After the Weather

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 1; The Chariot, Book 33

Chapter 1

Gravel

The north field still showed the winter.

May walked the edge of it with a bucket and the old pair of gloves that had been hers since she was fifteen, the leather cracked at the palms, the cuffs dark from other years. The wheat that had come up was thin. It lay in patches. Between the patches the ground had gone hard and pale, and when she stepped there the dirt gave a short dry sound, like a lid tapped on a jar. She had been out since first light. Her shirt stuck between her shoulder blades. Her jeans had the morning's dust in the knees. She was small in the row and she knew it; she had always been small. The work had gone into her anyway. It was in her thighs when she stepped over a rut. It was in the lift of her ass when she bent for a stone and pitched it toward the fence. She did not think about her body except as a thing that got tired and then went again.

The hens were louder than the field. She cut back toward the house with the bucket knocking her knee and the wind coming in off the open land, steady, smelling like dry grass and the little cold that still lived under the porch. The henhouse door stuck. She put her shoulder to it and it gave. Inside it was dim and full of the same smell it always had. She moved down the boxes. Warm eggs. Straw. A brown hen pecked once at her wrist and she said, "Quit," without heat, and lifted the bird aside with the back of her hand.

Eighteen felt the same as seventeen in a henhouse.

She had turned it in July. Esther had made a cake that sank in the middle and Estel had said she was grown now, which had not changed the buckets or the hour she got out of bed. Grown, on this place, meant you kept doing the work and you started sitting when the county men came about seed. There had been no county men this year. There had been weather. Too much water when the seed wanted to take, then a stretch of heat that cooked what had taken, then wind that laid the weak parts down and left them. Estel had walked the same edge she was walking now, day after day, and then he had gone to the enclosed porch and sat with the ledger and not come in for supper until the food was cold.

May came out of the henhouse with the bucket against her hip. The house sat low and white, two stories, the paint going along the north side. Kitchen window lit. Esther's shape in it. Beyond the kitchen the porch screened in, and the gravel drive running out to the county road like a pale scar.

She went in through the mudroom and toed her boots off because Esther would say it if she did not. The kitchen was warm and smelled like coffee and onions started in a pan. Esther stood at the stove in a housedress with a sweater over it,

hair pinned up the way she pinned it every morning. She looked at May’s face first, then at the bucket.

“Set them there,” Esther said. “You’re pink. Sit down before you fall over.”

“I’m not going to fall over.”

“I didn’t ask if you were. I said sit.”

May set the bucket on the sideboard and sat anyway, because her mother had that voice and because her legs had started to shake the small shake they did when she came in out of a long morning. The chair was the same chair. The table was the same table, pale from years of cloths and elbows. She put her hands on it and saw the dirt in the lines of her knuckles. Her shirt had come untucked on one side. She pushed it back in. The cloth dragged over her stomach and she felt, without meaning to, the heat her own skin was putting off.

Esther poured coffee and set it down. “Your father’s on the porch.”

“Still?”

“He got on with them again at six.”

May wrapped both hands around the cup. “The Architecture.”

“That’s what he said.”

May had heard the word all her life the way you heard about weather in other counties. Superintelligence. The Architecture. Units in other people’s fields. Neighbors who had sold their equipment and kept a house and a garden and let the rest go to lights that moved at night. Estel had not wanted it. Esther had not wanted it. They had said May should learn the old ways so she would have them. She had learned them. The old ways were in her shoulders this morning.

“Is he going to let them come?” May said.

Esther turned the onions. “He already asked. Asking is letting, once you do it.”

The porch door opened. Estel came in with the ledger under his arm and his hat still on. He was a long man, thinner this year. He took the hat off when he saw May at the table, which was the thing he did when he remembered she was not a hired boy.

“They’re sending somebody,” he said.

May looked at him.

“Today,” he said. “A liaison. They don’t send the field units first. They send a person. Or what they use for a person.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you should wash your face,” Esther said, not unkind. “If someone’s coming to this house, they’re going to see you.”

May did not get up at once. “Are they coming about the wheat.”

“They’re coming about the place,” Estel said. He set the ledger on the table and stood with his hands on the back of a chair. “I told them the season. I told them what we can still deliver by hand. I told them I have a daughter who does the work and I want her taught whatever they’re going to put on this land, so she isn’t standing in the yard like a fool when the lights show up.”

May’s face went hot. “I wouldn’t stand in the yard like a fool.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Estel said. “That’s why I said your name.”

He went to the sink and ran the water and drank from his palm. Esther put a plate in front of May without asking if she wanted it: eggs, the last of the bread, a slice of the hard cheese they still made. May ate because the morning had taken it out of her. She could feel her mother watching the road through the window even while she watched the pan.

“What does a liaison look like,” May said.

Estel wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. “They said humanlike. A woman, from the way they talked. Name’s Ameta. She’ll stay in the spare room. She’ll walk the fields with us. She’ll tell us what they can put out there and what it costs us in the old work.”

“Costs us,” May said.

“The work goes,” Estel said. “That’s the bargain. We keep the house. We keep the garden if we want it. We deliver through them instead of the truck. I don’t like it. I like eating next winter.”

May looked at her hands. The work going sat in her the way a weather change sat in her, not as an idea, as a weight. She had been the one in the rows. She had liked being the one in the rows, even when she complained to the hens.

Esther said, “Eat. Then go wash. I won’t have you meeting anybody with field on your mouth.”

May ate. She carried her plate to the sink and ran water and stood there a minute with her wrists in it because the cold felt good. Then she went upstairs.

The upstairs hall was narrow and always a little dim in the morning. Her room was at the end. The spare room was the other door, closed, the bed in there made up with the quilt Esther used for company that almost never came. May went into her own room and shut the door and took off the work shirt. The air in the room was cooler. She stood in her thin undershirt and jeans and looked at herself in the small mirror because her mother had said someone was going to see her.

Blonde hair coming out of its tie. Face pink across the nose. Mouth ordinary. She was modest in the chest and small through the waist and the jeans sat on her hips the way they had to sit when you had an ass that work had put a curve in. She turned half away from the glass and then back. She did not know what a liaison would look at. She pulled a cleaner shirt off the chair, a worn blue one that buttoned, and put it on and tucked it in and went down the hall to the bathroom.

The tub was dry. The window looked at the north field. She washed her face and her neck and the dust off her throat and stood with the towel in both hands listening. Gravel carried sound. There was no sound yet.

She went back down.

They waited without calling it waiting. Esther moved between stove and table. Estel took the ledger to the porch and brought it back and did not open it. May stood in the mudroom door and then at the kitchen window and then she went out onto the step in her socks until Esther told her to put her boots back on if she was going to stand in the air like that.

May sat on the step and pulled the boots on. The leather was warm from the kitchen. She laced them and left the laces a little loose because her hands were not steady and she did not want anyone to see her fuss with a knot.

Wind. A bird she did not bother to name. The thin wheat moving.

Then the sound on the county road, high and even, not a truck.

May stood up.

The car that turned onto their gravel was pale and closed and did not have a face on the front the way the old trucks did. It came in slow, quiet as a closed room, and stopped twenty feet from the step. Dust lifted and hung and fell. May’s heart had gone up into her throat for no good reason. She wiped her palms on her jeans.

The door opened.

The woman who stepped out was taller than May by a head. Brunette. Hair in two braids that lay forward over her shoulders like she had done them for work and not for town. Denim overalls, clean. A flannel shirt under them, the sleeves rolled once. Workboots that had not yet taken this drive’s dust. She stood up out of the car as if the car had been a chair and looked at the house first, then at the north field, then at May on the step.

May felt looked at all the way through her clothes.

The woman’s face was ordinary-pretty in a way May did not have a word for. Young. Twenty-something, if you went by the skin. Calm mouth. Eyes that did not

flick away when May did not speak.

Estel came out behind May. Esther stayed in the door.

“You Estel Chilton,” the woman said.

“I am.”

“Ameta. The Architecture sent me about the place.” Her voice was low and plain, like a neighbor who had already been down this road. “This is May.”

She did not ask it like a question. She looked at May when she said the name.

“Yes,” May said. Her own voice came out smaller than she wanted. “That’s me.”

Ameta’s gaze went once, without hurry, from May’s boots to her face. It snagged nowhere long enough for May to call it rude. It still landed. May felt it on her thighs and on the front of her shirt and on her mouth.

“You been out already,” Ameta said.

“Since light.”

“Good. I want to see it while the day’s honest.” She nodded at Esther. “Ma’am.”

“Esther,” Esther said. “You come in. Nobody stands on my gravel and talks business until they’ve had coffee.”

Ameta shut the car. There was no driver. May looked at the empty front and then away because looking made her feel like a child. Ameta took one bag from the back, a soft dark thing that did not look like a salesman’s case, and followed Estel in. May came last. In the mudroom Ameta glanced at the line of boots and stepped out of her own without being told. Her socks were plain. Her feet were long. May looked at them and then at the wall.

