Results Night

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Chariot, Book 23

Chapter One

Results Night

Maren Holt’s living room had been arranged the way it always was for book club: two sofas pulled into a loose square, the good glasses out, a pale coffee cake already cut into polite, crumbling slices. The only new thing was the stack of white envelopes on the coffee table, each one printed with a small helix and the words *LINEAGE COMPLETE*.

Claire sat with hers in her lap and did not open it. The paper was thicker than she had expected. It made a little sound when her thumb ran the edge.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Becca said, already tearing hers. “Mine’s going to be Ireland and a lecture from my mother.”

It was Ireland. Thirty-one percent. Then England, a smear of Scandinavia, a footnote of Iberian that made Becca laugh and hold the page up like a prize.

Nadine’s was almost cleanly German. Ruth’s came back as Ashkenazi and a careful

percentage of Levant that she read twice, lips moving, and then set face-down as if the paper might change its mind. Elise, who had chosen the most expensive kit and printed a supplementary packet at home, had a tidy Northwestern European profile with a single blinking marker she announced as “a Neanderthal snippet, the normal kind. Two percent. Everyone has a little.”

Maren’s was the same shape as Elise’s, more or less. She read it standing, hostess-straight, and then looked at the last envelope.

“Claire.”

“I know.”

“You paid for it. You might as well look.”

Claire slid a nail under the flap. The living room had the particular quiet of women who have already finished their own news and are waiting, kindly, for yours. Someone’s glass ticked against a coaster. The furnace kicked on in the hall.

The first page was a circle graph.

The largest slice was not labeled with a country.

Archaic human — Neanderthal: 80%

Modern human — European: 18%

Unassigned: 2%

Claire turned the page. There was a second chart, a comparison ladder, a paragraph in the calm font of all such companies. *Your result falls outside typical modern ranges. See appendix.* The appendix was three sentences and a recommendation to speak with a specialist if desired.

She laughed once, a small dry sound that did not belong to the coffee cake.

“What?” Becca leaned in. “Did they lose you in a peat bog?”

Claire turned the paper.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Elise took it out of her hands with the same courtesy she used when she corrected pronunciations, and the courtesy lasted exactly as long as it took her eyes to reach the number.

“That isn’t possible,” Elise said.

“It’s printed,” Nadine said.

“I mean genetically. The highest surviving—Claire, this is a contaminated sample. Sweat. Someone at the lab. You should demand a rerun.”

Ruth had come around the sofa. She put on the glasses that hung from a chain and looked not at the graph but at Claire, as if the paper had only given her permission.

“She doesn’t look contaminated,” Ruth said.

Maren made a noise that wanted to be a hostess laugh and did not quite arrive. “We should sit. We should—Claire, do you want more wine?”

“I want to know what it means,” Claire said.

Elise had already unfolded her printed packet. She had come prepared for a different conversation, the ordinary kind, the two-percent kind, and now she was hunting through headings with her mouth slightly open. *Introgression. Residual alleles. Phenotypic expression.*

“It means the kit is a toy,” Elise said, and then, because she could not help herself, “or it means you are expressing an archaic cluster at a level that should not persist. Which would show. In the body. If it were real.”

Becca’s laugh this time was thinner. “Show how?”

Elise glanced at Claire’s hands.

Claire looked down with them. She had lived with her hands her whole life. They were small. They were also, she had been told in high school art class, a little square. The teacher had liked that. *Good for clay.*

Elise said, “May I?”

It was asked the way one asked to borrow a pen. Claire nodded, because saying no in Maren Holt's living room, with the cake still out, felt like a failure of manners.

Elise took Claire's right hand and turned it. Compared it to her own. Elise's fingers were longer. Claire's knuckles sat in a different place. Elise pressed her thumb along the side of Claire's palm as if checking a seam.

"Denser," Elise murmured.

"She's always been strong for her size," Maren said, too quickly. "She moved my bookcase last spring. I told you."

"That isn't what I mean."

Ruth took the other hand without asking. Her skin was cooler. She held Claire the way she held fruit at the market, judging weight.

"Warm," Ruth said. "Do you run warm, Claire?"

"I don't know."

"You do tonight."

Nadine had not touched her. Nadine sat back with her glass and watched the little circle of examination as if it were the book they had meant to discuss and the book had finally become interesting.

"Stand up," Nadine said.

"Why?"

"Because you're sitting like a person who got a normal result, and I want to see if the rest of you agrees with the paper."

Maren opened her mouth, closed it, and then, because it was her house and she could not bear an unmanaged moment, said, "Just for a second. So we can stop guessing."

Claire stood.

She was wearing what she always wore to book club: dark jeans, a soft sage sweater, ballet flats she slipped off by habit at Maren's door. Blonde hair pinned up off her neck because Maren's house ran hot. She had thought she looked like the rest of them. She had thought that for years.

Elise walked a slow half-circle. "Height's ordinary. Shoulder width—Claire, pull your hair forward."

Claire did. Elise's fingers found the base of her skull, the place a ponytail sat. A pause.

"There," Elise said.

“There what?”

“A little shelf. You can feel it. Ruth.”

Ruth’s fingers replaced Elise’s. The touch was careful and unembarrassed, a nurse’s touch if a nurse were allowed to be curious for its own sake. Claire’s scalp prickled. She kept her eyes on the envelope on the table because looking at any of their faces made the heat in her throat worse.

“I don’t feel anything,” Claire said.

“You wouldn’t,” Elise said. “You live in it.”

Becca had gotten up on her knees on the sofa to see. “This is insane. This is—Claire, are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

She was not fine. The room had shifted by a degree. Not cruel. Not yet. Something more dangerous than cruelty: the bright, collective attention of women who had decided a question was now a project.

Maren said, “The sweater’s hiding everything. That’s all this is. We’re inventing a mystery because of a graph.”

“Then take it off,” Nadine said.

The furnace shut off. In the new quiet the suggestion sat on the coffee table with the envelopes.

Claire looked at Maren, who should have been the one to laugh it down. Maren’s cheeks were pink. She glanced at the front windows, at the slats of the blinds, and then at Claire.

“The blinds are closed,” Maren said. “It’s only us.”

“I’m not taking my clothes off in your living room.”

“Not clothes,” Elise said, already reasonable. “The sweater. So we can look at shoulder girdle and rib shape. If you’re modern, we’ll see it and we can all drink and make fun of the company. If you’re not—” She stopped, and the stop was worse than a conclusion. “Then we’ll know what we’re talking about.”

Ruth smiled the small smile she used when someone was being brave about a doctor’s appointment. “You can keep your jeans on, honey. No one is making a scene.”

They were already making a scene. That was the trick of it. It had the temperature of help.

Claire crossed her arms and then, because crossing her arms felt like admitting there was something to hide, she reached for the hem.

The sweater came off in one motion that was too fast to be graceful. Under it she had a pale camisole, the kind meant to disappear. The living room air touched her arms and the high start of her chest. Five faces changed in the same way: not shock. Correction. The look people get when a picture comes into focus.

“Oh,” Becca said.

Elise did not say oh. Elise stepped in and set her hands on Claire’s upper arms, thumbs along the muscle.

“This is not a two-percent body,” Elise said softly.

Claire’s mouth had gone dry. “It’s a gym.”

“No,” Ruth said, almost kindly. “It isn’t.”

They had her turn. Maren’s fingers at the nape again, as if the little shelf might have moved. Nadine finally stood, walked around to Claire’s front, and looked at her the way she looked at a menu when she had already decided.

“Camisole too,” Nadine said. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it. You can’t compare a covered thing to five uncovered opinions.”

“Nadine.”

“What? She can say no. Claire. Say no.”

Claire’s pulse was high in her neck. She could feel it against the thin strap. The correct sentence was *no*. The sentence that would return the room to cake and Ireland and Becca’s mother. She could hear that sentence. She could also feel Elise’s hands still on her arms, not gripping, only placing her, and Ruth’s gaze on the place where the camisole dipped, and Maren hovering with a hostess panic that was rapidly becoming something else.

If she said no, they would be disappointed in a way that would follow her out to the car.

She hooked the straps down.

The camisole caught for a second at her breasts and then folded to her waist, and she stood in Maren Holt’s living room in her jeans and a plain nude bra and the sudden, ridiculous fact of her own skin.

No one reached to cover her.

Elise made a low interested sound. “Breast root is wide. That’s consistent. Claire, arms down. Don’t fold them.”

Claire let her arms hang. The bra felt like a costume. Her nipples had tightened in the cool; she knew they could see that through the fabric, and the knowing put a slow, unwanted heat low in her belly that had nothing to do with the furnace.

Ruth’s hand came up and stopped an inch from her. “May I?”

Claire nodded, barely.

Ruth’s palm settled over the center of her sternum, then spread, measuring the cage of her. Claire’s breath lifted Ruth’s hand. Ruth left it there longer than measurement required.

“Heart’s going,” Ruth said. “That’s all right. Anyone’s would.”

“It isn’t fear,” Elise said, watching Claire’s face. “Look at her. That’s not fear.”

“Elise,” Maren whispered.

“I’m looking at what the page asked us to look at.” Elise’s fingers found the band of the bra at Claire’s back, not undoing it, only tracing the line. “This garment is doing you no favors. It’s built for a different thorax.”

Becca had her own arms wrapped around herself, not cold, only overwhelmed. “We should stop.”

“Do you want us to stop?” Nadine asked Claire.

The honest answer was that Claire wanted to sit down and pull the sweater back on and also that she did not want their hands to leave. The second want embarrassed her so completely that her eyes stung. She shook her head, a small motion, and Nadine’s mouth tilted as if a point had been won on the page.

