“I heard they put you on the glass,” Asta said.

“They did.”

“Did you come.”

Nell sat. The sheet was rough on the backs of her thighs. “Yes.”

Asta looked at her for a long time. “That’s how you stay. I stay because they request an ordinary glans on this face. You stay because you sound like you mean the thank you.”

“I think I do mean it,” Nell said. She was surprised to hear it. “Not the whole thing. The table part. I want the table part enough now that the file can use it. I want the square because the van is the other door. That’s as safe as I know how to be.”

Asta’s laugh was small. “Don’t say safe like it’s a place. Say it like it’s a week.”

Nell lay down with her hands at her hips. The corner camera was dark. She did not trust dark. She could still feel the glass and the instrument and Sera’s shaking mouth on the word assignment. She did not cover her chest. She did not turn over the second sheet in her head. She said the four words once, under her breath, and the four sentences under them, and she let herself believe the sheet on the bed was a kind of staying.

Chapter 12

Iona kept the folder flat against her ribs when she sat down.

Two years of rooms like this one had taught her the temperature of a hall before a talk. Students filled the rows in sweaters and jackets. A faculty woman at the aisle checked names on a clipboard and did not look twice at the folder. The lights over the seats were still up. The lights over the floor were brighter, a clean white that made the tape look wet.

On the floor in front of the first row, silver tape made a square the size of a bath mat.

Iona had put her mouth on a woman standing inside a square like that one. That had been two years ago. Bria Sen had been bare on the tape and grateful in the short way the talks taught, and Iona had kissed her to pull her off, and both of them had been more turned on than they had expected. Bria had gone in for a second kiss. Then Bria had stayed on the square. The memory still sat in Iona’s mouth when a hall went quiet. It did not get her anyone off a square now. It had not gotten anyone off a square in the two years between that kiss and this seat.

The folder held what Asta Quinn’s mother had brought and what the blonde officer had passed in the street with the faces and the addresses blacked out. First readings were still on the pages. The stamp was still on the pages. Deviation from linear presentation. Initials: L. KE. It had taken two years to put a last name to those letters. The directory had given her KEENE, L. She had followed the blonde woman out of the Board building already

uncovered, and the officer had given her paper and had not come with her. Two years to find that hand. Two years of graduates who would not walk off taped floors. Two years of a cell arguing that if you exposed the harvest you threatened the holiday, and people would hate you for the tax bill.

She had chosen the paper anyway.

A student in the next seat glanced at Iona’s hair and then at the folder and then away. People still looked at her. Two years had not changed that. She sat still and let them look and kept the folder closed.

The faculty woman at the aisle raised her voice without raising it much.

“Phones down. If you need the site later, it will be up after. This is the talk. She will take questions if there is time.”

The site. The sentence that had held for two years was the same sentence. The videos paid enough that the tax bill stayed at zero. Close the site and the tax bill came back. One party held because that was the other public sentence.

Iona opened the folder a thumb’s width and closed it again. Asta Quinn, nineteen when they took her, dark hair, under the line, taken anyway. Beautiful enough that the file wanted her. The mother had said intake. The mother had said the officer’s hand. By the time the mother found Iona, Asta had already been gone long enough that the name had weight.

The side door opened.

Nell Ives came in already uncovered.

Eighteen at the start. Brunette. Two clinic years on her. Small in the shoulders, pretty in the way the cameras liked. Her arms hung at her sides. She did not cover her chest when the air from the door moved across her. She walked to the taped square as if the square were a mark she had stood on every week of those two years. Students turned. The hall went quieter than a hall that size should have gone.

Nell stepped into the square. Her feet found the inside edge of the tape and stayed there. She faced the seats. She did not look for a coat.

A technician in a gray smock stood off to the left with a small camera on a short pole. The camera was already live. Iona could see the red point. Another woman in the same smock held a tablet and did not hide it.

Nell waited until the faculty woman nodded.

“My name is Nell Ives,” she said. Her voice was clear and not loud. “I am here on assignment. I measured over the official line the morning I turned eighteen. The new card printed volatile. I have been in clinic education for two years. I am stable. I am grateful for the weekly session. I am grateful to be seen.”

Two years in the sentences. Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. Iona had heard the list until she could say it in her sleep. Hearing it from this girl, who had been in clinic the whole time Iona had been hunting a last name, made the square look smaller.

Nell went on as if she were telling a neighbor how a kettle worked.

“The official story is short. Genome work said women with a larger glans are not a variation inside the human line. They are a remnant. A different species that came along with everyone else and never left. A larger glans reacts more. That is why the card changed. That is why I do not wear clothes. Humans wear clothes. I do not. Sleeping sheets stay on beds. Every week a staff woman uses her hands and then the instrument on my clitoris until I am flushed and swollen and wet, and then I say thank you. They tell me it is for my safety. The footage goes on the website. People pay if they want more than the free preview. That money is enough. Taxes stay at zero.”

She said taxes the way a person said weather.

Nell’s nipples were already tight. She did not mention it. She stood with her arms down.

“If you have questions,” she said, “you may ask them. I will answer what I am allowed to answer.”

The faculty woman smiled with only her mouth.

“We’ll take three. Then she has a standing slot at the teaching clinic. You can see the protocol there if your section signed.”

Iona stood up.

The seat gave a small sound. Faces turned from Nell to the aisle. Iona walked down without hurrying. She was taller than Nell. Her hair picked up the white light. Two years of this and people still looked. She felt the looking land on her mouth and her throat and the folder.

She stopped at the edge of the floor, not on the tape.

“Her name is Asta Quinn,” Iona said. She did not raise her voice. The room was already listening. “She measured under the line. They took her anyway. The stamp on the form is deviation from linear presentation. The initials are L. KE. Keene. It took two years to find her. There are more. Pretty women who came in under and left without clothes. You can read the first numbers. You can read the stamp. The addresses are black. The faces are black. The harvest is not.”

She held the folder open toward the first row and toward Nell.

Nell looked at the paper. She did not step off the tape. Her hands stayed at her sides. Her throat moved once.

“I know Asta,” Nell said. “She booked. She was on my floor.”

“She was under the line,” Iona said. “The pamphlet said human. They used her anyway. The site used her. You are standing there after two years telling them the remnant story as if the instrument does not move with heat and time of day and whether a woman has been touched. You know it moves. The officer who signed those files knows it moves.”

A murmur went through the seats. Not a rise. A shift.

The faculty woman was already speaking into a small mic at her collar.

Nell’s eyes stayed on Iona’s face, then on the folder, then on the square under her own feet.

“I am on assignment,” Nell said. “I am not going inland. I am stable. I say thank you. Asta said thank you.”

“She was under,” Iona said. “Say it to them. Say they take who they want and print a story over it so the tax bill stays gone.”

Nell’s breath showed in the lift of her ribs. She was flushed at the throat already.

“I want this job,” Nell said, and it came out plain. “The other door is the van in the loading bay. I do not look into the van. I stand here.”

Security came from the wing door, two women in dark jackets, badges on lanyards. They did not run.

Iona held the folder higher.

“Look at her,” she said to the seats. “Look at the tape. You can still vote a tax back. You can still walk her off.”

The first officer took Iona’s elbow. The second took the folder. Iona kept her fingers on the paper a second too long and the second officer waited her out and then had it.

“Out through the wing,” the first officer said. “Not through the seats.”

Iona looked at Nell.

Nell was still inside the tape. Her arms were down. The camera on the short pole had turned a few degrees so that it held both of them.

Iona went with the hands on her arms. The wing door shut on the faculty woman starting the first question as if a question could put the room back where it had been.

The corridor behind the theater was narrower than the hall. Painted block. A drinking fountain. A holding bed against the wall with the sheet folded at the foot and no one on it. A bed for a girl who was not staying. Waiting for the inland van. Iona had heard that sentence for two years from women with short voices.

The officers did not speak until the second door.

A bin stood under a wall hook. Gray plastic. A printed card taped to the rim, the letters large: CLOTHING.

“Jacket,” the first officer said. “Then the rest. In the bin. You can keep the earrings if they are small.”

Iona looked at the bin. Her heart had been high in the theater. It was higher now, and the height was not only fear. The officer’s voice was ordinary. The hook was ordinary. The lid of the bin was scuffed. Iona’s hands had already gone to her own buttons as if they had been waiting for the sentence.

She took off her jacket. She folded it once and put it in. The air in the wing touched her arms through the sweater and she felt her skin answer before she wanted it to. Sweater next. Shirt. The cooler air found her chest and her nipples drew in so fast it made her bite the inside of her cheek. She did not cover them. She watched her own hands put the shirt in the bin and the watching made a low

pull between her legs that she had no right to, not here, not after two years of calling this a harvest.

Shoes. Socks. Trousers.

She hesitated with her thumbs in the last band of cloth and the first officer only waited. The waiting was worse than a pulled hand. Iona pushed the last of it down and stepped out and put it in the bin. She was bare in a corridor with two dressed women and a plastic lid. The look landed on her the way looks had always landed, and her body, traitor and honest, opened to it. Heat. Wet. A tightness in her breasts she could not blame on the air alone. The thought arrived without permission: if this was capture, why was she wet already.

She stood with her arms at her sides because there was nowhere else that did not look like hiding. Her nipples were tight and obvious. She hated that they were and she felt them with her whole attention. Two years ago a kiss on a square had surprised her. This was not a kiss. This was a bin and a tag and a time written in ink, and she was more aroused than she had been on that sidewalk, which was a fact she would have argued down in the cell and could not argue down in her own skin.

The first officer put a lid on the bin and wrote the time on a tag.

“Through here,” the second officer said.