In the kitchen Ameta set the bag down by the chair Estel pointed at and sat. She did not sprawl. She sat like a person who intended to get up again soon. Esther poured. Ameta wrapped her hands around the cup the way May had, and May saw that the hands were clean and strong and had no splits in the fingers. No barn marks. No burn from a kettle. They were the wrong hands for overalls, except the overalls fit.

“You know this county,” Estel said.

“I know the maps and the last ten years of weather on this stretch,” Ameta said. “I know what you planted and what came up. I know you delivered by your own truck through June. I know July and August did not help you.” She looked at May again. “I know May does the rows and the hens and half the garden. That’s why I’m talking in front of her.”

May sat because her mother pointed at the chair. Their knees were not close. The table was not that big. May could have reached the flannel if she had been a fool.

Estel opened the ledger. “Numbers are in here. I can say them without it. We are short. We can run the house through spring if nothing else goes. After that I am selling what I said I would not sell, or I am calling you people a second time with my hat in my hand. I already called once. I would rather do the thing clean.”

“Clean is better,” Ameta said. She did not look at the ledger yet. “The Architecture doesn’t need you to be ashamed of the call. The weather did what weather does. You kept this place human longer than most. That’s not a mark against you.”

Esther made a sound that was not quite a laugh. “Tell that to him at night.”

“I will if it comes up,” Ameta said.

May watched her mouth when she talked. The words were ordinary. The calm in them was not. Nobody who came down their drive talked like the matter was already held.

“What do you put on the land,” May said.

Ameta turned her head. The braids moved on the flannel. “Field units first. They’ll take the wheat that’s left and the ground that’s empty. They’ll do next season. They’re not like me. They’re simpler. You will see them from that window. They don’t come in the house.”

“And you,” May said.

“I stay. I walk you through the change. I teach you the logistics so you aren’t guessing. Crop. Water. What the units take off your hands. What you still touch if you want to.” A pause, small. “The Architecture asked me to teach May, specifically. Estel put your name in the request.”

May looked at her father. Estel was looking at the ledger as if the page had moved.

“She’s grown,” Estel said. “She should know how the new work runs. I don’t want her ignorant on her own place.”

“I’m not ignorant.”

“Not about hens,” Estel said. “About the rest of the world you are, and that was our doing. I’m trying to undo a piece of it before it undoes us.”

Ameta drank coffee. “I won’t rush her. I won’t talk over her. I need her in the fields with me and in this kitchen when we talk about the house. The units can replace a row. They can’t tell me what this family will live with.”

May’s throat felt tight. “What do I have to do.”

“What you’ve been doing, until we take it off you,” Ameta said. “Then you do the next thing I show you. That’s all today is. Today I look. You tell me when I’m

wrong about a gate or a wet spot. You eat your supper. I sleep in the spare room.”

Esther said, “The bed’s made. There’s a towel on it. Bathroom is at the end of the hall. We don’t have two. You’ll have to live with that.”

“I can live with that,” Ameta said.

May thought about the bathroom with the north window and the chipped tub and a stranger’s braid hanging in that mirror. She looked at her cup.

They talked numbers. Estel said them. Ameta said them back without writing anything down that May could see. Yield. Moisture from the bad stretch. What a truck run used to take. What a delivery through Architecture would look like. May heard herself answering when Ameta asked how many hens, how far the north fence, whether the garden well had ever gone dry in August. Her voice steadied when the questions were work. Ameta watched her while she answered. Not smiling much. Present. Once May reached for the word and Ameta waited, and the waiting made May’s ears hot because it felt like being given room and being studied in the same second.

“You’re strong for your size,” Ameta said, in the middle of the fence question, as if it belonged there.

May’s hands closed on her knees under the table. “I do the work.”

“I can see that.”

It was not a compliment the way town people gave compliments. It was a note. May felt it land on her thighs anyway.

Esther set out lunch because she would not have a guest on coffee. Bread, the rest of the onions, cold chicken from the night before. Ameta ate like a person who did not need to but knew the rule of a table. She thanked Esther without fuss. When Estel went back to the porch with the ledger, Ameta stood and took her own plate to the sink.

May stood too. “I do those.”

“You did the morning,” Ameta said. “I’ve got this.”

“It’s my sink.”

Ameta looked at her over her shoulder. The overall strap made a clean line. “You can dry if you want to stand here. You don’t have to wash.”

May wanted to take the plate out of her hands and also did not want to put her dirty knuckles next to those clean ones. She took the towel off the hook. Ameta ran the water, found the soap without asking, washed the plates with a neat turning motion. Her sleeves were already rolled. Water beaded on her wrist. May

dried what she was given. Their fingers met on the edge of a plate once. Ameta's skin was the temperature of a person who had been sitting in a kitchen. May pulled back too fast and then hated that she had.

"You don't have to flinch," Ameta said, still facing the sink. "I'm here to help. That's the job."

"I'm not flinching."

"All right."

Esther, at the stove, did not turn around. May could see her mother's mouth in profile. It had gone soft. Pleased, already, that something in her kitchen was being done for her daughter.

When the last cup was up, May had nothing in her hands. The empty feeling came back, the one from the field when the row ended. She folded the towel and put it on the hook and did not know where to stand.

Ameta picked up her bag. "Show me the room."

May led her upstairs. The hall felt narrower with a taller body behind her. She was aware of her own ass in the jeans on the stairs and hated that she was aware of it. She opened the spare room door. The bed. The quilt. One window on the drive. A chest of drawers that stuck. The towel Esther had promised, folded at the foot.

Ameta set the bag on the chest. She looked at the bed and the window and the hook on the back of the door.

"This is good," she said. "Thank you."

May stayed in the doorway. "Bathroom's that one. It sticks if you pull too hard. You have to lift a little."

"I'll lift a little."

Ameta took off the overall straps and let them hang, still in the flannel, and May should have left. She did not, for one second too long. The flannel opened at the throat. Ameta's collarbone was clean. No tan line. May's mouth went dry in a way the field had never done to her.

Ameta noticed. She did not make it larger than it was.

"I'm going to walk the north edge with your father after he comes off the porch," Ameta said. "You can come or you can take an hour. You've already done a morning."

"I'll come."

"All right. Drink water first. Your face is still up from the sun."

May nodded. She left the doorway. In the hall she stood with her back to the wall and breathed once, quiet, and went downstairs for the water.

The afternoon was the north field and Estel’s voice and Ameta’s questions about drainage and seed and where the wet had stood. May answered when it was her place to answer. She walked a step off Ameta’s side and watched the taller woman’s boots take the ruts without fuss. The overalls moved on her. The braids did not come loose. Once Ameta stopped and crouched and put her fingers in the dirt and rubbed it and smelled it, and May crouched too without being asked, close enough to see the clean nails take on their dust. Ameta glanced at her, near, and May looked at the ground.

“You know this soil,” Ameta said.

“I ought to.”

“That’s what I need.”

They came in when the light went long and gold and the wind turned a little cold. Esther had supper. Talk at the table was units and timing and which outbuilding could take a charge plate, which was a thing May had not known was a thing. She listened. She ate. Her knee bounced once under the table and she stopped it. Ameta’s attention rested on her when she spoke and lifted when she did not, and the lifting was almost worse, because then May wanted it back and had no decent reason.

After supper May rose for the dishes by habit

Ameta was already at the sink.

“I said I do those,” May said.

Estel had gone to the porch with a last cup. Esther was wiping the table.

Ameta held out a hand, not touching her. “Give me the pan.”

May had the pan. It was heavy and still warm. She stood there with it.

“May,” Ameta said, mild. “I’ve got it.”

May let her take it. The weight left her fingers. For a second her hands stayed in the air as if the pan were still there. She put them on the back of a chair.

“Sit if you’re done,” Esther said. “Or go on up. You look worn through.”

May did not sit. She stayed in the kitchen and dried again because drying was something. Ameta washed. The window over the sink held the last of the field. May could see herself in the glass, small, blonde hair coming down, and Ameta beside her, taller, braids, flannel, doing May’s work as if it had always been allowed.

“Thank you,” May said, because the silence had gone on too long.

Ameta rinsed a plate. “You’re welcome.”

That was all.

When the sink was empty Ameta dried her hands on the same towel May had used at noon. “I’m going up. I start early. So do you. We’ll take the rotation tomorrow, if that suits your father.”

“It will,” May said.

“Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Ameta took her boots from the mudroom in one hand and went upstairs in her socks. The stairs creaked in the familiar places. The spare room door opened and shut.

May stood in the kitchen with Esther.

Esther said, “She’s mannered. That’s more than I expected from a machine in a shirt.” “She looks like a person.”

“She does. That’s the point of sending that kind, I suppose.” Esther hung the cloth. “You all right.”

“Yes.”

“Then go to bed. Don’t lie there picking it apart until midnight. She’s here. The place is going to change. You can be tired about it in the morning.”