“Bra,” Nadine said. “Then we can actually see.”

Maren said, “I can—” and then did not finish, because she was already stepping behind Claire. Hostess fingers. The clasp gave. Maren held the straps a moment against Claire’s shoulders, an almost-decency, and then drew the whole thing forward.

Claire’s breasts were bare in the lamplight. They were not large. They sat with a compact weight that made sense, suddenly, of every poorly fitting shop bra she had ever apologized to a clerk for. The areolas were a touch duskier than the rest of her. The nipples had drawn in tight, painfully precise.

Someone exhaled.

Elise did not ask this time. She lifted one breast with the backs of her fingers, assessed the underside, the spring of it, the way it returned. Claire’s knees went a little wrong. She locked them.

“Sensitive,” Elise noted.

“Don’t,” Claire said, and it came out unsteady.

“Don’t what? I’m not hurting you.” Elise’s thumb passed once, almost scientifically, across the tightened peak. Claire’s whole body answered it, a

bright involuntary pull that she could not hide. Elise left her hand there, feeling the shiver travel. “There. That’s a response. That’s useful.”

Ruth had moved to her side. Ruth smelled like the same perfume she had worn for a decade, powder and something floral that had gone a little old. Her hand rested at the small of Claire’s back, skin to skin now, and the kindness in it made the rest possible.

“Jeans,” Ruth said gently. “If the top doesn’t match the graph, the rest won’t either. You know that.”

“This is my book club,” Claire said, and heard how young it sounded.

“It still is,” Maren said from behind her. Maren’s voice had gone strange, hushed and thrilled. “We’re just—learning you. That’s all this is.”

Nadine was already at the button. She popped it with two fingers and waited, looking up at Claire’s face, until Claire, burning, put her own hands to the zipper.

The jeans came down. She had to bend. For a second her blonde hair slipped from its pins and fell forward, and in that bowed moment she was only a woman stepping out of her pants in a friend’s house, and then she was upright again in pale underwear and nothing else, and the comparison was no longer theoretical.

They looked.

Elise walked around her as if Claire were a statue that had arrived from a catalog. “Iliac crest is high. Thigh is short relative to torso. That’s textbook if the textbook were allowed to exist. Claire, underwear off.”

“No.”

“Then we stop at a guess,” Elise said. “And you’ll go home and wonder what we would have said. I don’t think you want that.”

Becca made a small wounded noise. “You guys. She’s shaking.”

Claire was shaking. She was also wet. She could feel it, a slick heat that had gathered while they passed her from hand to hand, and the underwear would tell on her the instant it left her hips. That, more than nakedness, opened a hole of panic in her chest.

Ruth saw it. Of course Ruth saw it. Ruth’s eyes dropped and then returned to Claire’s with a look of soft, terrible understanding.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Ruth said. “That’s all right too.”

“It isn’t—”

“It is. Your body is doing what this lineage does when it’s attended to. That’s not a moral event. It’s information.”

Gaslight as care. Claire recognized the shape of it even as it worked. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband because standing there arguing in damp cotton felt more obscene than the other thing.

She pushed the underwear down.

For a moment she kept them in her fist, a crumpled flag, and then Maren took them from her as if taking a wrap at a party and set them on the sofa with the bra and the camisole, neat, a little stack of the evening's discarded civilities.

Claire stood in the square of sofas with her clothes in a pile and her genealogy result on the table and five dressed women looking at the fact of her.

She was blonde everywhere it counted. The hair at the juncture of her thighs was darker gold, thicker than she liked, a dense low pelt she had always kept trimmed and had not, tonight, expected anyone to inventory. Her belly was flat enough. Her hips were the compact continuation of the rest of her. Between her thighs, when Elise murmured *feet apart, just a little*, the light found her and there was no arguing with what it found: swollen, parted a little from the handling, shining.

Becca whispered, "Jesus."

"Don't do that," Nadine said. "Don't make it church. Look at her properly."

They did.

Hands again. Permission had become a thing they assumed from the last permission. Elise's palm traveled the outside of Claire's thigh, squeezed once, professionally pleased. Maren, still behind her, touched the dimples at the base of her spine with two fingers and left them there as if holding a page open. Ruth cupped her, not quite between the legs, the heel of her hand against the thatch, and Claire jerked and made a sound she did not recognize.

"Heat," Ruth said. "Even here. Especially here."

"Please."

"Please what?"

Claire did not know. The word had fallen out of her without an object.

Elise crouched. It was an obscene courtesy, the crouch, like a woman examining a hem. She did not put her mouth anywhere. She did not have to. She used the side of one finger to part Claire just enough to see, and Claire's hips tried to follow and then tried to flee and accomplished neither.

"Everything is a little more," Elise said, almost to herself. "Fold, hood, the visible portion of the clitoris. It's all slightly—forward. As if the design assumed it would be used."

“Elise,” Maren said, and then, helplessly, “Is she—?”

“She’s wet,” Nadine said. “You can say it. The inferior nervous system is not actually inferior if this is what it does when five neighbors look at it.”

The word landed in the room and changed the air.

Claire’s face went hot. “Don’t call me that.”

Nadine tilted her head. “I didn’t call you that. I called the category that. The paper called it first. Eighty percent is not a quirky great-grandmother, Claire. Eighty percent is a different animal wearing a suburban haircut.”

“That’s enough,” Becca said, standing. “That’s—she’s a person. She drove here. She brought wine.”

“She brought wine,” Nadine agreed. “That’s what makes it ridiculous.”

Maren’s fingers were still on Claire’s back. They had begun, without any announcement, to stroke, small absent circles, the way one soothed a frightened cat and the way one claimed a frightened cat.

“What is?” Maren asked.

Nadine gestured at the pile of clothes, then at Claire’s bare body, the tight nipples, the shine on her inner thigh where a thin line had traveled down and dried and been replaced.

“That we let her dress like us,” Nadine said. “That’s the part I can’t get past. We all got our little countries. She got a species. And she still put on jeans and came to book club as if the zipper were a meaningful fact.”

Ruth’s hand had not left her. Ruth pressed, just enough that Claire’s knees softened, and spoke as if they were discussing a casserole schedule.

“It is a little ridiculous,” Ruth said. “Now that we’ve seen. You can’t put that away in denim and expect the room to forget.”

Claire’s voice came out thin. “I live here. I have a job. I am not—”

“You are what the test says you are,” Elise said, rising. She wiped her finger on her own jeans without looking, a tidy horror. “The kind thing is not to pretend. The kind thing is to decide what a result like this requires from a household. From a circle.”

Becca’s eyes were wet. “You sound like you’re going to put her in a zoo.”

“Don’t be vulgar,” Elise said. “I’m talking about practicalities. Clothing is a social contract among modern humans. If she isn’t—fully—then the contract is theater. It may even be unkind. Like shoes on something that doesn’t need them.”

Claire laughed, cracked. “You want me to drive home naked.”

“I want you to stop insulting the data,” Nadine said. “You can put your sweater on to walk to the car if Maren’s street bothers you. That’s camouflage. That’s different. In here, with us, after this—” She shook her head. “It’s theater. And you’re a bad actress. Look at you.”

They looked again. Claire could not close her legs without pressing against Ruth’s hand, and she could not open them without offering Elise another view. Her breasts moved with her breathing. A drop left her and went down the inside of her thigh, bright in the lamp, and Maren made a tiny sound as if someone had read a sentence in the novel that was not supposed to be read aloud.

“What should we do,” Maren said.

It was not quite a question. It was the hostess turning the evening toward its next course.

Elise glanced at her packet, useless now, and then at Claire’s mouth. “We document. We measure properly, not with cake forks. We see whether this reproduces in behavior or only in bone. We decide whether she attends like this from now on.”

“Like this meaning—” Becca began.

““Meaning without the joke of clothes,” Nadine said. “Yes.”

Ruth’s thumb moved once, a mercy and a cruelty in the same stroke, right where Claire was most swollen, and Claire’s head tipped back and her hands, which had had nowhere to go, found Maren’s wrists behind her and held on.

“She’s close,” Ruth observed, as if noting the time. “We should be decent about that. She’s been very good.”

“Decent,” Nadine said, tasting the word. “All right. Finish what you started, Ruth. Then we talk about next Thursday.”

Claire’s eyes had gone wet. “Next Thursday I am wearing clothes.”

Elise smiled with real, frightening fondness. “You can wear them to the door if it helps you leave the house. We’ll take them at the hall, the way Maren takes coats. It will become ordinary faster than you think. Inferior isn’t an insult if we handle you correctly. It’s a care instruction.”

Ruth’s hand settled to its work with the patience of a woman who had raised children and cooked for decades and knew how to bring a thing along without rushing it. Claire shook in the square of sofas, blonde hair slipping, the printout on the table catching the lamp at the edge, the word Neanderthal visible from where she stood if she wanted to look.

She did not want to look.

She looked at the blinds instead, closed on a street of ordinary houses, and came against Ruth’s palm with a helpless, drawn-out sound that made Becca cover her own mouth and made Maren’s fingers tighten at her waist as if to keep her from floating off the rug. After, they did not give her the underwear first.

Maren gave her the throw from the end of the sofa, light, decorative, and it covered nothing that mattered. Elise slid the result sheet back into the envelope and wrote, on the outside, in the same pen she used for passages in novels: Claire. Archive.

Nadine picked up the jeans, folded them, and set them on the far chair.

“Those can stay here,” Nadine said. “For now. No sense putting her back into a costume we don’t believe in.”