The next room was a clinic room. A table. A light on an arm. A camera on a taller pole with a wider lens. A tray. The instrument in an open cloth sleeve. Iona knew the shape from two years of free previews and campus screens. Measuring head. Slender body. The job of it was to seat on a woman’s glans, to count volume, and to work her until she was flushed and swollen and wet.

Director Pell stood at the foot of the table with a tablet. Dark dress. Low shoes. Hair pulled back. She looked at Iona the way she might look at a bed count.

“Iona Reeve,” Pell said. “You have been on our screens for two years. The old footage is protest. Coat and sign and a crowd that does not stand up. This will be the first session. Hands, then the instrument, on the clitoris, until you are flushed and swollen and wet. Then you say thank you. The camera stays on. You interrupted a talk. The site can use an agitator as easily as it uses a graduate. After this you do not cover. Do you understand what I said, or do you need it again?”

Iona’s mouth was dry. The rest of her was not.

“I came with paper,” she said. “Asta Quinn was under the line. Keene signed her.”

Pell looked at the shine already visible at the top of Iona’s thighs as if that were part of the answer.

“On the table,” Pell said. “Ms. Kade will do the session. I have time.”

Ms. Kade came from the sink with dry hands. Dark hair. Calm face. She looked at Iona’s hips and then at the table paper.

The officers stayed.

Iona got on the table. The paper was cool against her back and her seat and it made her nipples pull tighter. She lay on her back. The light found her. She turned her face toward the camera’s black glass and felt herself get wetter for being seen, and the shame of that want was so mixed with the want that she could not tell them apart.

Ms. Kade pulled on gloves.

“Feet apart. Knees easy. Arms down. If you get cold you still keep them down. I am going to use my hands first. Then the instrument. It seats on the glans. It counts volume. It will work you. If you need to breathe, breathe. If you need to speak, you may.”

Iona’s voice came out lower than the corridor.

“I know the protocol.”

Ms. Kade’s gloved hands touched the inside of Iona’s knee and waited there, placement, not comfort.

“I am starting,” Ms. Kade said.

The first contact on Iona’s clitoris was two fingers, warm through the glove, finding the hood and then the glans underneath. Iona’s body lifted into it. She heard herself make a sound that was not protest. The fingers circled, light, then firmer, the pad of one finger on the glans itself, a small steady motion that told her she had been ready before the glove arrived.

She had told herself for two years that she was hunting a harvest. She had told the cell that a crowd could still be shamed. She had kissed Bria to take a woman off a square and had gone home that night with her own pulse still high. On this table the old kiss felt like a rehearsal she had refused to name. The glove was not a kiss. It was better and worse. It was a staff woman doing a job, and Iona’s hips kept offering themselves to the job.

“Breathe,” Ms. Kade said. “You are already wet. That helps. You can lift. You cannot close.”

Iona breathed. Her arms stayed down. Her nipples ached in the open air. She could feel how swollen her clitoris was getting under the finger, a focused heat that spread into her belly and made her thighs restless. She wanted the finger to stay. She wanted it harder. She wanted, with a clarity that frightened her, to be good at this so they would not stop.

Ms. Kade used her other hand to hold Iona open, thumb on the outer lip. Ordinary. A procedure. Iona’s clitoris stood for it. She could feel the size of herself in a way that made her want to look down and made her afraid to look down. Slick heat. A pulse of her own under the glove. Shame at how much she wanted the next minute.

The thought came again, plainer: if they had not caught her, she would have walked back out with the folder and the same hunger she had carried for two years. Being caught had put hands on her. She did not know if she had come to the theater for the paper or for this.

Ms. Kade’s fingers slipped in her wet and came back to the glans with more of it.

“You are swelling,” Ms. Kade said. “Good. I am going to stay here a little longer. The instrument seats cleaner when you are like this.”

Iona laughed once, a small broken sound, because she was so far from unready that the paper under her had a spot she could feel. She wanted Ms. Kade to keep talking. She wanted the officers to keep looking. She wanted Nell’s practiced voice out of her head and she wanted Nell to see this, which was a wish she put down and picked up again.

“Please,” Iona said, and heard herself. “Don’t stop yet.”

Ms. Kade did not stop. She worked the glans until Iona’s breath shook and her nipples were so tight they hurt in the good way, and Iona’s wet made a quiet sound when her hips could not be still. Nothing she had done with her own hands in two years had ever made her this obvious this fast. The kiss on the square had been a spark. This was a room taking her apart with patience.

“Hands are enough,” Ms. Kade said. “I am taking the instrument.”

The cloth sleeve whispered. Ms. Kade did not make a speech of it. She seated the head on Iona’s glans as if seating were the whole sentence.

The first contact was pressure. Then a drawing. A slow pull that took the glans into the head and kept taking. Iona’s mouth opened and stayed open. Stretch. Not a tear. A lengthening hold she had not been told to expect. Her thighs jumped and Ms. Kade’s free hand pressed her hip down, a correction. The ache was immediate and the ache was pleasure so sharp she sounded on it.

She liked it before she understood it. That was the first honest thing.

“Hold still,” Ms. Kade said. “The head is seated. I am taking a count.”

The pulse started inside the hold. Low. Regular. Iona’s clitoris was drawn and worked at the same time. Heat climbed. Wet ran. Her nipples felt peeled to the air. She kept her arms down and her hands found the table edge.

Ms. Kade watched the small window on the instrument’s body.

“Under,” she said to Pell. Mild. As if she were reading a temperature.

Iona heard the word and her hips still tried to help. Under. The pamphlet word. The stamp word. The word she had carried in the folder for two years.

They did not take the instrument off.

Ms. Kade adjusted the head with two fingers and the pull deepened. Iona’s glans went with it, swelling into the hold, a bright focused self she could not hide. She heard herself ask without words. More. Keep it.

“Second count,” Ms. Kade said.

The pulse climbed a notch. Iona was shaking in a long climb that would not crest. She knew, in the middle of it, what they were doing. The window had given them under. The head was still on her. They were going to pull until the window said something else. The harvest method, in her own body, with her own wet on the paper. She had come to expose that sentence. She wanted the next pull anyway.

“Under,” Ms. Kade said again. Still mild. “Not enough.”

Iona’s eyes stung. She did not tell them to stop.

“Please,” she said. “Again.”

Ms. Kade looked at her face the way she had looked at the window.

“Third,” she said, and seated the stretch farther.

The pull took Iona up off the thought of paper. Her glans felt huge, drawn, held, used. She was so close that the air in the room felt like a hand. Then Ms. Kade spoke to her, not to Pell, in that same quiet technician voice, as if she were naming parts on a tray.

“The first two numbers were a human count,” Ms. Kade said. “You are not going to keep a human count. Humans wear clothes. Yours are in the bin. A larger glans is not a variation inside the line. That is the official story. This head is only pulling until the window agrees with the story. You spent two years on women stamped under. You are not that stamp. You are the other thing. You are not human. The card will not say human.”

The sentence went into Iona where the stretch already was.

She came on it.

The climax took the drawn glans as if the instrument had made a new center in her and then used it. She shook with her arms down and her knees easy and a sound she did not try to stop. Nothing — not Bria’s surprised second kiss, not two years of her own hands in the dark, not the bin and the looking — had ever held her like this. It was the most her body had ever been asked to be, and she gave it.

“Thank you,” she said.

Nobody had asked. The words came out of the shaking while the head was still seated and the window was still working. She said it again because the first time had felt like breathing.

“Thank you.”

Ms. Kade watched the window through the aftershakes and did not ease the stretch until she had what she needed.

““Over,” she said. Mild. “That prints. Volatile.”

Iona lay in the light and felt her clitoris still drawn, still swollen, still wanting the head even after the number had arrived. She looked down because she had to. She did not recognize the size of herself and she wanted to be looked at for it. Wet on the paper. Wet on her thighs. Nipples tight. Arms down. Thank you still in her mouth.

Pell marked the tablet.

“First session on camera,” Pell said. “She enjoys. The file can use that. Old footage against new. Coat and sign, then this. She can no longer cover. Sit up slowly. You may have a sheet on a bed. You may not have your clothes. You are not going back through the theater. Special wing. Short answers when you can stand.”

Ms. Kade eased the stretch down by degrees so the glans was not dropped from the hold in one motion. Even the easing made Iona moan. When the head came away, the air was almost unkind. She made a small sound and did not close her thighs.

One of the officers took a still. Face. Chest. The table paper. The swollen visible fact of her.

Iona sat up. The room tilted. She put her arms down when they tried to rise. The want to cover last lasted less than a breath. The want to be seen lasted. The want for the instrument back lasted longest.

They walked her down the block corridor past the holding bed with the folded sheet. Air moved on her wet skin and on the tender stretched glans and she kept her arms down because the officers were watching her hands, and because she wanted her hands down, and because she had already said thank you, and because the camera behind them had already taken what it needed.

Chapter 13

The volatile card hung on a short lanyard where the badge had hung.

The badge had gone with the clothes in Hale’s room, two years back, collected together, nothing returned. Denn had given her the lanyard later, so she could still pass a door. The card tapped the hollow of Lise’s throat when she walked. She did not reach for a collar. She still thought of the tap as a badge.

The Board corridor was cool. Dressed women passed her with files and did not slow the way strangers in the street still slowed. Two years had taught this building the sight of her. Officer Keene. Uncovered. On duty.

She carried a folder. Fluctuation tables. Repeat windows. Deviation slips with her initials. Asta Quinn’s first page was on top. Under. Photograph. Stamp. L. KE.

Chair Venn’s door was open.

Venn sat behind the desk in a gray jacket, hair pinned, glasses low. The stamp set was at her right hand.

“You asked for time,” Venn said. She looked at the folder, not at Lise’s breasts. “Stand if you want. I know how long I have.”

Lise stood.