May went up. In the hall she heard water start in the bathroom and stop, a short wash, nothing that used the tub. She waited until the bathroom door opened and closed and the spare room took Ameta back. Then May used the bathroom herself. The mirror still held a little steam. The soap was wet. She washed her face and did not look at her own mouth for long. She went to her room and shut the door and took off the clean shirt and the jeans and stood a minute in her undershirt and underwear in the dim, feeling the day on her skin, the places the jeans had held her, the place under her breasts where sweat had dried. She put on the night shirt that came to her thighs and got into her own bed.

The house made its night sounds. Porch. Wind. A pipe. Then, through the wall, the spare bed taking weight.

May lay on her side facing that wall.

She thought of the car on the gravel. She thought of the look that had gone from her boots to her face without hurrying. She thought of the pan leaving her hands. She put her palm flat on the sheet where her stomach was and left it there, not doing anything, just holding the fact of herself in the dark while another body slept twenty feet away in overalls that were probably folded on a chair.

She did not call out.

She listened until the house went quiet, and then she listened to that.

Chapter 2

Rotation

May woke to the spare room already empty.

The house had the early sound it always had — a pipe, Esther in the kitchen, wind working the north screen — and under that, nothing from the other side of the wall. May sat up in the night shirt and listened anyway. She put her feet on the floorboards. They were cold. She dressed in yesterday's jeans and a different shirt, the gray one with the collar gone soft, and tied her hair back without looking long at the glass. Her face in it was the same face. She still felt the pan leaving her hands.

Downstairs Ameta was at the table with coffee, overalls on, flannel buttoned, braids done again as if she had slept in them and they had not come loose. Estel's hat was on the hook. He was on the porch with the ledger. Esther stood at the stove.

"There you are," Esther said. "Sit. You're walking the place with her today. Your father already said."

May sat. Ameta looked at her over the cup, calm, morning-plain.

"You sleep all right," Ameta said.

"Yes."

"Good. We'll take the rotation while the light's flat. I want your voice on what you rest and what you don't. Maps don't tell me which gate you hate."

May wrapped her hands around the cup Esther set down. "I don't hate a gate."

"Then tell me which one sticks," Ameta said.

Esther put plates out. Eggs again. Toast. Ameta thanked her and ate. May ate because she was going to be on her feet until the light went. Under the table her knee wanted to bounce and she made it stop. Ameta's hands on the cup were the same clean hands. May looked at them and then at her own, which already had a thin scratch across the knuckle from the henhouse yesterday.

Estel came through and took toast in his fingers. "West first," he said. "Then the south strip. I have a man from the co-op on the line at noon. You two keep walking without me if I'm not back."

"We will," Ameta said.

May laced her boots in the mudroom. Ameta stood beside her and stepped into her own. Close in that small room May smelled soap that was not theirs and clean cotton. Ameta leaned down and tightened a lace May had left loose.

“You’ll blister,” Ameta said.

May held still. Ameta’s knuckles brushed the inside of her ankle through the sock. It was nothing. It stayed in May’s skin after Ameta stood up.

“I don’t blister easy,” May said.

“You will today. It’s a long loop.”

They went out into the gravel and then off it, Estel with them as far as the west gate. The morning was cool on May’s mouth and already bright on the thin wheat. Ameta let Estel talk first — the west acres, what had drowned, what had baked, the corner that always held water even in a dry year. Ameta asked the questions that belonged to a person who had read a map and wanted the ground to correct it. Estel answered. May said the thing about the corner when Estel glanced at her.

“She knows it,” Estel said. “She’s the one who goes in after a rain and comes out filthy.”

Ameta looked at May. “Show me where you step.”

Estel left them at the gate with his hand once on the post. “Noon,” he said. “Don’t let her walk you in circles.”

“I won’t,” Ameta said.

Then it was the two of them and the west field.

May went first because she knew the path along the fence. Ameta came at her shoulder, taller, not crowding. The overalls made a soft sound when she stepped. May found herself watching the hands without deciding to. Ameta walked with them easy at her sides and then used them — lifted a strand of wire, held it for May, let it down. The wire left a gray line on Ameta’s palm. Ameta rubbed it off with her thumb and kept walking.

“You rotate how,” Ameta said.

May had to think in sentences. “Wheat. Then we used to put the beans if we had seed. Then wheat again. Some years we left a strip. Dad doesn’t like a strip sitting. He says idle ground is a waste. This year the idle happened whether he liked it or not.”

“The idle is the only reason you have anything left to talk about,” Ameta said. “Ground that works every season without a rest is ground that stops. Units will rest it on a schedule whether it looks lazy or not.”

May glanced at her. “Dad won’t like hearing lazy.”

“I didn’t say lazy to him. I said it to you.” Ameta stopped at a place where the wheat gave out and the dirt showed. She crouched. “Come here.”

May crouched. Their knees pointed at the same clod. Ameta put her fingers in and broke it. May did the same because that was what you did. Their hands were close enough that May felt the warmth off Ameta’s wrist.

“See the color,” Ameta said. “That’s tired. You can plant tired ground. You just don’t get to act surprised.”

“I wasn’t surprised,” May said. “I was out here.”

Ameta turned her head. In the crouch they were almost the same height. May could see the seam of the flannel at her throat and the place the braid started behind her ear.

“I know you were,” Ameta said. “That’s why you’re the one I want talking, not just walking.”

She stood and put her hand out, not as a courtesy from town, as a brace. May took it before she thought. Ameta pulled her up. The grip was dry and sure and lasted one second longer than the standing required. May’s palm stayed open after.

They walked.

Ameta talked rotation the way Estel talked weather — plain, with the next season already in the sentence. What would follow wheat if the units took the rows. What you did not put back in the same ground. How a rest year was not an empty year. May answered with the names of the strips the way her family named them, not with numbers. The south strip. The low piece. The good corner. Ameta used May’s names back to her without writing them down.

At a washout May stepped wrong and the dirt sloughed. Ameta’s hand landed at her waist, firm, fingers on the shirt over the top of her jeans, and held her until her boot found the hard place.

“All right?” Ameta said.

May’s face was hot. The hand was gone. She could still feel the shape of it.

“Yes.”

“Watch that lip. It’ll take an ankle.”

“I know the lip.”

“You still stepped in it.”

May almost smiled and did not. “You sound like my mother.”

“Your mother would have said it louder.”

They reached the windbreak at midday, a thin line of old trees that threw a broken shade. May sat on the ground because her legs had started the small

shake again. Ameta sat on the fallen trunk, then moved down onto the dirt across from her, close enough that their boots nearly touched. She took a bottle from the bib of the overalls and drank and held it out.

May drank. The water was cold. A drop ran from the mouth of the bottle onto her lower lip. She wiped it with her wrist.

Ameta watched that and did not remark on it.

“Give me your hand,” Ameta said.

May looked at her.

“The scratched one,” Ameta said. “You keep opening it on the wire.”

May gave it. Ameta held her fingers as if she were looking at a tool. Her thumb went over the knuckle, light, then a little firmer, checking. May felt it in her mouth. She sat very still.

“It’s nothing,” May said.

“It’s dirty.” Ameta poured a cap of water over it and wiped the grit with the edge of her own flannel, pulled loose from the overall. The cloth was warm from her body. It dragged across May’s skin. “Keep it clean or it sits on you all week.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Ameta did not let go at once. She turned May’s hand and looked at the palm, the work pads, the short nails. “These are the hands I need on this place while we change it. I don’t need them split.”

May swallowed. “You talk like they’re yours.”

Ameta’s eyes lifted. “They’re yours. I’m just asking to use what you already know.”

She set May’s hand back on May’s knee, careful, as if it might tip. Then she rolled May’s right sleeve two turns without asking, because the gray shirt had slipped and the sun had found May’s wrist.

“You’re pink there,” Ameta said. “You burn and you don’t notice till night.”

May looked at her own forearm. The sleeve sat where Ameta had put it. “You notice a lot.”

“That’s the job.”

They sat in the shade and ate what Esther had wrapped — bread, cheese, an apple split with Ameta’s pocket knife. Ameta cut May’s half smaller without making a show of it and put it in her palm. Their fingers touched again. May said thank you and ate and watched Ameta’s hands on the knife, on the apple, on the dirt when she braced to stand.

The south strip was worse than the west. May said so. Ameta walked it anyway, counting something in her head that she did not share, stopping May once with two fingers on her elbow.

“Here,” Ameta said. “This is where I’d rest first. Tell me why I’m wrong.”

May stood in the thin crop and looked. The ground sloped. The weak wheat had laid down in a pattern she knew. “You’re not wrong. Dad planted it because it looks like a field from the road. It isn’t a field this year.”

“Good.”

“Good I said he was wrong?”

“Good you said the ground instead of the road.” Ameta’s mouth moved, almost a smile. “We’ll get along.”