Claire stood under the throw, still slick, still shaking, and watched five women begin, in the mild voices of a suburban book club, to decide what an eighty percent required of her. On the table, among the other envelopes, Ireland and Germany and the Levant looked suddenly like countries that had agreed to be kind.

Hers had not.

Chapter Two

Etiquette

The throw had tassels. It had been chosen for a sofa, not for a body. When Claire held the corners together her nipples still made the weave stand up; when she let them drop, the tassels hung along her thighs like a joke that had gone on too long.

Ruth turned her palm toward the lamp, looked at the shine on it, and reached for a napkin. She wiped as far as napkins go and then, because it was not far enough, she looked at Claire.

“You’re still trembling,” Ruth said. “That’s fine. Sit before you fall.”

Claire looked at the sofa she had sat on an hour ago with her envelope in her lap. The envelope was on the table now, *Claire. Archive.* in Elise’s tidy ink. The sofa was the same sofa. It did not feel like the same sofa.

Maren saw her hesitate.

“Wait,” Maren said. “Wait. If she’s—like that—I don’t want the upholstery. That isn’t— Claire, it isn’t you. It’s the cushion. I just had them steamed.”

Nadine’s mouth moved, almost a smile. “Say the rest of it.”

“There is no rest of it.”

“There is. You put a towel down for Dexter when he was damp after rain. You said so in October. You were very proud of being practical.”

Dexter was Maren’s retired greyhound. He lived in a bed by the kitchen and was not discussed at book club except as a scheduling constraint.

Maren’s face colored. “That isn’t the same.”

“Then why did you think of it,” Nadine said.

Becca still had her arms around herself. “You are not putting her on the floor.”

“I didn’t say floor,” Maren said, and then, because the idea had arrived and would not leave, she went down the hall and came back with a folded bath towel, pale gray, guest-quality. She spread it on the cushion where Claire had been. She smoothed the corners. She would not look at Claire while she did it.

Elise had not sat down. Elise was writing on the back of her own result sheet, small lines.

“Towel is etiquette,” Elise said, as if they were deciding whether to keep shoes on at the door. “Furniture is a modern courtesy. If we extend it, we extend it on purpose, not by accident. Claire. On the towel, please. Feet on the floor. Don’t tuck.”

“I’m cold,” Claire said.

She was not cold. She was wet, and the air moved over it, and the throw scratched.

“You’re flushed,” Elise said. “Those are different. Come here.”

Claire sat. The towel was rough under her bare seat. Her thighs made a sound against it that everyone heard. She kept the throw across her lap until Nadine reached over, pinched a tassel, and drew the whole thing away.

“That’s doing work it hasn’t earned,” Nadine said, and dropped it on the far chair, on top of the folded jeans.

Claire’s hands went into her lap and then away from her lap, because covering herself with her hands looked, suddenly, like a child, and they were not speaking to her as a child. They were speaking around her as a problem of manners.

Ruth sat close enough that their knees almost touched. Ruth’s knee was dressed. Claire’s was not.

“We should agree on rules before someone invents a cruelty by mistake,” Ruth said. “That’s how people get hurt. Not by looking. By being sloppy.”

“Rules for what,” Becca said.

“For her,” Ruth said. “For how we are with her, now that we know. You don’t handle a cat the way you handle a guest. You don’t apologize to a dog for touching its mouth. You don’t put a pig in stockings and then act surprised when the stockings are the strange part.”

Claire’s face went hot so fast her eyes watered. “Don’t.”

Ruth’s voice stayed mild. “Don’t what, honey. Don’t find a language? We have to call it something. Guest isn’t true anymore. You felt that when you came on my hand in front of the cake. Guests don’t do that.”

The word *came* in Ruth’s mouth was worse than the act had been. Claire’s belly tightened. She could feel, with a clarity that made her want to fold in half, that she was slick again on the towel.

Nadine saw. Nadine was watching the inside of Claire’s knee.

“She’s doing it again,” Nadine said. “Say the pig part once more.”

“Nadine,” Maren whispered.

“No. Watch. Claire. Look at me.” Nadine waited until Claire did. “It is ridiculous that you arrived dressed like Maren. It is more ridiculous that you think *pig* is the unkind word. Pigs are brighter than people want them to be. They know the bucket. They know the gate. They pink up when they’re attended. That isn’t an insult. It’s a description you keep proving.”

Claire shook her head. A drop left her and darkened the gray towel in an unmistakable coin.

Becca made a sound of protest that had no sentence attached.

Elise did not look away from the stain. “There. That’s the data. Humiliation is a stimulus. The archaic cluster is answering it. If we are going to be responsible, we don’t pretend that’s an accident, and we don’t stop the stimulus just because Becca wants the room to stay a book club.”

“It is a book club,” Becca said.

“It was,” Elise said. “Now it’s a lineage night that found something. Sit down, Becca, or come here and be useful.”

Maren picked up her glass and set it down without drinking. “Dexter is allowed on that one chair. Only that one. He knows. If we—if she—if we treat her like a household animal, we have to pick which kind, or we’ll be cruel by mixing them. Cats get the lap and the refusal. Dogs get the hand and the stay. Pigs get—” She stopped, horrified at her own inventory, and then finished it anyway, because the living room had become a place where finishing was the new politeness. “Pigs get kept. They don’t get a vote about the pen.”

Claire said, “I want my clothes.”

“I know you do,” Ruth said, and put her hand on Claire’s bare knee, high enough that her little finger rested in the wet heat at the very top of the thigh. “That’s the guest wanting. The rest of you is sitting on a towel making a mark because Nadine compared you to stock. We have to listen to the part that’s telling the truth.”

Ruth’s little finger did not stay still. It moved a fraction inward, a greeting. Claire’s hips lifted toward it before she could stop them, a small helpless hoist, and Maren’s breath caught.

“Cat,” Maren said, almost to herself. “That. That lift. Dexter doesn’t do that. The cat does that when you find the place.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Then stop doing it,” Nadine said.

Claire tried. She pressed her spine into the sofa and locked her knees. Ruth’s finger stayed. The effort of not lifting made her shake harder. A second coin darkened the towel.

Elise set down her pen.

“We need the examination while she’s in this state,” Elise said. “If we wait until she dresses —if we ever let her dress—we’ll lose the presentation. Maren, the ottoman. Not the sofa. Height’s wrong for looking.”

“Elise.”

“You wanted etiquette. Examination etiquette is: she is up, she is open, she is held, and someone writes it down. You have a kitchen pad. Bring it. Bring the little flashlight you keep in the junk drawer for when the porch fuse goes.”

Maren went. She came back with a notepad that still had a grocery list on the first page— *lemons, foil, Dexter’s joint tablets*—and a black flashlight the size of a palm. She tore the grocery list away as if that made the pad official.

“Claire,” Elise said. “Up. Throw stays off. Towel can come with you if Maren insists.”

“I insist,” Maren said, and then flushed, because insisting on the towel was its own verdict.

They moved her as a committee. Ruth kept the guiding hand. Nadine took her elbow. Elise shifted the coffee table six inches with her hip. The ottoman sat in the new space like a stool in a shop. Maren laid the towel over it. The stain from the sofa towel showed when she folded it; she turned that part under, a hostess reflex, and the reflex made Claire’s throat close.

“Sit on the edge,” Elise said. “Feet out. Heels on the floor. No. Wider.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. You just don’t want the angle. That’s different.”

Nadine’s hands went to Claire’s inner knees and opened her with the same unhurried force she used on stubborn jars. Claire’s feet slid. The air of the room went up between her legs and she made a noise she tried to swallow and did not.

“There,” Nadine said. “Stay. That’s the dog part, if we’re keeping Maren’s list. You don’t close until someone says.”

Becca had come as far as the arm of the opposite sofa. She was looking, and hating that she was looking, and not leaving.

Elise knelt on the rug.

It should have made her smaller. It did not. Kneeling put her face level with what the jeans had been for. She clicked the flashlight. The beam was harsher than the lamps. It found Claire’s belly first, then the thick gold hair, then the place the hair did not quite hide because she was already swollen open from Ruth and from the talk.

“Hold the light, Maren. Here. No—lower. Thank you.”

Claire stared at the top of Elise’s head. Elise’s hair was perfect. A pin caught the lamp. Claire’s own hair had come half down and hung along her breasts, tickling skin that felt too thin.

“I’m going to touch you,” Elise said. “I’m going to name what I touch. If you move, Ruth will hold your hips. If you close your knees, Nadine will open them. That isn’t punishment. That’s how you keep a subject still for a count. Do you understand.”

Claire’s voice would not come. She nodded, and the nod itself felt like a collar.

Elise’s fingers were dry and precise. She used the first two of her left hand to lift the outer folds, not spreading for show, spreading for access. Claire jolted. Ruth’s hands settled on her hips from behind the ottoman, thumbs in the hollows, a living brace.

“Labia majora are full,” Elise said. “More adipose than mine. Color is high. That’s the flush we keep seeing in her face, mapped down. Maren, write.”

Maren wrote. Her handwriting shook.

Elise’s thumbs moved inward. “Minora are long. They present without being pulled. That’s the forwardness from earlier.” She glanced up at Claire’s face, flashlight glow making a small moon under her chin. “You knew that. You’ve lived with this in jeans. No wonder you sit the way you sit.”

“I don’t sit a way,” Claire whispered.

“You do,” Nadine said. “You always have. We thought it was the chair.”

Elise’s right hand came up and, with a care that was worse than roughness, took the hood between finger and thumb. She drew it back.

Claire cried out. Not loud. A cracked, high sound. Her thighs tried to shut and met Nadine’s palms and failed.

The glans was exposed in the hard little beam. It was slick, vivid, larger in the light than Claire had ever been willing to imagine it, a wet stone of herself held out of its house.