“The line does not hold still,” she said. “Heat moves it. Time of day moves it. A woman who comes in cold can read under and read over after a walk across the courtyard. We have always known that. We use it.”

She set the folder on the wood. Paper. Columns. She kept her arms at her sides.

Venn turned Asta’s page with one finger.

“Asta Quinn,” Lise said. “First count under. Pretty enough for the site. Stamp. My initials. She did not go home. There are more in that stack. I am asking you to reopen the line long enough to say the instrument does not do what the pamphlet says it does. My own repeats are in the back. Different hours. Different numbers. The over is the one that printed this card.”

Venn did not open the back of the folder.

“Reopen it to what end,” Venn said. “So rumor wins. So the holiday ends. So every household gets a tax bill in the same week the videos go dark. You are not bringing me science I have not seen.”

“I am bringing you my initials on a girl who measured human,” Lise said.

Venn looked at her face then.

“You brought me a leak,” Venn said. Her voice stayed ordinary. “Faces blacked out. First counts left on. Stamps left on. Then the redhead stood up in a theater

with those pages and told a dressed hall that Asta Quinn was under. People talk. They talk on the site comments and they talk in kitchens. They say we take beauties who come in human and print a story over them. Iona Reeve spent two years making that sentence loud. The leak made it specific. A name. A first number. Your hand.”

Lise kept still. The card tapped when she breathed.

“So we answered the name,” Venn said. “Not with a speech. With maintenance. Every night since the packet left this building, clinic has put Asta Quinn on a table and used the instrument the way it is used when a count has to move. The head stretches the glans and holds the stretch. Night after night. Slow. The file calls it maintenance because her card already said she needed attention to stay stable. The window has had time to learn a new size. Rumor says she was under. This afternoon we demonstrate what she is now.”

Lise’s mouth had gone dry. Lower down, the sentence landed anyway. Stretch. Nightly. Asta, who had booked, who had had an ordinary glans on the floor with Nell, who had smiled on a public screen at the holiday.

“You modified her,” Lise said.

“We maintained her,” Venn said. “You may stand at the back. You asked about the line. You can look at the answer. Then we are done asking.”

Selke was already in the small hall off imaging. Dark coat. Calm mouth. A camera on a short pole. Two dressed Board women with tablets. The table under the light. Paper on it. The instrument in an open sleeve.

Asta Quinn was already on the table.

Dark hair. Two years older than the girl on the first page. Arms down. Knees easy. She had the short public face on: not quite a smile, not quite nothing. Her nipples were tight in the air. Between her open thighs her clitoris was not the small ordinary fact Lise had signed. The glans was huge and distended, drawn forward, darker, wet at the shine, a size the pamphlet had always described and this body had not possessed on the morning Lise put L. KE on the slip.

Lise felt the look go through her. Heat. Shame. A pull she did not give permission for. She was still an officer. She stood at the back with her card on its lanyard and her own sex already answering a girl she had sent to intake.

Ms. Hale pulled on gloves.

“Maintenance demonstration,” Hale said, to the camera and to the room, as if she were naming a kettle. “Asta Quinn. Nightly stretch since the rumor began. I am going to use my hands, then the instrument. The window will count. You will see the size. Asta, if you need to breathe, breathe.”

“Yes,” Asta said. Her voice was the short one. “Thank you.”

She said it before the hands. Lise’s throat closed.

Hale’s gloved fingers found Asta’s glans and had to take more of it than a first appointment required. There was that much of her. Hale circled the distended head with a patience that made Asta’s hips lift and made Lise’s own glans throb in cold air as if Hale had touched her instead. Wet sounded on the paper. Asta’s breath broke. She kept her arms down. She had learned that on the same floor as Nell.

“This is the maintenance size,” Hale said. Mild. “Not the first-count size. Rumor can look.”

One of the Board women made a note. Selke did not. Selke watched Lise for a second, then watched the table.

Hale seated the instrument. The head had to open for Asta. The stretch was not a beginning stretch. It was a hold on flesh that had been pulled every night until it stayed. Asta’s mouth opened. A sound came out of her that the file would call enjoyment. Lise knew the sound. She had signed off on it. She had made it herself in this building. Hearing it from Asta while the glans sat huge in the head made Lise wet along her own inner thigh.

“Volume,” Hale said. “Over. Well over. Confirming.”

She held the stretch. Asta shook and came with her knees easy and her dark hair on the paper and the distended glans caught in the instrument like a fact no kitchen rumor could talk back to. She said thank you again, automatic, grateful, booked.

Hale eased the head away. Asta’s clitoris stayed drawn and enormous in the light. Hale turned her slightly so the camera and the back of the room both had it. Lise looked because Venn had told her to look, and because she could not not look. She felt swollen between her own legs. She felt like an officer. She felt like a woman who had initialed a lie and then watched the body altered until the lie had meat.

Venn spoke from beside her, quiet.

“The line stays,” Venn said. “She is not an under on a slip anymore. She is what the pamphlet said a remnant looks like. That is the answer to Reeve and to the packet and to you. Do not bring me another folder.”

Selke’s voice came after, still ordinary.

“Officer Keene. The question is whether you want the tax bill to return. If rumor sets the catalog, the money thins. If the money thins, the holiday ends. You have a desk. You have a card. The Board looks after its own if they stay useful. Do you

want the tax bill to return.”

Asta lay on the table with her huge wet glans uncovered and her arms down. Lise said, “No.”

“Then monitoring is standing,” Selke said. “Same protocol. Hale has you next. Denn will wait. Clothes stay off. Desk stays yours.”

They did not cover Asta to move her. They sat her up and walked her out by the side door, still dripping, still distended, the short thank-you still in her mouth. Lise watched the door close and then got on the same paper because that was the next officer motion.

Hale changed gloves.

“You saw the window,” Hale said. “You know what heat does. On your back. Arms down. I am not waiting for you to cool.”

Denn stood at the door.

Lise lay down. The paper was still warm from Asta. That fact went through her like a hand. Hale’s fingers found Lise’s glans — smaller than what had just been demonstrated, not ordinary either, already swollen from watching — and worked her until she was wet enough to seat. Lise kept her arms down. She thought of columns. She thought of Iona in the theater. She thought of nightly maintenance on a girl she had stamped. The thoughts did not dry her. They did the opposite.

“Please,” Lise said, and hated it, and did not take it back.

Hale seated the instrument. Pull. Pulse. Lise’s hips tried to help. Hale looked at the window.

“Over,” Hale said. “Standing will take this number. Confirming.”

Lise came on the confirming pass with Asta’s size still printed behind her eyes and the tax- bill no still in her mouth and the card tapping her neck where the badge had been. Hale eased the head away. Lise sat up when she was told. Wet on her thighs. Arms down.

She said it to the tile, because she needed it in the air of the room that had just shown her what maintenance was for.

“I am still an officer.”

Hale marked the tablet.

“Same day next week,” Hale said. “The window does not care about the folder.”

Denn opened the door. Corridor air moved across Lise’s wet skin. She walked back toward the Board with an over in the file and Asta’s distended glans still on the camera, and the sentence she was going to keep saying until it was true enough to work in.

Chapter 14 — Three corridors, one annex

The tape on the stage floor was the same dull silver it had been the first time they walked her in from the back. Nell set both bare feet inside it without looking down. She knew the corners by the pull in her ankles.

The house lights stayed up. That was the point of a campus talk. The students had to see her. They sat in their coats and scarves with notebooks open on their knees, pens already moving, and the woman at the aisle microphone said her name the way the file liked it said.

“Nell Ives. Heritage track. She will answer from the body.”

Nell kept her arms at her sides. The theater air was cooler than the van. Her nipples drew tight before the first question, and she let them. Speech class had taken the old habit of covering and left her with the newer one: if she was cold, the room was allowed to see that she was cold. If she was watched, the watching was part of the assignment.

A girl in the third row had her pen stopped. Nell felt that stop the way she felt a camera finding focus. Heat moved low in her, familiar, not an emergency. Two years of weekly sessions had taught her the difference between a startle and a use. This was a use. She was grateful for it in the plain way she had been taught to be grateful: the pulse was there, the assignment was this square, and inland was a loading bay she had learned not to look into.

“What do you notice first,” the woman at the microphone said, “when you stand here.”

“Heat,” Nell said. Her voice carried. She had practiced that too, the volume that did not apologize and did not perform. “Then pulse. Then that you can see both.”

A small sound went through the seats. Not a laugh. Attention.

“And gratitude.”

“Yes.”

“For what.”

Nell looked at the girl with the stopped pen, then at the faculty row, then at the side door where a technician waited with a folded sheet and no expression. The technician was dressed. Everyone in the house was dressed except Nell and the painted square.

“For the session that keeps me stable,” Nell said. “For being pretty enough to be seen. For the work.”

The woman at the microphone nodded once. That was the whole of the praise. Nell’s mouth wanted to add thank you and she held it. Thank you belonged on the

table. Here it would have been extra, and extra made a clip look hungry in the wrong way. She had learned that on a Thursday she could no longer date by the calendar, only by the swollen, filmed hour that marked a week.

They asked her about the remnant story because someone in the lecture always asked. This time it was a woman in a gray sweater, careful, as if the word volatile might stain the notebook.

“They told us the larger glans means you are not a variation,” the woman said. “That you react more. Is that what you feel.”

Nell did not look down at herself. Looking down read as shame, and shame read as instability, and instability was a van. She let the question sit on her skin.

“I feel it when they use their hands,” she said. “I feel it when they use the instrument. I flush. I get wet. I have to say thank you. That is the safety they mean.”

“Do you enjoy it.”

The file wanted yes. The file had yes. Nell had yes in her body before she had it in her mouth, which was the part that still surprised her on some mornings, standing at a sink with no clothes to put on and a roommate already booked.