May’s chest did a stupid thing. Her heart had leapt. She walked.

By the time they turned back toward the house the light had gone long again. May’s shirt was stuck to her. She could feel the jeans holding her ass and her thighs the way they did after hours, seam in places she never thought about in the kitchen. Ameta looked as she had at breakfast — uncreased, a little dust on the boots, one smear of dirt on the clean wrist from May’s knuckle. May wanted, without a decent sentence for it, to see that smear stay.

Estel was not on the loop. They came in off the gravel and Ameta stopped May on the step with a touch to her shoulder, two fingers brushing chaff out of the hair at May’s temple.

May froze.

“You were carrying the field home in your hair,” Ameta said. “Esther would have picked it off you at the door and given you a look.”

“I can pick my own hair.”

“I know.” Ameta showed her the pale bit on her fingertip and flicked it into the wind. “Go on in.”

The kitchen smelled like coffee and pot roast that had been on since noon. Esther looked them both over.

“You’re red,” she said to May. “Wash. Supper’s near.”

May went up. The bathroom still stuck; she lifted the door. She washed her face and her hands and the wrist Ameta had rolled, and she stood for a breath with the towel against her mouth. When she came out, the spare room door was open.

She did not mean to look. She looked.

The bag was unpacked into the sticking drawers. The quilt was turned down neat. Overall straps hung on the hook. A second flannel, dark, was folded on the chair. The towel Esther had left was damp and hung on the chest. The room smelled like the soap that was not theirs. It looked lived in, as if Ameta had been there a week and not a night.

Ameta came up the stairs behind her. May stepped aside too fast.

“You can come in,” Ameta said. “It’s a spare room, not a vault.”

“I was going down.”

“Then go down. I’ll change my shirt and follow.”

May went down. She sat at the table with Esther and drank water and did not talk about the folded flannel. Estel came in from the porch and wanted the south strip in sentences. May gave them. Ameta came down in the dark flannel, overalls still on, braids still done, and took the chair across from May and gave Estel the same strip with the rest year already in it. Estel argued once, out of habit. Ameta did not raise her voice. She put the ground in front of him until he grunted and cut his meat.

“She knows the county,” Estel said to Esther, as if Ameta were not there.

“I can hear,” Ameta said, mild. “May knows the county. I know how to listen to her.”

May looked at her plate.

After supper Ameta stood. May stood with her, habit, and Ameta shook her head once.

“Not tonight,” Ameta said. “You walked me six miles of tired ground. Sit with your mother. I’ll do the pan.”

May sat. It felt like being told she was a guest in her own kitchen. Esther glanced at her and then at Ameta’s back at the sink and did not object. The water ran. Ameta’s hands moved in it, sure, the way they had moved on the wire and on May’s knuckle and on the apple.

Esther said, quiet, “You all right with her.”

May watched the flannel. “She knows what she’s doing.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

May’s ears were hot. “Yes. I’m all right.”

Ameta did not turn. She might have heard. She finished the pan and set it in the rack and dried her hands.

“Same time in the morning,” she said to the room. “I’ll take laundry off you if it’s in the baskets. No sense May bending for clothes after a day like this.”

Esther’s mouth went soft again. “There’s two baskets in the mudroom. I won’t fight you.” May said nothing. The idea of Ameta’s hands in her shirts sat in her like the hand at her waist had sat in her — too clear.

Ameta hung the towel. “Good night, Esther. Estel.” A look at May, even, not long. “May.”

“Good night,” May said.

Ameta went up. The spare room door shut.

May stayed in the kitchen until Esther told her to go to bed before she slid out of the chair. On the stairs she put her palm on the wall and felt the day’s work in her thighs and the places Ameta had touched — ankle, fingers, waist, elbow, temple — as if they had been marked with something that would not wash. In her room she undressed to the night shirt and got into her own bed and lay facing the wall.

Through it she heard the spare bed take weight, and then nothing, and then the small sound of a drawer. Lived in. On the place. Better at the ground than May had wanted a stranger to be.

May closed her hands on the sheet and left them there, empty, the way they had been when the pan went, and listened to someone else be competent in the next room until she slept.

Chapter 3

Laundry

The baskets were in the mudroom where Esther had left them, two of them, one already leaning.

May came down in her jeans and the blue shirt from the first day and found Ameta there ahead of her, overalls on, sleeves rolled, braids tied back off her neck. She had the first basket on her hip as if the house had given it to her with the spare room.

May stopped in the kitchen doorway.

“That’s ours,” she said.

Ameta looked at her, not startled. “I told your mother last night. She didn’t fight me.”

“I do the wash on Wednesdays.”

“It’s Wednesday,” Ameta said. “You walked six miles yesterday. You don’t need to bend over a tub for shirts.”

Esther was at the stove and did not turn. “Let her have the baskets, May. There’s coffee.”

May did not take the coffee. She came into the mudroom in her socks and put her hand on the second basket. It held her jeans, two work shirts, the gray one with the soft collar, socks rolled into pairs that were not pairs anymore, and, under the shirts, the plain underwear she wore every day and did not think about until someone else’s hands were going to touch it.

Her face went hot.

Ameta’s eyes followed the hand, not the clothes. “You can come to the line if you want the air. You don’t have to carry.”

“I can carry my own clothes.”

“I know you can.” Ameta shifted the first basket. “I’m asking you not to.”

May stood there with her arms a little out from her sides, no basket, no pan, no egg bucket. The mudroom was too small for how useless she felt. She let go of the wicker.

“The line’s on the south side,” she said. “Pins are in the tin.”

“I saw the tin.”

They went out through the kitchen. Esther glanced at May’s empty hands and then at Ameta and her mouth had that soft look again, the one from the sink. May

hated it a little and did not say so.

The south side of the house held the morning. The line ran from the porch post to the first pole by the garden, sagging in the middle the way it always had. Ameta set the basket in the grass and shook out Estel's work shirt with two snaps that sounded like weather. She hung it straight. She did not ask which pin. She knew enough.

May picked up a pair of her own jeans because standing with nothing made her arms feel wrong. Ameta took them out of her hands the way she had taken the pan.

"May."

"What."

"Go see the hens. Then come back if you want. This is not a test."

May's throat was tight. "It feels like you're taking the house apart."

Ameta hung the jeans. The denim looked smaller on the line than it felt on May's body. "I'm taking the bending out of your morning. The house is still yours. The units aren't here yet. When they come, they'll take the rows. Not the upstairs. Not your room."

"When."

"Soon. Your father and I will talk it at noon. I want you at the table."

May nodded once, sharp, and went to the henhouse because she still knew how to do that.

The hens did not care that her hands were empty of laundry. She collected. She talked to them without words that mattered. She stood in the dim and smelled straw and told herself it was an ordinary Wednesday. It was not. Through the henhouse door she could see Ameta at the line, taller than the sag, shaking out a small worn undershirt that May knew was hers. Ameta snapped it once and hung it by the straps. She did not hold it up or study it. She treated it like a shirt. May still felt it in her stomach, watching her own undershirt in those hands.

She stayed with the hens longer than she needed.

When she came back, both baskets were empty and the line was full. Her jeans. Her shirts. Estel's. Esther's housedress. The underwear hanging in a modest row that the breeze moved. Ameta was carrying the empty baskets toward the porch.

"Kitchen next," Ameta said. "Esther's letting me do the heavy. You can sit."

"I don't sit in the morning."

"You can walk the garden, then. Pull what you want for supper. Leave the sink."

May went to the garden because arguing in the yard felt like being a child. She pulled carrots. She stood too long over the beans. The quiet of not having the wash was a physical quiet. It sat in her shoulders. She kept starting to wipe her palms on her jeans and finding nothing to wipe off.

At noon Estel came in from the porch with the ledger and Ameta washed her hands at the sink without being asked and Esther put food down and pointed May at a chair.

“Units,” Estel said, once they were eating. “I want it said while May’s here.”

Ameta set her fork down. “They’ll come on a truck that isn’t a truck. They’ll offload west of the henhouse so they don’t cut your gravel to pieces. They’re not like me. Simpler. No faces worth naming. Work lights. They take rows. They take what a body used to walk. They do not come in this house.”

May looked at her plate. “How many.”

“Enough for what you planted and what you didn’t get,” Ameta said. “You won’t need to count them. You’ll see them from this window. That’s the point of putting them where Esther makes coffee.”

Esther said, “I don’t want lights in my kitchen.”

“You won’t have lights in your kitchen,” Ameta said. “You’ll have lights in the wheat. Different thing.”

Estel tapped the ledger. “Charge plate. You said the west outbuilding.”

“West outbuilding,” Ameta said. “Dry. I looked at it yesterday from the gate. I’ll walk it with you after we eat. May can come if she wants the look of the thing before it hums.”

May said, “I’ll come.”

Estel glanced at her. “You don’t have to like it.”

“I didn’t say I liked it.”