Elise did not rush.

“Hood retracts cleanly,” she said. “Glans is prominent. More so than modern average—don’t flinch at *average*, Claire, I’m not insulting you, I’m placing you. Shaft is palpable under the hood when I—” She pressed, a short firm stroke along the hidden line, and Claire’s whole body tried to curl around the press. “Yes. Responsive at first contact. No hunt. Maren.”

“I don’t know how to write that,” Maren said.

“Write: *clitoris readily presented; extreme reflex to exposure and to naming.*”

“Don’t name me like that.”

Elise kept the hood back with two fingers and looked up again. “Which word. Clitoris. That isn’t a humiliation. That’s anatomy. You soaked the towel when Ruth said *pig*. You soaked it again when Nadine said *stay*. The naming that does you is the animal naming. We can all see it. Becca can see it from over there.”

Becca’s voice was wrecked. “Her stomach is shaking.”

“Her clitoris is twitching in the light,” Elise said, clinical, almost kind. “That’s the same shake. Come here, Becca. If you’re going to be sick about it, be sick at the correct distance.”

Becca came as if pulled. She stopped at Elise’s shoulder and looked where the beam told her to look. Her mouth opened and did not close.

“It’s—she’s—”

“Say it.”

“She’s out,” Becca whispered. “Like she doesn’t get to put it away.”

“She doesn’t, for the moment,” Elise said. “That’s the point of an examination.”

She used the side of one fingertip to touch the glans directly. A single tap. Claire’s hips slammed against Ruth’s hold and a sound came out of her that had

no word in it, only pitch.

Nadine laughed under her breath, not happily. Awed. “Cat.”

“Dog,” Maren said, helpless, flashlight wobbling. “That’s the leg—when the vet—”

“Don’t,” Claire gasped.

Elise tapped again, then rested the pad of her finger there and did not move it, a steady claiming contact that made Claire’s vision white at the edges.

“Pigs have a different structure,” Elise said, as if they were still on the novel from last month. “I’m not saying she is one. I’m saying the appetite is the part that tracks. She is going to drip on Maren’s towel while we talk about her, and she is going to hate the talk, and the hate is going to make the drip worse. That is a husbandry problem. That is not a book problem.”

Ruth’s mouth was near Claire’s ear now. “Breathe, honey. Let her finish. You’re doing so much work trying to be a guest. You don’t have to.”

Elise drew the hood up once more, fully, and held it. “Maren. Light closer.”

The beam narrowed. They could see the small pulse in it. They could see the wet string that connected Elise’s finger to Claire when she lifted the finger away and put it back.

“I want a count,” Elise said. “How many times we can expose her like this before she finishes without anyone stroking her. That’s etiquette too. Whether she is allowed a finish during documentation, or whether documentation stays dry. I vote she is not allowed. If the cluster answers humiliation, then finishing is a reward we have not agreed to give.”

Claire shook her head hard enough that her hair whipped her own chest. “You can’t—you can’t decide that.”

Nadine’s thumbs pressed into the soft insides of her knees. “We decided the sweater. We decided the bra. We decided the jeans stay on the chair. This is only the next line on the same list.”

Elise released the hood. The relief was a horror of its own; the hood did not cover her the way it had before they began. She felt left out of herself, uncovered even when no fingers were there.

Elise sat back on her heels and looked at her hand. She did not wipe it on her jeans this time. She held it up.

“Taste is a separate exam,” she said. “Not tonight, unless someone insists. Tonight we decide sitting, speaking, clothing at the door, and whether she stays open while we talk.”

“Speaking,” Ruth said. She was still bracing Claire’s hips, and Claire was still open, and Ruth spoke across her body as if across a table. “I think she answers when asked. I think she does not get to give speeches about being a person. The speeches make her wet and then she cries, and that isn’t kind.”

“I am a person,” Claire said.

The room waited.

The towel under her was past coins now. A small dark map.

Nadine nodded at it. “Say *I am a person* again.”

Claire’s mouth tightened.

“Say it,” Nadine said.

“I am a person.”

It came out smaller. The muscles in her belly jumped. Elise, still kneeling, reached up without looking away from Claire’s face and laid two fingers against her, not in her, just against the wet open seam, and held them there so the jump had a place to register.

“Again.”

“I am—” Her voice broke. “I am a person.”

Elise’s fingers came away shining. She showed them to Maren, to Becca, to Ruth.

“The etiquette,” Elise said quietly, “is that she may say it. We don’t have to argue. We just check. The body is the parliament. The parliament just voted.”

Becca sat down on the floor. It looked like her legs had ended the debate for her.

Maren clicked the flashlight off. The afterimage of Claire’s clitoris stayed in the dim, a small pink ghost. Maren set the light on the table beside the archived envelope as if it now belonged to the same kit.

“Clothes at the door,” Maren said, and her voice was hostess-steady only by force. “Next time. I can put a hook in the hall. Dexter’s leash hangs on the other one. That isn’t— I don’t mean a leash. I mean I have a hook.”

“We may mean a leash later,” Nadine said. “Not tonight. Tonight we mean she doesn’t get the jeans back. She can have the throw to walk to the bathroom. She can have water. She sits on towels. She stays how we put her while we finish our wine. And if she starts to close her knees, someone opens them. That’s house manners.”

Claire’s voice was a scrape. “And if I walk out.”

Ruth kissed her hair, tender, ruinous. “Then you walk out like that, honey. That’s the choice that’s left. Dressed is the choice that isn’t.”

Elise stood. Her knees had a red mark from the rug. She picked up the pad and read back what Maren had managed to write, correcting a spelling as she went, and then she added her own line at the bottom, the pen ticking.

Subject accepts handling. Subject lubricates to species comparison (cat / dog / pig). Clitoral glans: prominent; hooding insufficient under attention. Recommend: no covering during circle; examination repeatable.

She underlined *repeatable*.

Claire sat on the ottoman with her feet still held apart by the idea of Nadine even after Nadine’s hands had gone to her glass. The air licked at her. The gold hair between her thighs was darkened and stuck in little points. Her clitoris felt enormous, uncovered, as if the living room could still see it with the flashlight off.

Nadine lifted her wine and looked at Claire over the rim.

“Cat on the furniture,” Nadine said. “Dog for the exam. Pig for the appetite. We don’t have to pick only one. We just have to stop dressing her as if the list were empty.”

Claire’s eyes filmed. A fresh slick welled and slipped from her, a slow bead that traveled down and met the towel with a sound too small to be a sound.

Every woman in the room heard it anyway.

Elise made a mark on the pad.

Ruth’s hand returned, not to finish her, not to be decent—the decency vote had already failed —but to rest two fingers against the hood and keep it from hiding, a casual, proprietary hold while the others drank, as if Claire’s clitoris were a page they were not done with and did not intend to close.

Chapter Three

Scale

Ruth took her fingers away.

The hood should have come forward. It had all Claire’s life. It was skin; it was meant to cover; it had covered her in jeans and in bathwater and in the ordinary dark of her own bedroom. She felt it try. She felt the little sleeve of her gather and stall on the swollen rim of the glans and refuse, as if the glans had become a doorstop.

Claire made a sound that wanted to be a laugh.

“Put it back,” she said.

Ruth used her thumbs, gentle, and slid the hood down. It rode the slick and then caught. The glans stayed out, wet, too big now for the house it had lived in. Under the lamp it looked polished. It looked wrong. It looked like something the

living room was not built to contain.

Elise leaned in so sharply her hairpin clicked.

“Don’t force it,” Elise said.

“I’m not forcing it. It won’t—” Ruth tried once more, a careful stretch. Claire’s hips jerked. The hood slipped and failed again. “Elise.”

“I see it.”

Nadine had her glass halfway to her mouth. She set it down. “That’s not going in. Look at it. It’s like trying to put a cork back in a bottle you already opened.”

“Don’t,” Claire whispered.

Becca had both hands over her lips. “Does it hurt.”

“It aches.” Claire’s voice frayed. “It aches and it won’t—please, just—someone get a cold cloth. It will go down. It always goes down.”

Maren was already moving. She came back from the kitchen with a clean washcloth folded around ice. She knelt as Elise had knelt and hesitated, the ice dripping onto the towel between Claire’s feet.

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to touch it,” Maren said.

“You’re supposed to try,” Elise said. “If it reduces, we learn that. If it doesn’t, we learn that.” The cloth met her. Claire hissed. The cold was a bright insult and then a pressure that should have helped. For a few seconds the glans tightened, shining harder in the shock, and Maren made a hopeful noise. Then the hood was urged forward again, and again it would not seat. The ice water ran down Claire’s inner thigh in a thin rivulet and did nothing that mattered.

Elise sat back on her heels.

“That’s no longer a book-club problem,” she said. “That’s presentation that won’t reverse. I have someone who can tell us whether we’re looking at swelling or at a change.”

Nadine’s eyes narrowed. “Someone.”

“My cousin. Petra. She has the anatomy chair at the university. She hates being called after nine unless a student is bleeding. This isn’t a student. This is a result.”

Claire shook her head. The motion moved her breasts and moved the thing between her legs that would not hide, and she felt both motions as public.

“You are not calling a professor.”

Elise already had her phone. “I am. You can say no to the camera if you want to pretend that’s still available. You cannot say no to the fact that you don’t fit

inside yourself.”

Ruth’s hands returned to Claire’s hips, not stroking, only pinning her to the ottoman as if Claire might close, or run, or try again with her own fingers and make it worse.

Elise put the call on speaker and laid the phone on the coffee table beside the envelope that said *Claire. Archive.*

Two rings. Three.