“I enjoy it enough,” she said. “Enough for the work.”

The woman in gray wrote that down. The girl in the third row started her pen again. Nell’s clitoris had thickened against the cool air, a small blunt pulse she did not need a hand to name. She kept her feet in the tape and her arms down and let the pulse be public because that was the job, and the job was the door that was not inland.

After, in the wing off the theater, the technician handed her a bottle of water and did not offer a sheet. Sheets stayed on beds. Nell drank. Water ran a thin line between her breasts and she did not wipe it.

“Teaching clinic after,” the technician said. “Same annex as last week. You know the table.”

“I know it.”

“Director Pell wants you walked through the corridor, not the loading bay.”

Nell said, “All right,” and felt the old flinch try to lift her hands. She left them where they were. The flinch was information. It was not an order.

The corridor to the annex was warm and painted the color of watered milk. Doors stood open on both sides. From one room came the wet click of an instrument seating. From another, a woman saying thank you in a voice that had been coached down to one clean note. Nell’s own body answered that note with a pull

that made her walk a little slower. Gratitude, she thought, and then did not think the rest of the list because the list was for microphones. Two staff women stood by a window at the turn, dressed, folders in their hands, speaking as if the corridor were empty.

“Ives came off the square wet,” one said. “Voice stayed clean. Pell walked past the monitor.”

“Keep her on the circuit. Young still reads. Teaching clinic is waiting.”

They did not lower their voices when Nell passed. She was not a person who required privacy. She was a body the site already had. She walked on, arms down, the pulse from the square still working in her, and did not need anything else from their mouths.

The teaching-clinic room had one table, one camera on a short arm, and a woman in a navy dress who washed her hands as Nell came in.

“On your back,” the woman said. “Knees up. This is the standing slot after the talk. Hands first. Then the instrument. You know the order.”

“I know the order.”

Nell climbed up. The paper on the table was already warm from the last woman, or from the lamp; she could not tell and did not ask. The navy dress smelled like soap. The camera’s small light went white.

The woman’s hands were dry at first, professional, parting Nell with two fingers and finding her already slick. Nell’s breath went thin. She looked at the ceiling tile with the hairline crack and then at the camera because looking away read as a problem.

“Heat,” the woman said, not as a test, as a note to the room.

“Yes.”

A thumb settled on the glans and stayed. Not rubbing yet. Weight. Nell’s hips tried to lift and the woman used her other palm on Nell’s belly to keep her down. The pressure was kind. It was also absolute.

“Pulse.”

“Yes.”

Now the thumb moved, slow, the same circle they used when they wanted her flushed before the instrument ever came out of its tray. Nell’s nipples ached in the open air. Wetness made a small sound. She would have been ashamed of the sound two years ago. She was still ashamed, a little, and the shame sat next to the pleasure like a second pulse, and both of them were useful.

“You did well on the square,” the woman said. “Arms down. Voice clean. Pell walked past the monitor.”

Nell could not hold a sentence and the circle at the same time. She made a noise that was not a word.

“Gratitude,” the woman prompted, mild.

“Thank you,” Nell said, too early, and the woman smiled with only her mouth.

“Not yet. That one is for the end. Say the word.”

“Gratitude.”

“For what.”

“For being seen. For this.”

The thumb left. Nell’s hips followed it half an inch before she caught herself. The instrument came out of the tray with the soft rattle she knew better than any clock. The woman seated the head against her, counted under her breath for her own timing, and began the stretch that was not supposed to be a plan, only a reading that happened to pull.

Nell’s mouth opened. The crack in the ceiling went bright. She did not cover. She did not ask how long. The camera took what it was there to take, and when the woman finally said she could thank them, Nell said it with her eyes wet and her voice steady enough for the file.

“Thank you.”

“Assignment,” the woman said, wiping the instrument.

Nell, still on her back, still open to the room, answered from the body because that was the only place the answer lived.

“This.”

—

The special-wing classroom had windows that did not open and a table that did. Iona had learned the latch by watching other women fail it with their eyes. No one used their hands on the latch. Hands were for the work.

She sat on the edge of the table because Ms. Kade had pointed there and because sitting in a chair like a visitor had lasted exactly one afternoon. Chairs were for dressed staff. The table was furniture. Iona’s bare thighs stuck a little to the paper. She was already wet. She had been wet walking down the hall. That was no longer a fact she argued with. It was a fact she lived inside, the way she lived inside the card that did not say human.

Ms. Kade washed her hands at the small sink. The soap was unscented. Director Pell stood by the wall with a folder and a face that had learned how to watch without offering a door.

“We are not going to recite,” Ms. Kade said. Her voice was the same mild instrument it had been the night they printed Iona over the line. “You already have the words. I want them attached to something that is happening.”

Iona’s mouth had a speech ready, two years of speeches, crowds, packets, the blonde officer’s initials on a slip. The speech stayed behind her teeth. It would not ship here. Here there was paper under her, and a camera on a shelf that did not pretend to be off, and a pulse between her legs that had started when Kade said her name in the doorway.

“Lie back,” Ms. Kade said. “Knees bent. You may hold the edges.”

Iona lay back. The ceiling was plain. Holding the edges kept her arms from doing the old work of covering. She held them. Her breasts cooled in the air; her nipples pulled in. Pell wrote one line and waited.

Ms. Kade’s first touch was not the instrument. It was two fingers, inside the folds, spreading her with the matter-of-fact care of a woman opening a file. Iona’s breath snagged. She was slick enough that the fingers made a sound. Heat climbed her throat.

“Name that,” Ms. Kade said.

Iona shut her eyes and opened them because shut eyes were a kind of clothes.

“I’m wet.”

“The word we use.”

Iona’s jaw worked. The word they wanted was not wet. Wet was honest. The word they wanted sat in the lesson like a hook.

“Heat,” she said.

“Where.”

“In my—” She stopped. The crude version rose and she refused it, not for their sake, for her own. She had never liked filthy talk. She liked accuracy. “In the glans. Behind it. Low.”

Ms. Kade’s fingers stayed. They did not thrust. They held her open so the air could find her. Iona’s hips made a small traitorous circle.

“Good,” Ms. Kade said, as if Iona had passed a spelling line. “Pulse next. I am going to put my thumb on you. You will tell me when you feel it as a count and not as a mood.”

The thumb landed on the glans and Iona’s whole body took the landing. She was larger than she had been the morning she walked into a campus talk with a packet in her fist. She knew that without a window. The first session had stretched her through two unders and an over. Want had done the rest, week after week, the wanting she had not planned when she chose exposure. She had questioned, in the wing that first night, whether getting caught was what she had wanted. The question had not left. Neither had the want.

“Now,” Iona said. Her voice roughened. “It’s a count. It’s—there. There.”

Pell’s pen moved.

Ms. Kade did not take the thumb away. She pressed, released, pressed, a slow Morse that made Iona’s thighs shake against the table.

“You came on a sentence last time I had you like this,” Ms. Kade said, still mild. “You remember which sentence.”

Iona’s face went hot. Remembering was not a recap. Remembering was the sentence lighting up again under the thumb.

“You said I was not human. That the card would not say human.”

“And you said thank you without being asked.”

“Yes.”

“Was that gratitude or manners.”

Iona laughed once, helpless, and the laugh broke into a sound that was not a laugh. “It was—I don’t know. It was the most my body had been asked to be. I meant it. I still mean it. That doesn’t make the harvest clean.”

Pell looked up at harvest. Ms. Kade did not.

“We are not talking about a harvest in this room,” Ms. Kade said. “We are talking about your clitoris and the words that keep you stable enough to stay visible. Inland does not get these sessions. You understand that.”

Iona understood the loading bay. She had been walked past it once, on purpose, a pretty redhead they were not yet ready to waste. She had not looked in. She had felt the want anyway, ugly and bright: stay on this side of the door, stay on the table, stay where someone would put a thumb on her and ask her to name it.

“I understand,” she said.

“Gratitude,” Ms. Kade said. “Not the thank you at the end. The one underneath. What are you grateful for while my hand is on you.”

Iona’s eyes stung. She hated that. She also lifted into the thumb.

“That you didn’t stop,” she said. “That first night. That you left it on. That you pulled again. I knew what you were doing and I wanted the third pull. I am grateful I got it. I am grateful I still get this. I know how that sounds.”

“It sounds like the file,” Pell said from the wall, not unkind. “The file is allowed to sound like that.”

Ms. Kade took her hand away. Iona made a noise she would have bitten off in front of Orrie and Nia. There was no cell here. There was paper and a tray and the instrument coming up with that small, clean rattle.

“Look at it,” Ms. Kade said.

Iona looked. The head was simple. She knew the stretch in her body before it touched her. Her nipples were tight enough to hurt. Slick had reached her inner thighs.

“Assignment is the last word,” Ms. Kade said. “You will say it when I seat this. Not before. If you say it before, I will wait, and waiting is harder than the pull. You already know that.”

“Yes, Miss Kade.”

The Miss came out of her without a decision. It fit the room. Mistress would have been theater. Miss was a woman doing a procedure.

The instrument touched, kissed, then took. The stretch was slow and the count in Kade’s mouth was slower. Iona’s hands went white on the table edges. She did not say assignment. She breathed through her teeth and let the glans be drawn the way it had been drawn the night the window printed over. Pleasure stacked behind the stretch until she could not tell the two apart. Shame sat in the stack and did not cancel it.

Pell said, quietly, “Redhead reads on camera. Keep her facing the lens.”

Ms. Kade adjusted Iona’s knee with two fingers, still seated, still pulling. Iona’s mouth fell open. A sound came out of her that had no politics in it.

“Now,” Ms. Kade said.

“Assignment,” Iona got out. “This. The table. You. I want—please don’t take it off yet.”