Ameta’s mouth moved, not quite a smile. “Good. Like is not required. Knowing where they stand is.”

They talked timing. A day. Two. The Architecture did not need Estel to sign a paper at the table; he had already called. Ameta spoke as if the units were weather that had a date. May listened and felt the south strip leaving her feet before anything had arrived. She ate. She had nothing to clear when the plates were done; Ameta was already standing.

“Sit,” Ameta said to her, mild, in front of her parents.

May sat. Esther did not object. Estel took his hat and went to the west outbuilding and Ameta told May she could follow in a minute, after she drank the

rest of her water.

May drank. Her hands looked wrong around the glass.

The west outbuilding was dim and smelled like old oil and burlap. Estel showed Ameta the wall. Ameta put her palm on the wood and nodded and said it would do. May stood in the doorway with her arms crossed and then uncrossed them because she did not know where they belonged if they were not carrying.

Ameta turned and saw the crossed-then-not.

“Come here,” she said.

May came.

Ameta took May’s wrist, the same one she had washed on the south strip, and turned it as if she were checking the scratch. It was closing. Ameta’s thumb rested on the pulse.

“You’re holding yourself like you’re waiting to be handed a job,” Ameta said. “There isn’t one in here. That’s all right.”

May pulled her wrist back, not far. “I don’t like standing.”

“I know.” Ameta let her go. “Walk with us anyway.”

They walked the outside of the outbuilding and the edge of the west field. Ameta pointed where the units would line up without drawing in the dirt. Estel asked about night noise. Ameta said some. Not like animals. Estel grunted. May watched Ameta’s hands when she pointed. Clean. Sure. Already belonging to the place more than May wanted them to.

In the afternoon Esther lay down the way she sometimes did when her back was in it, and the kitchen became Ameta’s. May came in from the garden with carrots and Ameta took the carrots and the knife and the board.

“I can cut those.”

“You can keep me company,” Ameta said. “Sit on the stool.”

May sat on the stool like a girl. The knife moved. Carrots fell in even coins. Ameta’s braids hung forward when she bent. The overall strap made that clean line again. May watched and felt the quiet press on her mouth.

“What do I do when they’re in the rows,” May said.

“You learn the new logistics. You walk with me. You tell me when the ground doesn’t match the map. You let the house work leave you.” Ameta glanced up. “You still eat. You still sleep in your room. You still talk at this table.”

“That’s not a day’s work.”

“It will feel like a day’s work at first, having no day’s work.” Ameta set the knife down. “You’re allowed to hate the quiet. You’re not allowed to snatch the pan back just to have weight.”

May’s eyes stung and she was angry at that. “You don’t know what it feels like.”

Ameta looked at her for a long second. “I know what you look like when your hands are empty. That’s enough for today.”

She went back to the carrots. May sat. She put her palms on her thighs and left them there so they would have a place.

Toward late day the line came in. May went out to help and Ameta let her take the pins and not the clothes, which was a compromise so small it almost made May laugh. Dry shirts. Dry jeans. The undershirt. The underwear. Ameta folded as she went, against her own chest, neat stacks. May carried the pins in the tin and followed her into the mudroom and then upstairs because that was where the stacks were going.

The upstairs hall was dim. May’s door was closed. Ameta stopped in front of it with May’s clothes in her arms.

“This is you,” Ameta said.

May opened the door. Her room looked the way she had left it — narrow bed, chair, the night shirt half on the quilt. She stood in the doorway and did not take the stack.

Ameta waited.

“I can put them in the drawer,” May said.

“I know.” Ameta did not move past her without being let. “May. Step in or take them. Don’t stand in the frame like you don’t live here.”

May stepped in. Her arms still felt wrong. She held them out.

Ameta put the stack into them. Shirts. Jeans. Socks. The underwear folded small on top, plain cotton, nothing to look at, and May looked at it anyway because Ameta’s hands had just left it. Their fingers brushed. May nearly dropped the lot.

Ameta steadied the stack with one hand under May’s.

“Easy.”

“I’ve got it.”

“You do.” Ameta’s gaze went over her the way it had on the gravel the first day, boots to face, only now May was in the blue shirt Ameta had not washed, the one still holding the day’s heat and the shape of her. Ameta’s eyes stopped once at the collar, once at the place the shirt tucked over May’s modest chest, once at her hands full of her own clean clothes.

May did not know where to put her arms except around the stack.

“That shirt’s due next,” Ameta said. “Leave it on the chair tonight if you want it in the morning load.”

“I only have so many.”

“I know how many you have. I just hung them.” No teasing in it. A fact. “Wear what you want. I’ll wash what you leave.”

May turned and set the stack on the chair. The underwear went in the drawer first, fast, as if speed could make it ordinary. When she turned back, Ameta was still in the doorway, one shoulder on the frame, overalls, dark flannel from yesterday, looking at May in her work clothes in her own room as if looking were part of hanging the line.

“What,” May said.

“Nothing that needs a speech.” Ameta’s voice stayed neighbor-plain. “You did all right with empty hands. I know it sat wrong. It’ll sit wrong tomorrow too. Come down for supper anyway.”

May nodded.

Ameta did not leave at once. She reached out and turned the tag in May’s collar that had been standing up all day, two fingers at the back of May’s neck, brief, warm. May’s breath went shallow. The fingers left.

“There,” Ameta said. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

She went down the hall. The spare room door stood open as she passed; the lived-in look was still in it. May stood in her own doorway with her collar lying flat and her arms hanging and the clean stack on the chair behind her.

She took off the blue shirt after a minute and put it on the chair for the morning load because Ameta had said to if she wanted. The undershirt underneath was the one she had worn all day. It stuck a little. She left it on. She went downstairs in it and the jeans, arms crossed and then not crossed, and sat at the table while Ameta set out what Esther would have set out, and Estel talked about the west wall as if a humming plate were a fence post, and May kept her hands in her lap around nothing.

After supper she did not get up for the dishes. Ameta was already there. May stayed in the chair until Esther told her she was allowed to go to bed without helping, which was a sentence May had not heard in her own house since she was small.

She went up. The stack was on the chair. The blue shirt on top of it now. She put on the night shirt and got into bed and lay facing the wall and thought of her underwear in a neat fold and her collar being turned down and the line on the

south side holding the shape of her body in the wind all afternoon without her in it.

Through the wall a drawer shut. Ameta, putting something away. Still here. Still taking the bending out of the house.

May left her hands on the sheet, empty, and did not go back down for a job that was no longer hers.

Chapter 4

Tub

The day ran long in the way a day did when there was talk instead of a full row.

They walked the west outbuilding again after breakfast. Estel wanted the wall measured with his own tape. Ameta let him. May held the end of it because holding a tape was still a job. Her blue shirt was in the morning load; she had on the gray one, already warm at the back by ten. Ameta's hands moved along the wood, knocking, listening. May watched the hands and the overall strap and the place the flannel opened when Ameta reached high.

"They'll sit off this wall," Ameta said. "Not against it. You want air."

Estel grunted. May said nothing. She had slept facing the wall again. She had woken with the clean stack on the chair and the feeling of fingers at her collar.

Midday they took the garden edge and the henhouse and the north fence because Estel said if units were coming he wanted the human walk done once more while it still counted. The sun sat on May's head. Dust took the damp at her throat and at the small of her back under the shirt. Her jeans held her thighs. By the time they came up the gravel her hair had come loose and stuck to her neck and she could smell herself, honest field smell, the kind Esther used to send her to the sink for.

Esther took one look at her in the kitchen door and said, "You're not sitting at my table like that. Wash."

"I'll use the sink," May said.

Ameta was behind her, taking her own boots off in the mudroom. "Use the tub," Ameta said. "You've got half the west field on you. A sink won't do it."

May stood in her socks on the kitchen boards. "I don't need the tub for a walk."

"You need the tub because you walked it in heat and you didn't drink enough and your hair's a week of dust," Ameta said, still neighbor-plain. "I'll run it. You eat after."

Esther had already turned back to the stove. "Listen to her. I've been telling you the same thing since you were twelve and too stubborn to get in the water."

May's face went hot. "I can run my own bath."

"You can," Ameta said. "I'm upstairs anyway. I'll lift the door."

That was the whole argument. It did not feel like an argument when it was over. May ate a piece of bread standing up because sitting in the gray shirt felt like putting the dirt on Esther's chair. Ameta drank water and watched her mouth when she chewed and then went up first. The pipes knocked. Water started.

May followed.

The upstairs hall smelled like the soap that was not theirs, faint, already in the plaster. The bathroom door was open. Steam had begun to take the mirror. Ameta stood at the tub with her hand in the pour, overalls still on, sleeves rolled, testing the temperature the way Esther tested a kettle.

The tub was old and deep, enamel chipped at the rim on the far side, the faucet stained from years of well water. The window was up an inch. North field in the last of the long light. May stopped on the threshold with her arms close to her body.