A woman answered the way women answer work calls in their kitchens: already impatient, already wiping something off a hand.

“Elise. If this is about Thanksgiving I swear—”

“It isn’t. I’m going to say a set of things quickly and I need you not to hang up. I’m at Maren Holt’s. Book club. We did the lineage kits. One of us came back eighty percent Neanderthal. Adult woman. Blonde. Compact build. We examined her. Her clitoris is unhooded and we cannot reduce it. I’m putting you on speaker.”

Silence. A chair scraped on the other end.

“Say the percentage again.”

“Eighty.”

“That’s not a kit. That’s a hallucination.”

“I have the printout in front of me. I have her in front of me. Petra. The glans will not go back under the prepuce. We used ice.”

Another silence, longer. When Dr. Petra Lang spoke again the impatience had been replaced by something thinner.

“How large.”

Nadine laughed once, unbelieving. “She wants a number.”

“I want a photograph,” Petra said. “I want a photograph with a scale in the frame and I want it now, and if this is a joke I will end you at the next faculty dinner. Elise. Is the subject listening.”

Claire’s mouth was dry. “I’m here.”

“Name.”

“Claire.”

“Claire. Do not touch it. Do not try to hood it again. If they iced you, stop icing. You can make lymphatic change look like anatomy if you keep insulting it. Elise, I want the photo. Hood held back even if it won’t sit. Ruler if you have one. If you

don’t, a coin. Full room light and a flash. Do not prettify her.”

Maren stood as if someone had pulled a string. “I have a sewing gauge. I have quarters.”

“Gauge,” Petra said. “Quarters look like a party. I don’t want a party. I want millimeters.”

Maren’s sewing kit was in the sideboard. The gauge was metal, inches along one edge, centimeters along the other. She put it in Elise’s hand as if passing a knife.

“Claire,” Elise said. “On your back. Ottomans don’t lie flat—Maren, cushions on the floor. Towel down. Now.”

“Please don’t take a picture of me.”

Nadine was already helping lift her. “Too late for *please don’t*. That train left with the camisole.”

They made a pad of sofa cushions on the rug. The towel went over it, stain and all. Claire was lowered onto her back. The ceiling of Maren’s living room was ordinary cream. A smoke detector blinked a polite green. Ruth took her wrists and held them above her head, not hard, only decided. Nadine opened her knees and kept them open with her own knees braced inside them. Maren held the flashlight even though the overhead was on, as if darkness might sneak in and grant Claire a mercy.

Elise knelt between her thighs and used two fingers to keep the hood from even attempting its old job. The glans stood in the light, wet, uncontained, a small furious animal of flesh. “Oh,” Becca said, very softly. “Oh, Claire.”

Elise laid the sewing gauge along her. The metal was cold. The first-centimeter mark sat near the base where the shaft met her. The glans rose past numbers it should not have risen past. Elise’s hand was not quite steady.

“I’m taking it,” Elise said.

The phone camera clicked. The flash made a white slap. Claire flinched and the flinch moved her against the gauge and against Elise’s holding fingers, and a sound came out of her that was not protest and not quite pleasure.

Elise sent the picture.

They heard Petra inhale.

They heard a cup go down hard.

“Oh my God,” Petra said. The speaker made her voice large in the living room. “Oh my God it’s HUGE.”

No one spoke.

Petra again, higher, all composure gone, the faculty dinner voice torn open. “Elise. Elise, that is not edema. That is not a trick of angle. The glans is—get me another. Lateral. I want the hood’s edge in the frame so I can see the failure to restitute. Pull it back farther. I don’t care if she makes a noise. Get me the shaft. Get me her face in one of them so I know you didn’t pull this off a site. Oh my God. Look at it. Look at the way it’s sitting.”

Claire’s face burned so deeply it hurt. The word *huge* went through her like a second flashlight. She felt herself swell against Elise’s fingers as if the word had blood in it. She felt the drip leave her and run toward the towel, a slow thick line.

Nadine saw. Of course she saw.

“Say it again,” Nadine said toward the phone. “She just—Petra. Say the size again. She’s answering it.”

“What.”

“She’s wetting the towel because you said it was huge.”

Petra was quiet for a heartbeat. When she came back she was trying to be a professor and failing in little bright pieces.

“That’s—that’s a hypothalamic picture. That’s not a parlor game. Elise, more photos. Now. I want three angles. I want one with the gauge vertical. I want one with fingers providing retraction so I can see whether the prepuce is short or simply outcompeted. Claire. Are you close to orgasm.”

Claire’s eyes were wet. “I don’t—I don’t want—”

“That was not what I asked.”

Ruth’s thumbs stroked the insides of Claire’s wrists, a grandmotherly horror. “Answer her, honey.”

“Yes,” Claire said, ruined. “Yes. I don’t want to be.”

“Then they will keep the camera on you while you are,” Petra said. “I need the peak. I need to see whether the glans engorges further when you go over. Do not be kind to her. Kindness will muddy it. Elise, shoot while you talk to her. Tell her what she’s looking like. I want the stimulus that matches the eighty percent.”

Elise angled the phone. The lens was a small black mouth. Claire could see herself in the glass for a fragment: blonde hair wrecked, mouth open, the gauge beside the wet, uncovered peak of her, Nadine’s knees keeping her wide.

“You’re out,” Elise said, and the camera clicked. “You won’t go back in. My cousin—who teaches this, Claire, who has seen hundreds of bodies—just lost her manners on speaker because of you. Lateral.” Click. “The hood is a rim. That’s all it is now. It doesn’t get to be a door.” Click.

“Face,” Petra said. “I need the face.”

Maren, flashlight forgotten, put a hand in Claire’s hair and turned her toward the phone as if turning a child toward a birthday candle. Claire’s wet eyes. Claire’s mouth. The flash. She tried to turn away and Ruth’s grip on her wrists said no.

“Oh my God,” Petra said again, quieter, worse. “She’s pretty. Of course she is. That’s going to make the lab impossible. Another. Closer. I want only the clitoris and the gauge. Fill the frame. I want to count the millimeters on my screen.”

Elise filled the frame.

The living room smelled like wine and skin and the faint iron of the sewing gauge. Claire’s hips kept lifting toward the phone as if the lens were a mouth she could not stop offering herself to. Each lift made the glans shine. Each shine made Nadine breathe out through her teeth.

“Pig,” Nadine said, almost conversational, for the camera and for Claire. “That’s the appetite. She’ll come from being measured. Watch.”

“Don’t use domestic labels yet,” Petra snapped. “I’m serious. Elise. Listen to me. If that measurement is what it looks like, you do not treat her like a lap cat and you do not treat her like Maren’s nice dog. Ordinary domesticated etiquette assumes a nervous system that will take a scolding and a biscuit. A clitoris that size, unhooded, with an eighty percent archaic cluster, is a volatility marker until I say it isn’t. She can spike. She can bolt. She can bite. She can go into a presentation state you will not be able to talk her down from in a living room. Do you hear me.”

Maren’s voice was small. “Bite.”

“I said possible. I said until I see her. I want her here. Tonight. Not tomorrow. I am walking to the comparative wing right now. There is an observation bay I can clear. I am preparing a cage because I am not putting that on an exam table with a paper gown and a smile. Elise. You muzzle her before she enters a common hallway. You muzzle her before she enters your car if she has started to mouth at you. Do you have anything.”

Becca said, “This is insane.”

“Becca,” Petra said. “I don’t know you. If you are the kind one, good. Kind ones hold the feet. Kind ones do not drive. Elise.”

Maren had gone white. “Dexter has a muzzle. The basket one. For fireworks. It’s in the mudroom.”

Claire thrashed once, a full-body refusal that did nothing against five women and a voice on a table.

“No. No muzzle. No cage. I want my jeans. I want—”

The orgasm took her in the middle of the sentence.

It was not the earlier one, the almost-kind one on Ruth’s hand. This one came up from the unhooded ache and from the word *huge* still living in the speaker and from the lens in Elise’s fist and from Petra’s voice saying *cage* as if cage were a towel and a hook and a next Thursday. Claire’s back arched off the cushions. Her wrists yanked in Ruth’s grip. She cried out against her own teeth, a raw broken sound, and her clitoris—out, huge in the flash, unhoused—jerked visibly in the frame while Elise, pale, kept the shutter going because her cousin had told her to.

Click. Click. Click.

Wet left her in a pulse that darkened the towel in a sudden spreading map. Her thighs shook so hard Nadine had to lean her weight in. The gauge slipped; Elise caught it; the metal slid along the glans and Claire sobbed through the peak as if the measurement itself were finishing her.

On the speaker, Petra was breathing.

“I have them,” Petra said. “I have—Elise, I have seven. The last three are the event. She enlarged. Of course she did. Get the muzzle on before she comes down far enough to run. She will feel ashamed in about forty seconds and shame will make her fast. Maren. The dog’s muzzle. Now.”

Maren ran.

Claire was still clenching, little helpless after-pulls, when the mudroom door banged. Maren came back with a black basket muzzle, nylon straps, the plastic grid meant for a greyhound’s long mouth. It looked absurd and then it did not look absurd. It looked like the next envelope.

“That’s a dog’s,” Becca said, crying openly now. “That’s Dexter’s.”

“It will fit enough,” Petra said. “If it doesn’t, you hold her jaw with a scarf and you do not let her teeth near anyone’s hands. Claire. Listen to me. I am Dr. Petra Lang. I am going to look at you in a room that can hold you. You are not being punished. You are being contained because your body just demonstrated a climax to observation and to size-speech, and I will not have that in a parking structure. Open your mouth or they will open it.”