Ms. Kade’s mouth almost smiled. “I won’t. We are not finished. You will thank me when you come, and you will use the short words after, in that order, while you can still feel this. Heat. Pulse. Gratitude. Assignment. Not as a list. As what is true in the next two minutes.”

She worked the instrument in the small skilled way that was not a plan on paper and was a plan in the hand. Iona’s back arched. The camera on the shelf took her

face and the wet shine and the way her breasts moved when she could not keep still. She thought of the brunette on the square who had not stepped off, and of her own clothes going into a bin, and the thought did not cool her. The girl had stayed. Iona had been walked out through a wing with her body already decided.

The sentence from the first night rose again, uninvited, kind, devastating. Not human. The card will not say human.

She came on the stretch and on the memory of the voice, shaking, eyes open because the lens was a kind of witness she no longer refused. Thank you left her mouth before she was asked. She said it twice. Ms. Kade kept the instrument where it was until the shaking changed key, then eased it off with the same care she had used seating it.

Iona lay on the table and named what was left, not as a drill, as weather.

“Heat. Still. Pulse—less, but there. Gratitude. I meant the thank you.” Her throat worked. “Assignment. I want the table again. I know what that makes me.”

Ms. Kade set the instrument in the tray and pulled a towel from the stack, not to cover Iona, only to clean the paper.

“It makes you stable enough to keep,” Pell said. “Class again tomorrow. Same room. You will answer from the body first. If you start a speech, we will put you back on the table until the speech leaves.”

Iona turned her face toward the window that did not open. Her body was still open to the room. She did not close her knees. Closing the knees had become a kind of lie, and she was tired of the lies that did not even help.

“I’ll answer from the body,” she said.

Ms. Kade’s mild voice followed her toward the door like a hand at the small of the back.

“You already do.”

—

Lise stood in the teaching-clinic doorway with the card on the short lanyard Denn had given her, hanging where the badge had hung. The lanyard was a courtesy. The card said volatile. She was uncovered. The two technicians in the room were not.

“Officer Keene is observing,” Denn said to the room, as if Lise’s title still arranged the furniture. “Group session. Two on the table. Hands, then the instrument. She does not need to touch them. She needs to see the protocol hold when there is more than one subject.”

Lise nodded. The nod was staff. Her nipples were already tight from the corridor air. She kept her arms at her sides because that was what she had initialed other women for, years of files, arms down when they were cold or watched. She was watched. She was cold. She was also, humiliatingly, not only cold.

The table was wide enough for two. Silver tape marked two rectangles on the pad. A dark- haired woman already lay in the left one, knees up, eyes on the ceiling, wet enough that Lise could see it from the door. The second woman was younger, fair, climbing up with the careful feet of someone who had been taught not to hurry and not to hide. Neither of them looked at Lise’s card. They looked at the technicians’ hands.

Lise knew both files. She had initialed one of them in a different life, clothes on, stamp waiting. Deviation from linear presentation. The photograph and the number had not agreed. Venn had not reopened the line when Lise asked. Selke had asked whether anyone wanted the tax bill back. Monitoring had become a standing appointment. Lise told herself she was still an officer. The lanyard tapped her sternum when she breathed.

“On your marks,” the nearer technician said. “This is one session. You will hear each other. You will not wait for privacy. There is no privacy on a table.”

The dark-haired woman said, “All right,” in a voice that had been to speech class.

The fair one said, “Yes,” and then, smaller, “Thank you,” too soon, the way a woman still new to the timing said it before the timing lived in the body.

Lise stood where Denn pointed, at the foot, close enough to see the work. Close enough to smell soap and skin. Her own glans felt swollen against nothing. The instrument on the side tray was the same shape as the one in Hale’s room the afternoon they had taken her clothes and her badge together. She did not reach for it. Observation was the order.

The technicians washed, dried, and put their hands on the two women at the same time. It was not theater. It was efficiency. Two thumbs found two glans. Two mouths opened. The fair one jerked; the dark-haired one only flushed, a practiced deep color that meant she booked.

Lise watched the thumbs move. She knew the circle. She had done it to other women when she was dressed. She had done it to herself after hours in an empty room, the door locked, the reading changing with the hour, and then she had put her clothes back on and written nothing. The memory arrived with a pulse that made her shift her weight. Denn glanced at her and did not comment. Denn had issued the lanyard. Denn knew what the card was for.

“Heat,” the nearer technician said to the fair one.

“Heat,” the fair one whispered.

“Louder. Officer Keene is here to hear that the protocol holds.”

The fair one swallowed. “Heat.”

The dark-haired woman, unasked, said, “Pulse,” because her body had gotten there first, and the technician on her side gave a small approving hum and pressed firmer.

Lise’s mouth was dry. Between her legs she was not. She could feel slick starting, a traitor line, and she could not close it away with a seam or a badge. Humans wore clothes. She did not. The room was allowed to see if her nipples tightened while she watched. They tightened.

Hands worked. The fair one began to shake. The dark-haired one stayed almost still except for the lift she could not help. Wet sounds stacked. Lise counted in her head the way she had counted on paper: duration, flush, whether enjoyment would read. Enjoyment was what the file wanted. Both women were giving it. Lise’s own breath had gone shallow enough that Denn, beside her, said quietly,

“You may sit if you need to.”

“I am on duty,” Lise said.

“I know.”

The instruments came next, two of them, seated together so the camera on the ceiling could take one frame of two stretches. Lise saw the heads pull. She saw the fair one’s eyes go wide and wet. She saw the dark-haired woman’s mouth form thank you and then hold it back for the end. The protocol held. Of course it held. The instrument did not care how many women were on a table. The window would say a number if anyone asked for a number. No one asked. This was not a classification. This was the weekly work that paid for a tax holiday Lise had stood through uncovered on civic steps while the city stayed dressed.

She wanted, with a clarity that shamed her, to be the one on the pad. She wanted, with the same clarity, to be the one holding the instrument. Officer and subject. The order had named both and given her neither pair of hands.

The fair one came first, a broken thank you, assignment lost in the noise and then found again when the technician prompted her. The dark-haired one lasted longer, then spilled with her eyes on the ceiling crack, gratitude said like a fact. The technicians eased the instruments off, wiped, reset the tray. Paper would be changed. The women would be walked back through a corridor that was not the loading bay.

Denn said, “That’s the session. Protocol held. I’ll note that you observed.”

Lise nodded. She did not trust her voice with a longer sentence. Her clitoris throbbed in the open air, untouched, and the throb was a kind of reading she did

not need a window for. Just over. Almost over. It had always depended on the hour.

The fair one sat up on her elbows and looked at Lise for the first time, really looked, at the blonde hair and the bare body and the card on the short lanyard.

“Are you—” she started, then stopped, unsure which word was allowed.

“Officer Keene,” Lise said. The title still fit her mouth. “You did the session correctly. That is all you need to know from me.”

The girl nodded, flushed, grateful in the short way, and let the technician help her down. Her legs were unsteady. Lise watched her walk to the door and hated the tenderness in her own chest. Tenderness was not in the protocol.

When the room was only Lise, Denn, and the two technicians breaking down the tray, Lise stayed at the foot of the table. The tape rectangles were smudged. The air smelled like skin.

“Same room next week for observation,” one technician said to Denn. “Pell wants her on the circuit days.”

Denn said, “Officer Keene will be available.”

Lise put two fingers on the edge of the table because the table was furniture and furniture did not require a stamp. Her wetness had reached her thigh. She did not wipe it. Wiping would have been a kind of clothes.

“I’ll be here,” she said.

She was still in the room when they turned the camera’s small light off. The light going dark did not give her back a badge. It only ended the session in front of her, which was the only session anyone in that room was allowed to talk about.

Chapter 15 — Special appointments

The sheet in Nell’s tray looked like the others. She almost set it aside unread. Then she saw the first line. Practice session. Teaching clinic. Today. Two other women would handle her. A staff woman would watch.

She read it twice. Nothing on it said inland. Nothing on it took her off the talks. She put the sheet back and walked.

The annex corridor was the same pale paint. A dressed woman at the door checked her face against a list and stood aside.

“Ives. On the table. They already washed their hands.”

Two women waited inside, uncovered, cards on short cords at their throats. One looked young and nervous. The other was older and stood as if she had done this before. Ms. Bram was at the sink in a navy dress, drying her hands.

“This is practice,” Ms. Bram said. “You’re not on stage. These two are going to handle you. I’ll stop them if they do it out of order. If I ask you a question, tell me what you feel.”

Nell climbed onto the table. The paper was cool. The camera light was already on. She put her feet on the tape and kept her arms down. She was already warm from the walk. That helped. She would not have to fake anything for the file.

The younger woman looked at Nell, then at Ms. Bram.

“Hands first,” Ms. Bram said. “You know that. Go on. Tell me what you find.”

The younger woman’s fingers were colder than a regular technician’s. They shook once on Nell’s thigh and then steadied. She parted her and went quiet.

“She’s wet.”

“We say heat.”

“Heat,” the younger woman said. “She’s already there.”

Nell’s breath went thin. Being touched by someone who was also uncovered felt different from a woman in clothes. She felt it in her nipples and in the small lift she could not stop. She looked at the camera. That was the habit that kept her out of trouble.

The older woman put a hand on Nell’s belly, the way the usual technician did, and Nell made a sound that was not a word.

“Good,” Ms. Bram said. “She knows that. Thumb on her clitoris. Slow circles. Don’t use the instrument yet. If you skip ahead, I take your hands off her and you stand there and watch.”

The younger woman’s thumb found her. The circle was uneven at first, then it matched what Nell’s body already knew. She was ashamed of how fast she opened for someone still learning. Not ashamed of being seen. She lived seen. Ashamed of the speed. The older woman watched the thumb the way other people watched a form.