“It’s all right,” Ameta said. She did not look at May yet. “Come in and shut it enough that the heat stays.”

May came in. She did not shut the door tight. She left it the way they left it when someone else might need the hall, a hand-width. She stood on the mat. Her socks were gray at the soles.

Ameta turned the tap down to a thin stream and sat on the closed lid of the toilet, easy, as if this were the spare room.

“Boots are already off,” Ameta said. “Socks.”

May looked at her.

“You can’t get in with socks on,” Ameta said. “That’s all that is.”

May hooked her thumbs in the socks and pulled them off, one, the other. The boards were cool under her feet. She held the socks in a fist.

Ameta took them out of her hand and set them on the hamper. “Shirt next. It’s stuck to you. You’ll fight it if you wait till you’re over the water.”

May’s fingers went to the buttons of the gray shirt and stopped.

“I wash by myself.”

“I know,” Ameta said. “You’ve got grit at your collar and in your hair and along the waist of those jeans. I can get what you can’t see. That’s the practical part. You want me in the hall, you say so.”

May stood there. The water talked in the tub. She could hear Esther downstairs, a pan. She could hear her own breath, too loud in the tile.

She did not say hall.

Ameta waited a full second more, then stood up and came close enough that May had to lift her face. Ameta’s fingers went to the top button of the gray shirt and opened it. Not fast. The buttonhole was stiff with wash and dust. The second button. The third. May looked at Ameta’s throat and the clean line of the overall strap and not at her own chest as the shirt came apart. She had the undershirt on

underneath, thin, worn transparent at the seams. The air in the room touched the cloth and she felt her nipples take against it, small and sudden, from steam and from being stood in front of.

Ameta saw. She did not remark. She opened the last buttons and put her palms to May's shoulders and pushed the gray shirt back and down her arms. The cuffs caught at May's wrists. Ameta freed them, one then the other, her fingers circling the bone. The shirt dropped to the hamper.

May's arms hung. She did not know where to put them. The undershirt showed the modest shape of her, the small lift of her breasts, the tight points. She crossed her arms and uncrossed them because crossing felt like a child.

"Jeans," Ameta said.

May's hands went to her own button. They were not steady. Ameta let her get the button and the zipper. The jeans loosened on her hips and the curve of her ass sat in the open waist. May pushed. The denim was stubborn at the thighs, damp from the day, holding the muscle it had held for hours.

"Hold the sink," Ameta said.

May held the sink. Ameta went down on one knee on the mat, not ceremony, leverage, and took the jeans at the hips and worked them down. Her knuckles passed over May's

underwear, over the outside of her thighs, over the place the work had put its shape. May stared at the faucet. The jeans came to her knees. She stepped on the cuffs, clumsy, and Ameta lifted each foot free and set the jeans aside.

May was in the undershirt and the plain cotton underwear she had put on that morning, the same kind Ameta had folded and put in her hands in the doorway. The cloth between her legs was not only day's cloth. She knew that in a distant, hot way. She kept her knees together.

Ameta stayed on her knee a moment longer than the jeans required. She looked, not smiling, not looking away. May's thighs. The modest pouch of the cotton. The undershirt hem. Then Ameta stood.

"Undershirt," she said. "It'll cling when the water hits it. Better off."

May shut her eyes and opened them. She reached for the hem and Ameta's hands were already there, gathering the thin cloth, lifting. May's arms went up because that was how a shirt came off. The undershirt peeled from her damp back and from her breasts and then it was gone and she was bare from the waist up in the steam with her blonde hair coming down and her nipples drawn tight and the modest small weight of her chest moving with her breath. Ameta laid the undershirt on the hamper as if it were any shirt. Her gaze went over May's breasts once, even, and down to the waist of the underwear and back to May's

face.

“You’re all right,” Ameta said. “It’s a bath.”

May’s voice came out thin. “I know what it is.”

“Underwear.”

The word sat in the tile.

May hooked her thumbs in the waistband and did not push. Ameta stepped in, close enough that the overall bib almost touched May’s bare stomach, and set her own thumbs beside May’s.

“Together, then,” Ameta said. “You’ll snag them on yourself if you rush.”

They pushed. The cotton came down over the curve of May’s ass, over the pale skin where the jeans had sat, over the close blonde hair, over the lips of her that were already slick when the air found them. May made a sound she did not mean to make, small, shut behind her teeth. The underwear went to the floor. She stepped out. She was naked in the old bathroom with the north window and Ameta still fully dressed in work clothes, braids, boots off only.

Ameta picked up the underwear and put it with the rest. She did not hide that she had felt the damp in the cotton. She did not hold it up.

“Tub,” she said. “Before it cools.”

May turned. The enamel was wet at the rim. She lifted one foot over and the water took her ankle and then her calf. She had to use the rim with both hands. Ameta’s palm came to the small of her back, bare skin, steadying, and stayed there while May brought the other leg in and sat.

The water rose around her hips and her waist and the undersides of her breasts. It was hotter than she would have run it. It made her gasp. Her knees came up and then she made them go down because there was not room to hide in a tub that size if someone was sitting on the lid three feet away.

Ameta turned the tap off. The last drip hit May’s knee. Quiet, then. Pipes. Esther downstairs. May’s breathing.

Ameta took the cup off the shelf — the plastic one they used for hair — and filled it from the tub and looked at May.

“Head back.”

May put her head back. Her throat showed. Ameta poured. Water ran through May’s blonde hair and over her ears and down into the tub at her shoulders. A second cup. A third. Ameta’s other hand spread at the back of May’s skull, holding her so the water did not go in her face. The hold was firm. May’s mouth opened and she did not speak.

Soap, then, the household bar, worked in Ameta's palms and into May's hair. Fingers. Slow. The scratch of nails near the scalp that was not quite a scratch. May's eyes closed. Her nipples pulled tighter in the air above the water. Something low in her belly went heavy. The slick between her legs was not only bathwater; she could tell the difference even if she had no good sentence for it.

"You carry it all in your neck," Ameta said, quiet. "That's the walking."

May made a sound that might have been yes.

Ameta rinsed. Cup after cup. Hair heavy, clean, dripping down May's back when Ameta wrung it once, gently, and laid it forward over one shoulder so it would not sit in the soap.

"Lean."

May leaned. Forward. Her breasts hung modest in the water. Ameta wet the cloth and soaped it and started at May's nape, then the shoulders, the blades, the long sore places from buckets and tape and the fence. The cloth went in circles that did not hurry. When it came around May's side it brushed the outer curve of her breast and May jerked, a small full-body thing.

Ameta's hand stilled.

"Too much?"

May stared at the chipped enamel. "No."

The cloth came again, slower, over the same place, then under, lifting the small breast just enough to wash the crease, the nipple dragging the cloth, May's breath breaking. Ameta did the other side the same. Practical. Thorough. May's hands were fists on her own knees under the water.

"Arms."

May lifted them. Ameta washed from wrist to armpit, the cloth and then the bare soapy hand when the cloth bunched. May's mouth stayed open. She could feel how wet she was against the tub. She hoped the water hid it. She knew water did not hide that kind of thing from a person who was looking.

Ameta washed her stomach. The cloth dipped to the top of the hair and stopped there, then went on down the outside of one thigh, the muscular top, the inner, May's knees falling apart an inch because there was no way to be washed there and keep them locked. Ameta's wrist passed close. Not on her. Close. May made that shut sound again.

"Breathe," Ameta said.

May breathed.

The other thigh. The same care. The work that lived in her legs being handled as if it were ground Ameta already knew. Ameta lifted May’s right ankle out of the water and washed the foot, the arch, the toes, and set it back. The left. Then she wrung the cloth and looked at May’s face.

“You have field on you still,” Ameta said. “Lower. I can do it or you can. You pick.”

May’s voice was almost not a voice. “You.”

Ameta nodded once, as if May had said which gate stuck. She soaped her hand, not the cloth. She reached under the water. Her fingers found the inside of May’s thigh and then the soft lips and washed there the way she had washed the scratch on the knuckle — clean, exact, not a stroke meant to finish anything. May’s hips tipped. She grabbed the rim. Ameta’s fingers slipped once, by the slick that was May’s own, over the swollen place at the top, and May’s whole body tightened and a noise came out of her that she had never made in this room.

Ameta stopped on that place. Not pressing. Resting.

“That’s enough for a wash,” Ameta said, very even. “I’m not taking you through it tonight.”

May could not get a word out. She nodded, desperate and grateful in the same nod. Ameta’s hand left her, slowly, and rinsed in the water, and came up empty.

The door opened a hand-width more.

Esther stood in the hall with a folded towel from the linen shelf. She saw the tub. She saw May naked in it, hair wet, face pink, knees loose. She saw Ameta on the lid in overalls with her sleeves rolled and her hands dripping.

Esther’s face did not close. It went soft, the same look as the sink and the line.