Ruth lifted Claire to sitting while she was still slack from the orgasm. Claire’s blonde hair stuck to her wet cheeks. Her breasts moved with the wrecked breathing. Between her legs the glans shone, still out, still refusing the hood, a wet secret the whole room had stopped pretending was a secret.

“Please,” Claire said.

Nadine took the muzzle from Maren. “Open.”

Claire did not. Nadine’s fingers went to the hinges of her jaw, firm, the same unhurried jar- opening patience, and Claire’s mouth gave because mouths give. The basket fit over her face, too wide in the snout, tight when Nadine ran the strap behind her head and buckled it in her hair. Plastic grid against her lips. The smell of the mudroom and of Dexter, faint, a suburban humiliation so precise Claire’s eyes spilled over.

She made a noise into the muzzle.

Elise held the phone up so Petra could hear it.

“Good,” Petra said, and the word was not praise for Claire. It was praise for the strap. “Coat or throw, I don’t care. She does not get trousers. If you meet anyone, she is ill, she is being taken in, you do not stop to explain genealogy. Maren drives. Elise in the back with her. Someone on the knees. If she starts to rock into a second peak, you do not finish her in the car. You tell me and you hold her short of it. I need her hot when she arrives but I need her not stupid with it. I’m in the bay in twenty minutes. Service drive on the east side of Hensley. The cage will be open. You put her in and you shut it before you take the muzzle off, if you take it off. I may not let you take it off.”

They moved.

The throw went around Claire’s shoulders and covered nothing that the night air would respect. Maren’s garage was cold. The SUV’s back seat received the stained towel. Elise climbed in after her. Nadine took the other side and put a forearm across Claire’s bare thighs, keeping them from closing, her hand high enough that her little finger rested against the wet unhooded ache as if to monitor it. Ruth rode in front with the envelope and the sewing gauge and the phone still open on speaker. Becca came last, shaking, and held Claire’s clothes in her lap like a failure.

Claire breathed through the grid. Each breath made a small animal sound the muzzle could not help making. When the garage door went up she flinched toward Elise, and Elise’s arm went around her bare back, not comfort, only ballast.

“Volatility,” Elise said quietly, as if testing the new word.

Nadine’s little finger shifted, a thoughtless grope that was not thoughtless at all, and Claire moaned into the plastic. The glans nudged Nadine’s knuckle, slick, huge, homeless.

“Don’t,” Ruth said from the front, and she meant *don’t finish her*, and Nadine left the knuckle there anyway, a threat and a promise and a measurement.

The university at night was brick and sodium light. Hensley’s east drive was a concrete tongue behind a dumpster and a loading door. Petra Lang was already

there.

She was taller than Elise. She had the same precise hair and none of the living-room softness. A white coat over dark clothes. Nitrile gloves already on, as if Claire's arriving skin were a surface she had decided about in advance. Behind her the bay was fluorescent, clean enough to smell like cold metal and ethanol. In the center of the floor stood a cage that had not been built for a greyhound.

It was human-tall if Claire stooped. Close mesh. A sliding panel. A pan floor with a drain. A folded blanket that looked like an afterthought and also like etiquette of a new kind. A clip on the mesh for a water bottle. A second clip that did not have a purpose Claire could name from the back seat.

Petra opened the car door and looked in.

She looked at the muzzle first. Then at Claire's eyes. Then she reached, slowly, and lifted the throw.

The night air and the fluorescent spill found Claire's breasts, her belly, the gold wet hair, the clitoris that would not tuck back, still grossly presented, still shining from the climax they had photographed.

Petra's composure—recovered on the walk over, assembled in the coat—went again, just for a second, in her mouth.

"Oh," she said. Not the shout from the phone. Something hungrier. "Oh, look at you."

She stepped back.

"Out. Don't give her the pavement to think on. Straight in. Elise, you keep the strap. Nadine, you keep her knees useless. If she presents on the concrete I will be angry. Claire." Petra's eyes returned to the grid over Claire's mouth. "You are not a house pet. You will not be handled like one. You will go into that cage because I am not guessing about your teeth and I am not guessing about that." Her gloved hand indicated, without touching yet, the unhooded glans. "When the door shuts I will measure you properly. If you are good, the muzzle comes off for the measurement. If you are volatile, it stays, and I work around it."

They walked her.

Claire's bare feet on the bay floor. The throw slipping. The muzzle making its small breathy sounds. Nadine's hand never leaving the inside of her thigh. The mesh coming closer until it was the only architecture left.

Petra slid the panel wide.

The blanket. The drain. The clips.

"In," Petra said.

Ruth kissed Claire’s hair above the strap, once, a book-club leftover, and then they stooped her and put her through the opening and the mesh enclosed her, a clean cold geometry around her skin. She turned on her knees on the blanket, blonde, muzzled, still wet, the glans absurdly bright under fluorescent light, and the panel rolled shut with a sound that was not a living-room sound.

Petra set the latch.

She stood close enough that Claire could see the phone in her pocket, Claire’s own unhooded flesh still lit on the screen.

“Now,” Petra said, to the women and to the cage and to the thing between Claire’s legs that would not go home. “Now we stop playing house.”

Chapter Four

Off the Clock

Petra did not take off the coat.

She took off the gloves, one finger at a time, and dropped them in a tray as if they had belonged to a different woman, a woman who still needed an excuse. She found a rolling stool. She pulled it to the mesh and sat, knees apart, and looked at Claire the way women look at a dessert they have already decided to ruin.

“Someone open wine if you brought any,” Petra said. “If you didn’t, there are paper cups in the prep room and a bottle in my desk that I keep for visiting speakers. Elise. You know where. This is not a grant review. This is us. She’s already come for a camera. We can stop pretending I need a white coat to finish the thought.”

Elise hesitated only a second. Then she went.

Claire stayed on her knees on the blanket. The muzzle made her breath small and wet against the grid. The fluorescent light did not blink. It just kept finding the place between her thighs that would not go back under its hood, still swollen, still shining from the car and from Nadine’s knuckle and from the word *huge* that lived in the room even now.

Nadine dragged a chair over. Ruth found another. Maren stood with her hands at her mouth. Becca sat on a crate as if her legs had filed a complaint.

Petra crooked two fingers at the latch.

“Out,” she said, to Claire. “On the blanket, here, where they can see your face. If you make me reach in after you I will be irritated, and I do irritation with my hands.”

Claire did not move.

Petra opened the panel herself, leaned in, and took Claire by the back of the strap. Not a jerk. A hostess pull. Claire came forward on her knees because the alternative was to fall on her face in a greyhound muzzle, and even ruined she had that much pride left.

The bay floor was cold under the edge of the blanket. Petra sat her back on her heels, opened her knees with the sides of her shoes, and looked down at the unhooded glans as if it were a drink someone had set in front of her.

“There you are,” Petra said. “Hello.”

Claire made a muffled sound.

Petra unbuckled the muzzle with her thumbs and lifted it off. The air on Claire’s mouth felt indecent. She licked her lips and tasted plastic and her own salt.

“Don’t thank me,” Petra said. “I want you noisy. I want your friends to hear what they paid for with a genealogy kit. Elise, did you find the bottle?”

Elise came back with a cheap red and a stack of cups. She poured as if this were Maren’s living room. The pour was the loudest civilized sound in the bay.

Petra took a cup, sipped, made a face, and laughed. It was a real laugh. It undid something in the room that the gloves had been holding.

“That’s awful,” Petra said. “Perfect. Claire. Look at them. No. At their faces, not at your knees. These women watched you soak a guest towel because someone said *pig*. They’re going to watch you come until you run out of arguments. That’s the evening. That’s all the evening is.”

“I want to go home,” Claire said.

Petra’s hand settled between her legs without any preamble at all, two fingers sliding up either side of the exposed glans, not covering it, framing it, and Claire’s whole body jerked as if the floor had moved.

“You are home,” Petra said. “Home is wherever this is out. Maren, you can come closer. You look like you’re at a recital. It’s a girls’ night. She doesn’t get a program note.”

Maren came closer. Her wine trembled.

Petra began to work her.

There was no count. There was no *palpable shaft*. There was Petra’s hand, slick almost at once, rubbing in small filthy circles that were not filthy in language and were filthy in intent, the pad of her thumb riding the naked glans while her other fingers cupped what the hood would not hide. She talked while she did it, easy, as if they were on a porch.

“She’s so wet I could do this through a meeting. Elise, your cousin is a menace. Look at her stomach. That’s a woman who is going to come on my hand in front of her book club and still try to call it a misunderstanding. Nadine, say something mean. She likes mean. We all saw the pictures.”

Nadine leaned her chin on her fist. “Your clit is still out, Claire. It’s sitting there like it paid rent. You came on a phone and you didn’t have the manners to put it away after.”

Claire moaned. The sound bounced off tile.

Petra’s thumb sped, then slowed, then sped, a party trick. “There. That’s the face. Ruth, you should feel how hot she is. You can. I’m not precious. This is not my lab voice. This is my *we opened a second bottle* voice.”

Ruth came and put two fingers beside Petra’s, not taking over, only touching so she could know. Claire’s hips pushed into both of them. Wine sloshed in someone’s cup.

“Oh, honey,” Ruth said, fond and wrecked. “You’re going to go right now.”

“She is,” Petra agreed. “Claire. Eyes on Nadine when you do it. She started the pig talk. She gets the show.”

Claire tried to shake her head and looked at Nadine anyway, because Petra’s thumb had found a rhythm that did not permit dignity. Nadine smiled with only one side of her mouth. Claire came with her mouth open and her knees wide on a university blanket, a raw, helpless shake that pulled a sound out of her like crying and like sex and like being laughed at in a kitchen.