“Pulse,” Nell said, because no one had asked and she felt it anyway.

Ms. Bram shook her head, not unkind. “Don’t wait for her to offer it. Ask her.”

“Do you feel a pulse?” the younger woman said.

“Yes.”

“What are you grateful for?”

Nell’s hips tried to follow the thumb. The hand on her belly kept her still. “For staying on the talks. For this room instead of the van. For your hand.”

The younger woman flushed. Her own nipples were tight. Nell could see that without lifting her head. Another bare chest under the lamp. Another card that did not say human. Learning the same steps on Nell’s body.

“Instrument now,” Ms. Bram said to the older woman. “Put it on her. Count in your head. She says thank you at the end, not before. If she says it early, don’t stop. Finish.”

The tray rattled the way it always did. The older woman put the head in place with more confidence than her face had. The stretch took. Nell’s mouth opened. She did not cover. The younger woman still had a hand on her knee. The two of them held her there while Ms. Bram watched.

“Nell,” Ms. Bram said. “Last word.”

Nell found air. “Assignment. This.”

They kept her there until she shook and said thank you with her eyes wet. Ms. Bram said they had done it in the right order. The two uncovered women looked at their hands as if they had not expected to be allowed that. Nell stayed on her back a moment longer than she needed. The sheet had not lied. She was still on the talks. She was still safe.

She believed that. The room did not argue with her.

—

Lise’s notice came in a Board envelope, so she treated it like work. Watch a session with two women on the table. Teaching clinic. Make sure they kept to the order. Sign if they did. Denn had written Officer Keene.

She walked the annex uncovered, card on the short lanyard, and told herself the envelope was why her pulse was up. She already had a standing appointment for

her own checks. This was not that. This was a job.

Denn met her at the door, dressed, a folder under her arm.

“Two women. Stand at the foot of the table. You can stop them. You probably won’t need to. Pell wants your initials if they keep to the order.”

“I know the order,” Lise said.

“I know you do.”

The table was the wide one. Tape in two rectangles. The women on it were not last week’s pair. Lise knew that from old files, the habit of faces and first readings. One was dark-haired and still. One was a small brunette who kept looking at Lise’s card and then away, as if a title might still change the room.

Two technicians washed their hands at the sink.

“Officer Keene is here to watch and sign,” Denn said. “Hands, then the instrument. One session. You’ll hear each other.”

Lise stood where she had stood before. The room smelled like soap. Her nipples tightened. She kept her arms down. She was staff. She was also the only uncovered woman not on the table, and that difference felt thinner than the page she was supposed to sign.

“Keep your feet on the tape,” the nearer technician said.

Hands went on. Lise watched the thumbs find them, the circles start. The brunette’s mouth opened too soon around a thank you she had to swallow. The dark-haired woman said she felt heat without being asked, then pulse, her voice already small and even. The wet sounds were quiet and plain. Lise felt herself answer from the doorway and could not stop it.

She could have stopped them. The envelope said so. There was nothing to stop. It was the same order she used to write down when she still had clothes on.

“The instrument now,” she said.

The technicians put both heads in place. The brunette cried out and turned toward Lise as if an officer could make the stretch easier. Lise did not touch her. She counted in her head and watched color rise in two throats and felt herself get wet and hated how little the hatred did.

Selke’s old question tried to arrive — did anyone want the tax bill back — and Lise pushed it off. This was not the steps outside. This was a table and a sheet that needed her initials.

The brunette finished first, loud, the last word late. The dark-haired woman lasted longer, then came and said thank you like a fact. The technicians took the instruments off, wiped them, and waited.

Denn held out the sheet.

Lise looked at the two women still open on the table, at the camera light, at her own bare stomach above the lanyard. She signed L. KE the way she had signed a hundred stamps, neat, in the box that said they had kept to the order.

“They did,” she said.

“That’s the session,” Denn said.

Lise did not leave until the light went off. Watching ended when the work ended. The annex did not tell her what the other rooms were doing with the same hour.

—

Iona’s notice was spoken. Pell stood in the special-wing doorway with her folder shut.

“You have a session this afternoon in the teaching clinic. If you go through with it, you get time with women who’ve been placed. You can talk to them. Ask questions. That’s what you’ve been asking for.”

Iona stood in the hall and felt both wants at once, which was how they lived in her now. Placed women meant graduates who were still seen. Women who had not walked off a square. She had spent two years hunting a harvest and a set of initials. She still wanted names. She also wanted the table they were charging for those names.

“If I start a speech,” Iona said.

“You won’t last long enough to finish one,” Pell said. “Ms. Kade has you. Tell her what you feel. Finish. Then you get the other room. Not before.”

“I understand.”

She understood, and she was already wet walking there. That was not an argument anymore. That was the fact on her card.

The annex room was not the classroom in the wing. Same kind of table. Same soap with no smell. Ms. Kade at the sink, mild as the first night. No folder. The camera closer than the old shelf.

“Session first,” Ms. Kade said. “Then you get your talk. Don’t pull your knees away. Hold the sides of the table. Tell me what I’m doing while I do it.”

Iona climbed up. The paper stuck to her thighs. She held the sides. Her breasts cooled. Her nipples pulled in. She looked at Kade’s mouth until Kade said, “Look at the camera.”

Iona looked at the camera.

Hands first. Two fingers opening her. A thumb on the glans that had been stretched to a number and had not gone back to the morning she walked in with a packet. Iona’s breath caught.

“What do you feel?”

“Heat. Your thumb. I can count it. It’s a beat. Now.”

“Good.” The circle was slow. “You still want to talk to the placed women.”

“Yes.”

“You also want this.”

Iona’s laugh broke. “Yes. I know how that sounds. I still want to ask them why they stayed on the square. I still want you not to stop.”

“I’m not stopping so we can argue,” Ms. Kade said. “What are you grateful for?”

Iona lifted into the thumb and hated that her eyes stung. “That I don’t have to pick. That I get this and I still get to talk to them.”

“When I put the instrument on, don’t thank me yet. Thank me when you come.”

“Yes, Miss Kade.”

The instrument made the small sound she knew better than a crowd. It touched, settled, pulled. A sound came out of her that had no speech in it. She held the sides of the table. She did not close her knees. She waited on the thank you the way she had been told, and Kade handled her with the same calm she had used the night the card printed.

She thought of the talk she was buying. Women who had gotten through clinic and still been seen. Short answers. Gratitude. She thought of asking if they had wanted the square before anyone put them on it. She thought of the brunette who had not stepped off. None of that cooled her. It rode the stretch.

“Not human,” she whispered, not because Kade had said it this time. Because her body had kept the sentence and brought it along.

“The card still doesn’t say human,” Ms. Kade said, mild, still pulling. “Thank me when you come.”

Iona came looking at the camera, and thank you was already in her mouth, twice, then a third time nobody had asked for. Kade held her until the shaking changed and then took the instrument off.

Iona lay there and said what was left.

“Heat. Pulse. I’m grateful. I want the talk. I wanted this more than I wanted to walk over here.”

Ms. Kade cleaned the paper, not Iona.

“Pell will take you to the other room when you can stand,” she said. “You finished. You get the talk today.”

Iona turned her face toward the door that was not this door. She did not know who would be in the next room. She knew the session behind her had been real. She stayed on the table until her legs worked, card at her throat, the annex saying nothing about the other doors.

Chapter 16 — The corridor

Nell knew the annex turn by the pale paint and the soap in the air. She had a sheet that said teaching clinic and a head that still believed she was safe. Practice, yesterday. Another table today. She walked with her arms down because the corridor had windows and windows had people.

A blonde woman stood at the next corner with a card on a short cord where a badge would have been. Uncovered, like Nell. Older than the eighteen-year-olds on intake. She was looking at a door the way staff looked at a door.

Nell almost said excuse me. The words stayed home. Volatiles did not need excuse me in this building. She saw the blonde's face in full and the name arrived without a file. Keene. People said Keene in hallways the way they said inland: not often, and not to you. Nell had never had her on a table. She had had the rumor of an officer who stayed on duty after the clothes came off.

The blonde looked at her.

"Ives," the blonde said, as if the name were a stamp she had already used.

"Yes."

They stood there a second too long. Nell felt the air on her nipples and hated that she noticed it now, in front of a woman who still sounded like staff.

Behind them the special-wing door opened. Red hair. A card at the throat. The woman from the campus talk, the one who had come down the aisle with paper in her fist while Nell stayed on the square. Nell's stomach went tight. She had not seen her since security took her through the side. She had heard she was in the wing. She had not expected her in this hall, bare, walking like she knew where the table was.

The redhead saw Nell and stopped. Then she saw the blonde, and something in her face changed that was not surprise only.

Nell kept her arms down. Heat moved anyway, low and unhelpful, the same heat the square always started. She did not know which woman had started it. She walked when the dressed technician at the end of the hall said, "This way. All three."

—

Lise knew both files before she knew the hall had both women in it.

Ives: young, over the line the morning they measured her, pretty enough to keep, two years of clinic, talks, gratitude that read on camera. Reeve: the packet, the leak, the interruption that filmed well, stretched over on the third pull, wing after that. Lise had initialed one life and leaked the other and worn the same card as

both of them since Hale’s room.

They came toward her uncovered because there was no other way to come. Ives had the clean posture of someone who had been taught her hands. Reeve walked as if the floor still owed her an argument. Neither of them had clothes to hide in. Neither did Lise. The lanyard tapped her chest when she breathed.

Denn was at the clinic door, dressed, folder shut.

“Officer Keene,” Denn said. “Inside.”

The title still fit Lise’s mouth. The doorway did not care. She went in because oversee meant going in. The table in the room was the wide one. Three strips of silver tape, not two. Lise’s mind did the small staff math and came up with a session. She did not let it become anything else. Pell wanted initials. Pell wanted the order held. That was the job.