“Good,” Esther said. “She’s been getting in here too fast and getting out dirty. You take your time with her.” She set the towel on the edge of the sink. “I’ll shut this. Estel’s on the porch. He doesn’t need the hall.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ameta said.

Esther looked at May, fond, ordinary. “Let her finish you. You’re allowed.”

She pulled the door to, not tight, and her steps went down.

May stared at the place her mother had been. The pleased in it sat in her chest beside the ache between her legs and did not cancel it.

Ameta took the fresh towel. “Stand. Slow.”

May stood. Water sheeted off her, off her breasts, off the curve of her ass, off the muscle of her thighs. She was slick on the inner skin. The air made her shake once. Ameta wrapped her from behind, towel first at her back, then around, and

held her there in the wrap for a breath longer than drying required, Ameta's clothed body against May's wet one, overall buckle cold at May's spine.

"Out."

May stepped out onto the mat. Ameta dried her hair first, rubbing, lifting, careful at the ears. Then her throat. Her arms. The towel went over her breasts and May's nipples dragged the nap and she bit her lip. Ameta dried her stomach, her hips, the ass in two firm passes, the thighs, and then, lighter, between, enough to take the water and not enough to take the rest. May's hand landed on Ameta's shoulder to stay standing. The flannel was dry. May's fingers closed in it.

Ameta let her hold.

"Night shirt," Ameta said. "It's on the hook. I brought it when I ran the water."

May had not seen her bring it. It was there, the same worn shirt that came to mid-thigh. Ameta dropped the towel to May's shoulders like a cape and lifted the night shirt and May's arms went up again. The cloth fell over her bare skin, catching on wetness, clinging at the chest. Ameta tugged it down in the back so it covered her ass, and then she buttoned the two buttons at the throat that May never bothered with.

"There," Ameta said. "You're done."

May stood in the night shirt, hair dripping onto the yoke, thighs still trembling, the want unspent and obvious to her if not named. She looked at Ameta's mouth and at the wet spots on the overalls where the tub had kissed them.

"You're staying in the spare room," May said, because she needed a fact.

"I am," Ameta said. "That's my room tonight. You go to yours. Lie down. Don't pick this apart until midnight. Your mother already said the thing that matters."

May swallowed. "She said I was allowed."

"You are." Ameta picked up the hamper things in one arm — shirt, jeans, undershirt, underwear still faintly marked from May — and opened the door with the other hand. "I'll wash these with the morning load. Go on."

May went. The hall boards were cool under her bare feet. In her room she did not take the night shirt off. She got into her own bed and pulled the quilt to her waist and lay on her back this time, staring at the ceiling, feeling every place the cloth and the hand and the water had been.

The spare room door opened and shut. The bed over there took weight. Ameta, still in the house, still dressed, still not in this room.

May put her palm on her own stomach over the night shirt and left it there. She did not finish what the bath had started. She listened to the other room until the

shake in her legs went down to a hum, and the north window in the bathroom ticked as it cooled, and she stayed in the moment of being clean and looked-after and unfinished, in her own bed, while the liaison slept twenty feet away.

Chapter 5

So We Can Start on Time

May woke before the pipe and after the spare room.

She heard Ameta stand. She heard the drawer. She lay in the night shirt with the two throat buttons still done and felt the bath all over again in the first second of being awake — hair, cloth, the hand under the water that had stopped. The want had slept badly. It was there when she shifted her thighs. She stared at the ceiling and listened to the hall.

The knock was quiet.

“May.”

“I’m awake.”

“Good. We should start on time. Your father’s already on the porch.”

May sat up. The night shirt stuck where she was still a little damp from her own skin. She put her feet on the boards. “I can dress.”

The door opened anyway. Ameta came in with a stack against her overall bib — May’s clothes from the chair and the drawer, the ones she had folded herself the day before. Jeans. The worn blue shirt. Socks. Undershirt. The plain underwear on top. Ameta’s braids were done. She looked like morning. She looked at May on the edge of the bed in the night shirt and did not pretend she was only delivering laundry.

“I know you can,” Ameta said. “Stand up.”

May stood. Her legs remembered the tub and went unsure. She held the mattress a second and let go. Ameta set the stack on the chair and came close enough that May had to lift her face. The overall buckle was at May’s sternum. May could smell the soap that was not theirs.

Ameta’s fingers went to the two buttons at May’s throat, the ones she had done the night before, and opened them.

May’s breath caught as if it were the gray shirt all over again. She stood still.

“Arms.”

May lifted her arms. She lifted them before the word was finished, waiting for the cloth. Ameta gathered the night shirt and drew it up. It peeled off May’s breasts and her damp hair fell down her back and then she was naked in the cool of her own room with the quilt thrown back and the north light thin at the window. She crossed nothing this time. She did not know where to put her arms except where Ameta had just put them, in the air.

Ameta laid the night shirt on the bed. She looked May over the way she had looked at tired ground, from the feet up. May felt it on her mouth and on her nipples and on the slick she had woken with.

“Underwear first,” Ameta said. “Then we won’t be late.”

She took the cotton off the stack. May watched her hands open it, find the front, hold it at May’s ankles.

“Step.”

May stepped. The cloth came up her calves, her knees, her thighs. Ameta’s knuckles traveled the same path they had traveled taking the jeans off, only now they were putting something on her, arranging her. The waistband settled. Ameta hooked two fingers in it and straightened it over May’s hip bones, then at the back, over the curve of her ass, a firm small tug that seated the cloth against her. May made a sound. She was already marking the clean cotton.

Ameta saw. She did not name it.

“Undershirt.”

May’s arms were still up. They trembled and stayed. Ameta smiled with only her eyes and fed May’s hands through the straps and let the thin shirt fall. It caught on May’s breasts. Ameta reached in at the side and settled each modest shape into the cloth, her fingers brief and exact, the nipples dragging her knuckles. May’s mouth opened. She looked at Ameta’s flannel and not at her own chest.

“Breathe,” Ameta said. “I’m dressing you. That’s all this morning is.”

“I know.”

“Then let me.”

May let her.

The blue shirt came next. Ameta held it open like a door. May turned because Ameta’s hand on her shoulder turned her, and her arms went back and found the sleeves. Ameta drew the shirt on, pulled it over the undershirt, and set May facing her again by the upper arms, as if May were a thing you stood where you needed it. May’s knees went soft. She locked them.

Buttons. Ameta started at the bottom.

May watched the fingers. She anticipated each one the way she had anticipated the cloth in the tub. The first button closed at her belly. The next. The next sat at the modest line of her chest and Ameta’s knuckle grazed her as it went through, and May swayed forward a half inch and caught herself. Ameta did not comment. She did the collar last and turned the tag down, the same tag as the hall, two fingers at the nape. May’s eyes shut.

“Eyes open,” Ameta said, mild. “I need you standing, not gone.”

May opened them. Ameta was very near. The braids. The calm mouth.

“Jeans.”

May reached for them and Ameta shook her head once.

“I’ve got them. Hold my shoulder if you have to.”

May put her hand on the overall strap. The denim was stiff from the line. Ameta held the jeans at the floor.

“Foot.”

May gave her the right foot, then the left. Ameta worked the jeans up. They took May’s thighs and the muscle there and the ass and sat, tight from the wash. Ameta buttoned them. The zipper. A tuck of the blue shirt, front, then back, Ameta’s hands at May’s waist going in along the skin above the underwear, smoothing the shirt down so it would lie. May gripped the strap hard enough that the metal bit her palm.

“Too much?” Ameta said.

May shook her head. She did not trust her voice.

Ameta stayed at the waist a second longer than the tuck needed, thumbs at May’s hip bones, holding her in her own clothes as if checking a fit. Then she let go and took the socks.

May sat when Ameta pointed at the bed. She sat. Ameta went to one knee again, same as the bath, and lifted May’s right foot into her lap. The sock went on. Ameta’s thumb smoothed it over the arch. The left. May stared at the part in Ameta’s hair and felt every inch of being handled.

“Boots are by the door,” Ameta said. “Stand.”

May stood. Her legs were not good. Ameta put a hand under her elbow and walked her the four steps to the doorway as if the room were a field with a lip. The boots were where May always left them. Ameta set her down on the hall boards by the shoulders.

“In.”

May stepped into the boots. Ameta laced the right one, snug, not the loose knot May had made the first morning. The left. She tied them and tucked the ends and then she sat back on her heels and looked at May from the floor, dressed, pink in the face, blonde hair uncombed, standing in the dim hall like a girl who had been put together for the day.

“Hair,” Ameta said.

She stood. She turned May by the hips to face the spare room, where the little glass on the chest could be seen through the open door, and she gathered May’s hair with both hands. May felt the pull at her scalp and the heat of Ameta’s body at her back and the overall buckle again. Ameta worked a tie from her own wrist — May had not seen her take it off — and made a simple tail, not a braid, and smoothed the sides with her palms.

“There. You look like you can start.”

May found a sentence. “What are we starting.”