Petra did not take her hand away.

She patted, light, almost friendly, right on the oversensitive glans, and Claire whimpered and tried to close and Nadine’s shoe was there, inside her knee, a casual doorstop.

“That’s one,” Petra said. She sipped the bad wine. “Somebody toast. I’m serious. Toast.”

Elise, pale, lifted her cup. “To the kit.”

“To the kit,” Maren whispered.

Becca did not lift her cup. She was watching Claire’s clitoris twitch in the aftermath, still uncovered, still enormous in the light, and she looked as if she might be sick and as if she might never leave.

Petra’s fingers started again before Claire had a full breath.

“Two,” Petra said. “Then we talk. Talking before two is how you get speeches. I don’t want speeches. I want her stupid.”

“Please,” Claire said. “Please, I can’t—”

“You can. You just did. This is the same night, sweetheart. It’s just longer.” Petra glanced over her shoulder. “Becca. Come hold her hair. If you’re going to suffer, suffer usefully.”

Becca came as if the floor sloped that way. Her hands gathered Claire’s blonde hair off her face. It was almost tender. Claire looked up at her and Becca’s eyes filled, and Petra’s hand kept working that naked, unhousable peak in lazy filthy circles while the others drank.

“Tell her she’s pretty,” Petra said. “Girls’ night rules. We say the pretty thing out loud.”

“You’re pretty,” Becca whispered, miserable.

“And.”

Becca’s throat moved. “And it’s huge.”

Claire sobbed. The sob turned into the climb. Petra laughed under her breath, delighted, all professor gone.

“There she is. Don’t you dare look at the floor. Maren. Tell her what we’re doing tomorrow. Make it ordinary.”

Maren’s voice cracked and then found hostess. “We’re—we’re going to have her. When we want. That’s what you said in the car. On demand. Like—like a bottle we opened and didn’t recork.”

“That’s it,” Petra said. “That’s the tone. Not a protocol. A night that doesn’t end. Claire. Second one. Give it to them.”

She pinched, very lightly, just behind the glans, and rubbed the exposed head with her wet thumb, and Claire broke again, harder, a full-body buckle that would have put her on her side if Becca hadn’t had her hair and Nadine hadn’t had her knee. She cried out a name that was no one’s. She pulsed against Petra’s hand in plain view. A fresh run of slick went down to the blanket. Someone—Elise—said *oh* as if a chapter had gotten good.

Petra eased her through it and then cupped her, possessive, a woman keeping a glass from being taken.

“Now,” Petra said, pleasant. “Now we shop.”

Claire could barely lift her head. “What.”

“Agreements. You’re going to say yes to things because your body is already saying yes, and we’re going to keep you in this state until your mouth catches up. That’s the whole technique. It isn’t even interesting. It’s how every drunk girl at a reunion ends up telling the truth.” Petra’s fingers stroked once, a threat of a

third. “You will sexually service your friends when they ask. On demand. In a kitchen. In a car. During a book they didn’t finish. You will put your mouth where they put you. You will keep your knees the way they leave them. You will not get a vote about whether you’re in the mood, because we have seen your mood and your mood is this.” She tapped the unhooded glans. Claire jerked. “Say you understand.”

“I understand you’re—trying to—”

Petra took her hand away.

The absence was worse than the touch. Claire’s hips followed it into empty air. She heard herself make a lost little noise.

“That’s the other half,” Petra said. “We stop when you make speeches. We start when you agree. Unorthodox only because people pretend it doesn’t work. Elise. Ask her for something specific. Small.”

Elise’s cup was empty. She set it down. Her voice, when it came, had wine in it and cousin in it and the living room in it.

“I want her mouth,” Elise said. “When I want it. Not as a favor. As a thing I can say in a text. *Come here.* And she comes here.”

Petra’s wet fingers returned, two of them sliding either side, not enough. “Claire.”

Claire’s eyes were swimming. “Elise, please don’t—”

The fingers stopped.

Claire’s breath hitched. The ache between her legs was a mouth of its own. She could feel the hood still failed, still rucked behind the glans like a sleeve that had given up.

“Yes,” Claire said, very small. “Yes. Your mouth—your—when you text. Yes.”

Petra rubbed her once, a prize so brief it was an insult, and Claire moaned as if she had been given a whole orgasm.

“Maren,” Petra said.

Maren’s face was blotched. “I want her at my house. After Dexter’s walk. I want her on the towel. I want to put my fingers in her hair and use her mouth while I watch something stupid. I don’t want to ask if she had a long day.”

Claire shook. Petra waited, fingers hovering.

“Yes,” Claire whispered. “Yes. Maren. On the towel. You don’t ask.”

Another stroke. Not enough. Claire’s thighs trembled around nothing.

Nadine did not wait to be invited. “I want her to crawl. I want her to come to my knee in a room with other people in it and wait. I want to put her face between my legs during a conversation and keep talking. I want her to stay wet the whole time because she can hear herself not being included.”

Petra looked at Claire.

Claire’s mouth opened. The no was there. The no died on the unhooded, pulsing need.

“Yes,” Claire said. “I’ll crawl. I’ll wait at your knee. I’ll—during conversation. Yes.”

Ruth spoke softly, almost apologetic. “I want to finish her when she’s been good, and I want to refuse her when she uses that guest voice. I want her to ask me. I want *please, Ruth* and I want it to mean her clit, which will not go away, and I want to decide.”

“Yes, Ruth.” It came faster. “Please. I mean—yes. You decide.”

Becca was shaking her head, crying, and then she said, as if the sentence had been pulled out of her with the rest, “I want to be allowed to stop being the kind one. I want to tell her to lie down and I want her to do it even if I’m crying. I want her mouth. I want it even though I hate that I want it.”

Petra’s hand was kind for three full seconds. Claire almost came from the kindness.

“Yes, Becca,” Claire gasped. “Even if you’re crying. I’ll lie down. You can have my mouth.”

“And me,” Petra said, as if adding cheese to an order. “You service me first when I’m in the room. You don’t get to be shy because I have a title. Off the clock I’m just the woman who can keep you on the edge of this until you forget the speech about being a person. Say it.”

Claire looked at her. Petra’s thumb rested on the glans and did not move.

“I’ll service you first,” Claire said. “When you’re in the room. I won’t be shy. I won’t—give the speech.”

“What speech.”

Claire’s face crumpled. “That I’m a person.”

Petra smiled, girls’-night sweet. “You can be a person tomorrow if I let you. Tonight you’re the thing we opened. Again.”

The third orgasm was given to her like a refill. Petra did it with her fingers wet to the palm, rubbing that homeless peak while the book club watched and while Claire, broken into sound, said *yes* on every breath because stopping the word

felt like stopping the hand. She came shaking, sloppy, a run of slick that made Nadine laugh and lift her cup.

“To on demand,” Nadine said.

“To on demand,” Elise said, and this time her voice had no packet in it.

They did not stop.

Time went strange in fluorescent light. Petra’s wrist got tired and she put Claire’s own hand where she wanted it and told her to work herself while they talked about her as if she were a plan for the weekend, and whenever Claire’s fingers slowed Petra said *ah-ah* and waited, and Claire’s fingers started again. They made her look at each of them and repeat the agreements without Petra prompting. The first time she stumbled, Petra took her to the edge and left her there until Claire, sobbing, recited Maren’s towel and Nadine’s knee and Elise’s text and Becca’s mouth and Ruth’s *please*.

They made her crawl the four feet to Nadine’s chair.

She did it. The mesh of the open cage was behind her. The drain was beside her hand. Her blonde hair hung. Her clitoris, still out, still wet, nodded under her as she moved, a small obscene pendulum, and Nadine watched it instead of her face.

“Ask,” Nadine said.

Claire’s voice was raw. “Can I—do you want my mouth.”

“On demand,” Nadine said. “Try again.”

“I want to service you,” Claire said, and the sentence came out like it had already lived in her for hours. “Please. On demand.”

Nadine looked at Petra.

Petra shrugged, smiling, coat open now, all clock off. “She’s been saying it long enough. Take her. That’s what the night is for.”

Nadine opened her knees. She did not undress all the way; she only drew her underwear aside with two fingers, suburban, practical, as if adjusting a napkin. Claire, on her knees, went in because waiting had become the worse pain. The taste was skin and heat and the faint detergent of ordinary clothes. Nadine’s hand landed in her hair with a sigh that was not scientific.

“She can still talk after this,” Petra said, watching, idly stroking two fingers around Claire’s unhooded glans from behind while Claire’s mouth worked. “That’s the trick. You don’t smash the language out. You rent it. Claire. Tap Nadine if you need air. If you don’t tap, keep going. When she finishes, you thank her and you ask Ruth next. That’s a girls’ night. That’s passing the bottle.”

Claire did not tap.

Nadine came with her teeth in her own lip and her eyes on Petra, a startled, angry pleasure, and her hand tightened in Claire's hair hard enough to hurt. Claire stayed. When Nadine let her up she was shining at the mouth and between the legs both, and she turned on her knees toward Ruth without being told, because the next name was already in line.

"Thank you," Claire said to Nadine, hoarse. "Ruth. Please. On demand."

Ruth touched her cheek, thumb wiping Nadine off the corner of Claire's lip as if wiping cake. "Oh, you poor lovely thing. Yes. Come here."

They used her that way.