Ives stopped just inside, looking at the three marks. Reeve looked at Lise’s card the way she had looked at it the night outside the Board building, when Lise had put paper in her hands and not gone with her.

“You’re Keene,” Reeve said.

“Officer Keene,” Lise said.

Reeve’s mouth moved like she might laugh and then did not. “I know what the card says.”

Ms. Kade was at the sink, washing, mild as always. Director Pell stood by the camera with her arms folded.

“On the table,” Ms. Kade said. “One of you on each mark. You’re going to work together.”

Lise heard work together and translated it into procedure because that was how she stayed an officer. Three subjects. One session. She would stand at the foot and sign.

Pell looked at her.

“You too, Keene. On the table. The mark on the right.”

The room tilted a degree. Lise’s nipples were already tight from the hall. She felt herself get wet and despised the timing.

“I’m here to watch,” Lise said.

“You’re here for the session,” Pell said. “Watching was last time. Lie down.”

Ives was already moving toward the middle tape, obedient in the way that had kept her on the talks. Reeve had not moved yet. Lise walked to the right-hand mark because her body still answered Pell like staff, and because there was no

coat to button while she thought. She sat on the edge first. The paper was cool. Her card rested between her breasts. She lay back. The ceiling was plain. She turned her head and saw Ives’s dark hair on the pad beside her, and beyond Ives the redhead’s mouth, slightly open, looking at both of them.

Lise knew their numbers. She knew their stamps. She had never been this close to either of them without a desk in between. She kept her arms at her sides. She was still an officer. The table did not agree.

—

Iona had come down the hall for the talk she had paid for yesterday with her own shaking.

Pell had said placed women. Questions. Names. Iona had held that in her mouth all night. She had also held the table, which was the other half of how she lived now. She did not pretend the two wants were one. She only walked.

Then the corridor had Nell Ives in it, bare, arms down, the brunette who had not left the square. And past her, Keene. Blonde. Card on a cord. The officer from the leak. The initial on Asta’s slip. Uncovered, the way she had been the night Iona took the packet and Keene would not come with them.

The harvest was in the hallway wearing two faces Iona already knew.

“This way. All three,” the woman at the end said.

Iona followed because the talk was supposed to be this way, and because her body had started the session in the corridor, wet, nipples drawn, shame sitting next to want the way it had since the first pull.

The room was one room. One table. Three marks of tape. Ms. Kade at the sink. Pell by the camera. Keene being told to lie down like anyone else.

“I was supposed to talk to placed women,” Iona said.

“You are,” Pell said. “They’re on the table. So are you. After this session you can talk. Not before.”

It was not the room Iona had pictured. It was better and worse. She could ask them things with her mouth if Pell let her later. She could already feel the questions sliding under the other fact, which was that she wanted to be put on the pad between them and handled, or to watch them be handled, or both, and she knew how that sounded, and she got on the table anyway.

Left-hand mark. Paper under her back. Nell in the middle, close enough that Iona felt the heat off her arm. Keene on the far side, staring at the ceiling like a form she could still initial.

Ms. Kade came to the foot of the table and dried her hands.

“This is one session,” she said. “The three of you. You stay on your marks. You can look at each other. You will hear each other. There isn’t a curtain.”

Nell said, “All right,” in the voice from the square.

Keene said, “The order.”

“Hands first,” Ms. Kade said. “Then the instrument. Same as always. I’m not asking you to run it yet. I am asking you to stay on the table while we start.”

Yet sat in the room and Iona did not grab it. She looked at Nell’s profile. Young. Practiced. A pulse visible in her throat. Iona looked at Keene’s breasts and the card and the way Keene’s mouth was set to remain staff. Iona’s clitoris had already thickened against the air. She held the edge of the table so her hands would not cover her.

Nell turned her head. Their eyes met. Nell’s were wet at the edges without tears.

“You came down the aisle with paper,” Nell said, quiet.

“You didn’t move,” Iona said.

“I know.”

Keene’s voice, from the other side, still even: “Talk after. Not now.”

Ms. Kade’s mouth almost smiled. “Officer Keene is on the table. She can hear herself.”

A camera light went white above them. Iona felt it on her mouth and on her chest and on the slick already between her legs. Pell checked a list and did not read it out. No one said why the three of them. No one needed to for the hour they were in. The session in front of them was the session.

Ms. Kade pulled the tray closer. Two other technicians, dressed, stood at either side. Hands, Iona thought, and her hips knew the rest.

“Look at the camera if you need a place to look,” Ms. Kade said. “Or look at each other. Both are fine.”

Iona looked at Nell because Nell was the square she had not been able to empty. She looked at Keene because Keene was the initial she had hunted for two years. She was wet enough that the paper would show it. She did not close her knees.

Nell’s fingers twitched on the pad and then went still, arms down.

Keene stared at the ceiling one more second, then turned her face toward them, officer and subject in the same breath, and said, “All right. Start.”

Ms. Kade put her clean hands on the tray and nodded to the women at the sides.

“We start,” she said.

The room held the three of them on one table, uncovered, marks under their backs, and did not explain the other doors.

Chapter 17 — More to handle

Ms. Kade set the tray on the table between Nell’s knee and Iona’s. The camera light was already white. Pell stood by the wall. Denn had a folder and did not open it.

“Listen first,” Ms. Kade said. “Then you do it. You’re going to handle each other. Hands first. After that I give you the instrument. You don’t need my hands on you unless someone freezes. You thank the woman who finishes you. That’s this session. That’s all this session is.”

Nell’s mouth was already open. She turned her head on the paper. Lise on her right, card on the cord, eyes on the ceiling like she could still run the room from her back. Iona on her left, red hair on the pad, looking at the tray.

“We can sit up?” Nell said.

“You can sit up. You can turn. Stay on the table. Don’t get off it.”

Nell sat. The paper stuck and let go. She had been handled for two years. She knew the order the way she knew the square. Doing it to someone else made her pulse jump in her throat and between her legs at the same time. She looked at Lise because Lise was still holding her mouth like an officer.

“I can start,” Nell said.

Lise’s jaw moved. “I know the order.”

“Good,” Ms. Kade said. “Then let her. Ives. Hands. Keene first.”

Nell got on her knees on the pad. The table was wide enough. Lise’s body was pale under the lamp, nipples tight, the card lying between her breasts. Nell had never put her hands on an officer. She had put them on herself in the dark after a session, once or twice, and stopped because the file did not ask for that. The file was asking now.

She put her palm on Lise’s belly the way other women had put a palm on hers.

Lise’s breath went short.

“You don’t have to brace,” Nell said. “I know how this goes.”

“I’m not bracing.”

She was. Nell did not argue. She used her other hand to open Lise and found her already wet. Heat, Nell thought, and did not say the list out loud because no one had asked for a talk. She put her thumb on Lise’s clitoris and made the slow circle she knew from the receiving end. Lise’s hips lifted. A sound came out of her that did not belong to a desk.

“That’s pulse,” Nell said, quiet, almost kind.

“I know what it is.”

Iona had come up on her elbow to watch. Nell felt her watching the way she felt a camera. It made her nipples ache. It made her thumb steadier. She circled Lise until Lise’s mouth fell open and Lise’s hand found the edge of the table, white-knuckled, still trying to be the person who signed.

“Instrument,” Ms. Kade said. She set it in Nell’s free hand. “You know how it sits. Don’t rush her.”

Nell had had this thing on her a hundred times. Holding it was different. The head was simple. She looked at Lise’s face.

“All right?”

Lise laughed once, helpless. “Don’t ask me like that. Put it on.”

Nell seated it. She pulled the way she had been pulled, slow, a stretch that was not supposed to be a plan. Lise’s back arched. The card slid toward her collarbone. Nell watched color climb Lise’s throat and felt herself drip onto her own calf and did not hide it.

“Thank you at the end,” Ms. Kade said. “Not yet.”

Lise tried to keep her eyes on the ceiling. They kept falling to Nell’s mouth, Nell’s bare chest, Nell’s wrist working. When she came it was with her teeth together and then not, a broken sound, and thank you after it like a stamp she could not refuse.

“Thank you.”

Nell eased the instrument off. Her hands were shaking. She was so wet it embarrassed her, and the embarrassment sat next to how much she wanted Iona to look at her hands.

“Ives,” Ms. Kade said. “Lie back. Reeve. Your turn on her.”

—

Lise heard the instruction from inside her own shaking. She was supposed to sit up and take the instrument and be staff. Her thighs were still open. Thank you was still in her mouth. Ives was lying down with her dark hair on the paper and her legs already bent, eager the way the talks were eager, like being used was a job she had asked to keep.

Reeve had not moved yet.

Lise pushed herself up on an elbow. The room smelled like skin and soap. She could run this. She had run it on paper for years. She had run it with clothes on. She could not leave it. That was the part that shamed her more than the wet table under her.

“Reeve,” Lise said. Her voice almost held. “You heard her. Hands first.”

Iona looked at Lise as if Lise had just handed her the packet again.

“I know what hands first means,” Iona said.

She got on her knees between Nell’s legs. She was flushed down her chest. Her nipples were tight. She looked at Nell the way she had looked at her on the square, except now there was nothing to take off and nowhere to walk.

Nell said, “Hi,” which was stupid and young and made Iona shut her eyes for a second.

Then Iona put her hands on her.

Lise watched because watching was still what an officer did. Iona’s fingers were sureer than her face. She opened Nell and found the heat and made a sound of her own, not quite a laugh.

“You’re already—”

“I know,” Nell said. “Please.”

Iona’s thumb went on. Nell lifted into it like she had been waiting since the corridor. Lise felt the circle in her own body, used, still twitching, and put her fist against her mouth. Denn was looking at the floor. Pell was not. The camera took all of it.