Not all at once. In the stupid, social sequence of a long night: Ruth with her skirt lifted and her head tipped back against the cage mesh, murmuring *that's it, that's it* while Petra kept two fingers lazy on Claire's clit so she would stay in the agreeing state; Elise with her hand over her own mouth so the hallway wouldn't hear; Maren crying and coming and apologizing and then putting Claire right back when Petra said *don't you dare apologize to the bottle*; Becca last, shaking so hard her knees knocked, saying *I hate this I hate this* while her hips lifted into Claire's mouth anyway.

Between them Petra gave Claire the fourth and the fifth with an unhurried, party cruelty, never quite letting her drop out of the wet trance, talking over her sounds.

"See? She's easy now. That's all breaking in is. You keep the body in the yes long enough that the yes starts arriving first. Claire. What do you do if Nadine texts you at work."

"I go," Claire said, against Maren's thigh, wrecked. "On demand."

"What do you do if I tell you to crawl in a room you thought was yours."

"I crawl."

"What are you not going to say."

Claire's eyes were blank and bright. "That I'm a person."

"Good night," Petra said, and rubbed her to a sixth until Claire's arms gave out and she came on her side on the blanket with her mouth still wet from her friends, moaning thank-yous into the drain.

When it was over enough to count cups, the bottle was empty and the bay smelled like wine and skin and ethanol. Claire lay where they had left her, knees still open because no one had said they could close, clitoris still unhooded and dark-flushed, shining, used. Her lips were swollen. Her voice was gone to a

whisper.

Nadine snapped her fingers, testing.

Claire got to her knees.

She waited.

Petra laughed, quiet, almost affectionate, and hooked two fingers under Claire’s chin.

“There,” Petra said. “That’s a night. That’s a girl who knows what she is when the coat comes off. Somebody find her a blanket that isn’t this one. She can sleep in the cage. If she asks nicely I might leave the panel unlatched. Claire. Ask.”

Claire swallowed.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please let me sleep in the cage. Please leave it unlatched if you want. I’ll service anyone who wants. On demand. I won’t give the speech.”

Petra kissed her forehead, a party kiss, a cousin’s-friend kiss, and patted the naked, homeless glans once as if patting a pocket that now belonged to the room.

“Put her in,” Petra said. “If she presents in her sleep, take a picture. If she wakes up talking like a guest, bring her back to two and start the list again. She won’t. Look at her.”

They looked.

Claire crawled the four feet into the mesh without being shown. She turned, sat on her heels, knees open, and waited for the panel with her mouth already soft and her eyes on Petra’s hands.

The latch clicked anyway.

Claire did not make a guest sound.

She whispered, to the mesh, to the women with their empty cups, to the ache that would not tuck back—

“On demand.”

Chapter Five

The Other Envelope

Thursday still smelled like the dog.

Maren came in with Dexter’s leash in one hand and her mail in the other and didn’t even do the surprised thing anymore. Claire was already on the towel. Coat on the hook. Shoes under the bench. Knees apart because that was just how it went in this house now.

“Traffic was stupid,” Maren said. She unclipped Dexter. He wandered off like none of this was his problem. “I thought I was late. You’re early.”

“There wasn’t any traffic on my side.”

“Lucky you.” Maren dropped her keys in the bowl. Then she looked, the way she looked every time: face first, then between Claire’s legs, like checking if she’d left a burner on. “Jesus. You didn’t even wait.”

Claire didn’t bother covering it. The hood still tried at her apartment. Here it didn’t. Here she sat there uncovered and wet and it had stopped feeling like a performance weeks ago. It just felt like Thursday.

“Do you want me to—”

“Yeah,” Maren said. “Yeah, come here. I’ve been thinking about it since the park.”

Claire crossed the rug on her hands and knees because Nadine had made that a thing and because standing up to walk four feet had started to feel fake. Maren was still in her jacket. The TV was on in the other room, some renovation show. Claire put her mouth on her and Maren’s hand went into her hair with a sound that was mostly relief.

“That’s—okay. Yeah. Slower. I can’t hear the street if you—yeah.”

A commercial ended. Maren came with her fist against her teeth, laughed once like she was embarrassed anyway, and patted Claire’s shoulder the way she would have patted someone who’d helped her move a table.

“Okay. Okay, get your water. I left it by the—” She saw it was already there. “Right.”

Claire sat back on the towel and drank.

Maren stood there with her jacket half unzipped and her mouth still flushed and didn’t start the usual logistics dump. No Tuesday. No Nadine wants Saturday. She looked at the sideboard instead.

“So I did a thing,” Maren said.

Claire waited.

“Don’t look at me like that. I requested the raw file. After Petra’s. I told myself it was for, I don’t know. Records.” Maren opened the sideboard, shoved the napkins over, and came back with an envelope that looked exactly like the first one except nobody had written on it. She dropped it on the rug. “I opened it last week and then I put it back because I’m a coward. You can read it. I’m not doing a speech.”

Claire wiped her fingers on her own thigh and picked it up.

The chart was aggressively normal.

Northwestern European: 97.4%

Neanderthal snippet: 1.9%

Unassigned: 0.7%

Typical modern range. No appendix. No specialist. No eighty.

Claire read it twice.

Maren rubbed her forehead. “Yeah.”

“This is me.”

“That’s you. The other one was—Elise, or Petra, or the company, I don’t even care who. You’re the same as the rest of us. You’re like two percent of a cave and a bunch of England.” Maren exhaled. “Your jeans are in the spare room. They’re clean. If you want to say the obvious thing, say it. I’ll get them.”

Claire set the paper down next to the water glass.

She didn’t stand up.

Maren watched her not stand up.

“…Claire.”

“What time is Ruth coming.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m not being funny.”

Maren sat on the edge of the sofa like her knees had clocked out. “You get that you can just say you’re human, right. That’s an option they give people. There’s a graph.”

Claire looked at the towel. At her own knees. At the part of her that was still out, still wet, still behaving like the first night had never ended.

“If I say that, we have to stop this.”

“We don’t *have* to—”

“You would, though. You’d get weird about the towel. You’d start asking if I had a long day. You’d make me sit on the couch.” Claire’s voice stayed flat. “I don’t want the couch.”

Maren stared at her. Then she looked down, saw the new dark spot on the terry, and let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

“You’re kidding. You’re wet because I offered you pants.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s insane.”

“Okay.”

The lock turned. Ruth came in with her own key and toed her shoes off before she even looked up. Then she took in the towel, the envelope, Maren sitting there like she’d been caught, Claire not wearing a single useful thing.

“Hi,” Ruth said. “What did I miss.”

“The real results are normal,” Maren said. “She’s two percent. I told her I have her jeans. She asked what time you were coming.”

Ruth picked up the page, squinted, nodded once.

“Huh.”

“That’s it? Huh?”

“What do you want me to do, Maren, faint?” Ruth set the paper on the coffee table. “Claire. You saw it.”

“I saw it.”

“And you’re still on the floor.”

“Yeah.”

Ruth looked at her for a long second. Not clinical. Just a woman in a living room doing math that had already come out one way.

“You going to start saying you’re human now?”

Claire shook her head.

“Of course you’re not,” Ruth said.

Maren’s head snapped up. “Ruth.”

“What. She isn’t. If she were, she’d have the jeans on. She’s sitting there dripping on my hostess towel because you tried to give her an out.” Ruth shrugged, already unbuttoning her sleeve like this was still Thursday. “Of course you’re not human. Come here.”

Claire moved.

Maren made a small helpless sound. “We can’t just—”

“We can,” Ruth said. “We have been.” She glanced at Maren, then down at Claire, who was already at her knee, already waiting with that mouth that didn’t do speeches anymore. “You want the pants, Claire?”

“No.”

“You want to sit up here like people?”

“No.”

“Okay then.” Ruth lifted her skirt, matter-of-fact, and guided her in. “God, your mouth’s warm. Maren, can you text them or are you going to stand there like the paper’s going to grow legs.”

Maren picked up her phone because doing something with her hands was better than looking at the graph.

She talked while she typed.

“She found it,” Maren said, not into the phone, just out loud. “She doesn’t care.”

Claire didn’t stop. Ruth’s fingers were in her hair, casual, like stirring a pot.

The replies started hitting the counter.

Nadine: *wait the real one is normal??*

Elise: *yes. the eighty was us.*

Nadine: *and she’s still naked on your floor*

Maren, thumbs clumsy: *she won’t say she’s human*

Nadine: *lol of course she won’t*

Elise: *don’t give her the jeans. if she puts them on she’s lying twice*

Petra, no hello: *saturday. mudroom. no coat. do not start treating her like a guest because a pdf got honest*

Maren read Petra’s last.

Ruth huffed a little laugh and then her hand tightened. “That’s it—stay. Stay there.”

She finished quietly, like she didn’t want to make it a production, and let Claire up with her thumb at the corner of Claire’s mouth, wiping, automatic.

Claire turned toward Maren on her own.

Maren looked at the spare-room hallway. Looked at the hook. Looked at Claire’s face.

“Of course you’re not,” Maren said, and it came out tired and fond and a little mean, like she’d just agreed the dishwasher needed fixing. “Come here. Don’t make it a thing.”

Claire came.

Maren used her mouth standing up, jacket still on, the real envelope under her heel so she wouldn’t have to see the circle while she did it. When Claire shook and came off nothing but that offhand sentence, Maren felt it in her hands and swore under her breath.

“Yeah,” Maren said. “Yeah, I know. You’re fine. You’re not—whatever. Just stay on the towel.”

In the spare room the jeans stayed folded.

On the table the honest graph sat next to a water ring and nobody picked it up again.

Claire sat back on her heels, knees open, waiting for Saturday like she waited for the key in the lock, and when Maren walked past her to get wine she touched Claire’s hair in passing and said, almost to Dexter, almost to the room—

“Of course you’re not.”