“Slow,” Lise heard herself say. “She’ll come too fast if you rush. The file wants her flushed first.”

“I can feel that,” Iona said, not looking up. “I don’t need the file.”

She did it slow anyway. Nell’s hands stayed at her sides and then didn’t; one of them found Iona’s wrist and held on. Lise should have told her arms down. She didn’t. She watched Nell’s stomach jump and Iona’s mouth open and the wet shine on Iona’s thighs and understood, with no stamp to hide behind, that she was going to put her own hands on them next because the order was a door she no longer had a key to.

Ms. Kade held out the instrument. Iona stared at it.

Lise saw the pause. She knew pauses. She had used them at a desk.

“Reeve,” Lise said. “It’s the same instrument. You put it on her. You finish her. She thanks you.”

Iona took it.

—

The argument lasted the length of a breath.

If she put this on Nell Ives she was not exposing a harvest. She was doing it. She was the hand. She was the pull. Two years of packets and initials and a mother in a hallway became this: a brunette on her back, wet, asking with her hips, and Keene watching from a mark on the same table with come still on her mouth, and Kade mild as the night the card printed.

Iona almost said no.

She did not say no. The no did not ship. Want got there first. Want had been there since the third pull, since thank you without being asked, since the sentence about the card. She wanted the table. She wanted to be the person on it and the person over it. She seated the head on Nell and pulled.

Nell cried out. Her knees tried to close and Iona kept them with her free hand, not rough, just there.

“I’ve got you,” Iona said, and hated how true it was.

She worked the stretch the way it had been worked on her. Nell shook and said please and then assignment like a girl on a square and then nothing but sound. When she came she said thank you loud enough for the camera, twice, and reached for Iona’s arm as if gratitude needed skin.

Iona took the instrument off. Her own clitoris was swollen enough to hurt. She was dripping. She knew how that sounded. She still wanted Keene’s mouth and Keene’s hands and the rest of the hour.

“Keene,” Ms. Kade said. “You know what to do. Reeve is last.”

Lise moved like procedure. She did not look like procedure. She got between Iona’s legs with the instrument in one hand and her other hand already shaking.

“Lie back,” Lise said.

Iona lay back. The paper was wet under her. She looked at Lise’s face, the blonde officer from the leak, and at Nell beside them, still open, still watching, young and wrecked and smiling like this was the safe room.

“If I let you,” Iona said, and then had nothing that would fit. The harvest sentence had already used its breath.

“You’re not letting me,” Lise said. “This is the session.” Her hand opened Iona. She found her soaked. She closed her eyes once, brief, and put her thumb on.

Iona lifted. Shame and pleasure hit at the same time, old partners. Lise’s circle was exact. Of course it was. Lise had taught other women this with clothes on. She was exact and she was breathing hard and her card hung between them and tapped Iona’s thigh when she leaned in.

“Heat,” Iona said, because it was true.

“I can see it.”

“Don’t stop.”

“I’m not going to stop.”

Nell had rolled close enough that her breast touched Iona’s arm. She put her mouth near Iona’s ear, not a kiss, just air.

“You can thank her after,” Nell said. “That’s how it works. It helps.”

Iona would have laughed if Lise’s thumb had given her room. Lise took the thumb away and put the instrument on and the stretch drew a noise out of Iona that had no packet left in it. She held the sides of the table. She did not close her knees. She looked at the camera because Kade had taught her that, and then she looked at Lise because she wanted the face that went with the initial.

“The card doesn’t say human,” Iona whispered.

Lise’s mouth tightened. She did not repeat it. She pulled. She kept the count in her head where Iona could not hear it. Iona came on the stretch and on Lise’s exactness and on Nell’s hand finding hers on the paper. Thank you left her before anyone asked. She said it to Lise. She said it again toward the lens. She said it a third time into Nell’s hair because Nell was there and the session had no curtain.

Lise eased the instrument off and sat back on her heels, flushed, wet to the knee, officer only in the way she set the thing in the tray.

Ms. Kade looked at the three of them and then at Pell.

“They held the order,” Ms. Kade said. “They can keep going if the session isn’t done.”

Pell nodded once. “It isn’t done. They have each other. Let them.”

Nell reached first, laughing under it, and put her mouth on Iona’s breast because no one had told her she couldn’t. Iona’s hand found Lise’s hip and pulled her in. Lise made a sound that was not a title and let herself be pulled. Hands crossed. Timing got messy and then found a rhythm anyway. Thanks passed without being called for. The camera stayed on. The dressed women stayed dressed. The table stayed a table.

Iona, in the middle of it, with Nell’s fingers on her and Lise’s mouth on her throat, understood the thing she had not said out loud. She was the harvest. She was also the hand. The want from the first night was still bigger than the sentence. She turned her face into Nell’s neck and let the session be the session in front of them, which was the only one anyone in the room was allowed to talk about.

Chapter 18 — The price

They were still on the table when the wall changed.

Nell saw it first because she was facing that way, sitting back on her heels between Iona’s knees, her mouth wet, her hands shining. A panel that had been blank all hour put up letters. White on dark. Large enough to read from the pad.

THE SPOOKY THREE

Under it, smaller: First tandem set. Three for the old price of one. More coming.

Nell’s hands stopped on Iona’s thigh. She could still taste salt. The camera light did not dim. Nobody offered a sheet.

“That’s the name,” Pell said. She did not raise her voice. “That’s what this session is called on the site. People who pay for one of you get all three. Same monthly price as the old single feed. None of you is paid. If you speak on this clip, you praise the assignment. That’s the whole of it.”

Lise turned her head on the paper. The letters sat on her face like a stamp she had not initialed. Her card hung between her breasts. She was flushed down her chest from Iona’s mouth. She still had the instrument in reach and nowhere to put a badge.

“Who approved that language,” Lise said.

Pell nodded at the side door.

Minister Selke came in dressed, as she always was, and looked at three uncovered women on one table as if she were looking at civic steps. She had a thin sheet in her hand. She did not offer it to them.

“Group sessions improve stability,” Selke said. “The money from the site is enough. The tax holiday holds. That is the note. I don’t need a longer one.” She glanced at the wall. “The name is theirs in Archive. It films. You three film. That is fortunate.”

Iona laughed once, raw. She was on her back. Nell’s fingerprints were on her hips. Lise’s mouth had left her throat pink. The banner made the room smaller.

“Spooky,” Iona said. “That’s the word.”

“It’s the title,” Pell said. “Not a discussion. Kade.”

Ms. Kade checked the camera and the tray. Mild. Ordinary.

“We go live in a minute,” she said. “Same as the session you just did. You handle each other. Order doesn’t matter. You can play. You thank each other. If you talk to the lens, you say you’re grateful you were assigned this. Then we leave the feed on.”

Nell looked at the letters until they stopped being strange and became a job. She had wanted the visible door. This was a visible door. Inland was still a van she did not look into. She wiped her hand on her own thigh because there was no cloth and put her palm back on Iona, gentle, where she had been.

“I can say it,” Nell said. “I’m grateful. I am. This is the assignment.”

Lise shut her eyes. When she opened them she was still on the table. She was still wet. She could still have run the order if anyone had handed her a pen instead of a feed.

“Keene,” Selke said. “You may speak or not. If you speak, you don’t talk about Board paper.”

“I know what I may say,” Lise said.

Iona sat up enough to see the wall whole. Two years of packets sat behind her teeth and did not come out. The want from the first night was still in her hands. She looked at Nell’s mouth and Lise’s card and the price under the name, one old feed for three bodies, and felt the laugh try again and die.

“If I talk,” Iona said, “I praise the assignment.”

“That’s all we need,” Pell said. “Live.”

The small light on the camera went from white to a deeper white. A tiny mark appeared in the corner of the wall under the banner. LIVE.

Nell moved first because she knew how to be seen. She bent and put her mouth on Iona again, open, sure, and Iona’s hand found her hair. Lise came in from the other side with the instrument because someone had to hold the order and her body would not let her stand off the pad and watch. She seated it on Nell while Nell’s mouth was busy, and Nell made a sound into Iona that the microphone would take.

“Thank you,” Nell said, when she could, against Iona’s skin. “Thank you. I’m glad this is the work.”

Lise pulled the stretch the way she had been taught to pull a reading. She was exact and she was shaking. Iona reached over Nell and put two fingers on Lise, finding her wet, and Lise’s exactness broke into a breath that was not a title.

“Assignment,” Lise said, to the lens, because that was the word that would pass. “This is the assignment.”

Iona looked once at the LIVE mark. Then she looked at the two women on her and used her hands the way the first night had taught her she would. She did not give the harvest speech. She put her mouth on Lise’s breast and her fingers on Nell and when the instrument changed hands she took it and put it on Lise without asking the room to call it anything else. Lise came with her eyes open on

the banner. Thank you first. Then, because Selke was still in the doorway, “I’m grateful I was assigned this.”

Nell said it too, clearer, practiced, young. “I’m grateful. Heat, pulse— I’m grateful we were put together. This is the assignment.”

Iona came last, on Nell’s hand and Lise’s mouth and the knowledge that the clip would not stop when she did. She said thank you. She said she was grateful for the assignment. Both things were true in her body. The other true thing stayed off the microphone.

Selke folded her sheet.

“That’s enough speech,” she said. “Leave the feed on. They can keep going. The holiday holds.”

She left. Pell stayed. Denn stayed. Ms. Kade reset nothing that mattered. The wall still said THE SPOOKY THREE. Under it the price. Under that, LIVE.

Nell kissed Iona’s shoulder because no one told her to stop. Lise set the instrument down and did not get off the table. Iona turned her face toward the lens and did not cover.

The feed stayed on.