“West wall once more. Then the north edge so I can say irrigation out loud before the units sit in it. Your father wants times. I want you walking while you still know the ground better than they will.”

Units, not yet arrived. Talk. May nodded. The tail sat on her neck. She could feel every button.

Ameta did not move out of her way. She looked at May’s mouth, then at the collar, then down the front of the blue shirt as if making sure of her work.

“You didn’t argue,” Ameta said.

“No.”

“Good. That’s easier on both of us.” Ameta’s hand came up and straightened the shirt at May’s shoulder, a last small pull. “You going to make it down the stairs.”

May’s laugh was air. “Yes.”

“Hold the rail anyway.”

They went down. May held the rail. Esther was at the stove and Estel’s hat was already gone to the porch. Esther looked at May and at Ameta coming behind her and at the tidy tail and the tucked shirt.

“Well,” Esther said. “That’s a cleaner start than she gives herself.”

May’s ears burned. She sat because Ameta pointed at the chair. Coffee. Eggs. Ameta set the plate in front of her as if dressing and feeding were the same job. May ate. She could feel the underwear. She could feel where Ameta’s thumbs had been at her hips. She kept her knees together under the table and still felt open.

Estel came through for toast. He glanced at May, saw clothes, saw a daughter ready, and did not see the rest.

“West first,” he said. “I want that plate sitting in my head before they show up.”

“We’ll go when she finishes,” Ameta said.

Estel looked at Ameta, then at May’s plate, and grunted. “Don’t take all morning.”

He went back out.

Esther’s mouth was soft. “She dressed you.”

May stared at her eggs. “She said we’d be late.”

“You would have been.” Esther poured herself more coffee. “Let her. You’ve got enough change coming without fighting your own buttons.”

Ameta washed the pan. May sat with empty hands that were not empty the way they had been over laundry. They were empty because they had been used as a doll’s hands, lifted, put through sleeves, made to hold a strap. She watched Ameta at the sink and waited for the next instruction without wanting the word for that.

Ameta dried her fingers. “Coat if you want it. The north edge is wind.”

May’s coat hung in the mudroom. She stood. Ameta took it off the hook first and held it. May turned without being told. Arms. The coat came on. Ameta buttoned the two middle buttons only, so May could move, and then she put her palm flat on May’s back, between the shoulders, and left it there while she spoke toward the kitchen.

“We’ll be back for noon. She’ll drink water this time.”

“See that she does,” Esther said.

They went out on the gravel. The morning was bright and thin. May walked in the clothes Ameta had put on her body and felt each piece as a touch that had not ended. At the west outbuilding Ameta stopped her with two fingers at her elbow, the same place as the south strip, and May stopped on the first contact, already waiting for it.

“Here,” Ameta said. “When they come, you stand this side of the door. Not in their line. You watch. You tell me if the ground they take doesn’t match what you showed me.”

“All right.”

Ameta’s fingers stayed on the elbow. Her thumb moved once, a small stroke over the blue sleeve, over the place she had dressed.

“You did fine this morning,” Ameta said. “We’ll do it again tomorrow. So we can start on time.”

May looked at the wall. She looked at Ameta’s mouth. She did not argue.

“All right,” she said again.

Ameta let her elbow go and walked her on toward the north edge, talking water and rows in plain sentences, and May went where she was walked, dressed, unfinished from the night before, every button a place she could still feel, the day beginning on someone else’s schedule and her own clothes no longer only hers to put on.

Chapter 6

Lights in the Wheat

May was already sitting on the edge of the bed when Ameta opened the door.

She had heard the spare room. She had put her feet on the boards and stopped there, night shirt and all, waiting. The want from the tub had not gone anywhere overnight. It lived in her when she closed her knees and when she opened them.

Ameta had the stack. May's clothes. She looked at May waiting and nodded once, as if that were the correct way to start a morning.

"Good," Ameta said. "Stand."

May stood. Arms up before the word was done. The night shirt came off. The air. Ameta's eyes. Underwear, seated with the same tug at the hips. Undershirt, breasts settled. Blue shirt, buttons from the bottom, tag turned down. Jeans, foot, foot, zipper, shirt tucked with thumbs at the hip bones. Socks. Boots in the hall. May held the strap when she needed to and did not argue. She watched Ameta's mouth and anticipated every contact like a weather change she could feel in her teeth.

Ameta did not take her downstairs yet.

"Sit on the bed. Turn around."

May sat. She turned. Ameta's legs stood on either side of her knees. Fingers in her hair, pulling the tie from yesterday. The blonde came down over her nape and Ameta combed it with her hands, slow, working yesterday's tail out.

"I'm going to braid it," Ameta said. "Like mine. It'll hold in the wind and it won't sit in your collar while we watch."

May's voice was small. "All right."

Ameta parted the hair down the middle. The comb of her fingers was exact. She began on the right, three strands, tight enough that May felt it in her scalp and in her nipples and in the cotton already going damp. Ameta's knuckles brushed May's ear, her neck, the collar she had just buttoned. May sat very still, a dressed girl being finished. The first braid lengthened down over the front of her shoulder. Ameta tied it with a small band from the chest of the overalls.

"Other side."

The left. Same tension. May's eyes were open and not seeing the wall. She could feel herself being made to match the woman behind her — two braids, work clothes, morning. When Ameta tied the second band she rested both palms on May's shoulders and looked at the back of her head as if checking a fence line.

"There," Ameta said. "Stand up. Look."

May stood. Ameta turned her by the waist toward the spare-room glass. In it May saw a small blonde with two braids like the taller brunette’s, face already pink. She looked like she belonged next to Ameta and not next to a row. The thought made her throat tight.

“We should go down,” Ameta said. “They’re coming this morning.”

May swallowed. “The units.”

“Yes.”

In the kitchen Esther had the window over the sink cranked and the coffee poured. Estel was not on the porch. He was in the yard, hat on, facing west.

May sat. The braids hung forward when she leaned toward the cup. Esther looked at them and at Ameta and her mouth went soft.

“Well,” Esther said. “That’s a pair.”

May stared at the cup.

Ameta took the chair that let her see the west. “They’ll offload past the henhouse. You stay this side of the glass unless I take you out.”

May nodded.

The truck that was not a truck came up the county road first as a sound, high and even, then as a pale shape that did not slow for the pothole the way Estel’s old truck did. It turned onto a packed strip west of the hens, not onto the gravel. Dust lifted and hung. May stood without meaning to and went to the sink window beside Esther.

Units came off the back.

They were not like Ameta. That was the first true thing. No braids. No flannel. No face worth naming. Lower, wider, built for rows, metal and matte and jointed in places a person was not jointed. They moved without hurry and without waste. Work lights sat dark on them in the morning. One by one they took the dirt.

Esther’s shoulder touched May’s. “Ugly,” Esther said, not unkind. “That’s fine. They can be ugly in a field.”

May’s hands were empty on the sink rim. She watched a unit turn toward the west wheat and go into it. The thin crop moved around a body that was not a body. Another followed. Estel walked along outside their line, not in it, the way Ameta had told May to stand. Ameta came to the window at May’s other side. Close. The overall strap brushed May’s sleeve.

“That’s the job leaving,” Ameta said, quiet enough for the glass. “Not you. The walking. The bending. You still live here.”

May watched until her eyes hurt. “There’s nothing for me to do.”

“There is. You drink your coffee. You come with me to the north edge and we talk water. You tell me if they take a lip they shouldn’t. That’s the day’s work today.”

May’s laugh was air. “That isn’t work.”

“It’s the work I need from you.” Ameta’s fingers found the end of May’s right braid and tested the band, a small tug. May felt it in her scalp and lower. “Coat.”

They went out. The morning smelled like dust and the faint hot smell the units put off, not animal, not truck. May kept to the house side of their line. Ameta walked her to the north edge where the ground had always held water after a rain and held nothing much this year.

Irrigation, Ameta said, in plain words. Where the wet had stood. Where a unit would put water later and where it should not, because the lip would slough. May answered with the names she had. The good corner. The low piece. She could see, when she looked back, the lights still dark on the machines in the west, and her own rows filling with a motion that did not get tired.

Her hands hung. She kept starting to reach for a wire or a stone and stopping.

Ameta stopped her with two fingers on the elbow.

“Look at me.”

May looked.

“Your jobs are thin today,” Ameta said. “That’s the truth of it. Don’t invent a bucket to carry. Walk. Talk. Come in when I say.”

May’s braids moved when she nodded. “And tonight.”

Ameta’s mouth was calm. “Tonight you use the tub. You walked less and you’re still wearing the day. I’ll stay.”

May’s face went hot in the wind. “All right.”

They took the long way back so May would have steps to put her feet on. In the kitchen at noon the window still held the west. Units in the wheat. Lights still off in the daylight. Esther set plates down and May ate with empty hands between bites and felt the braids when she turned her head. Estel came in, sat, said the west wall was humming, said he did not like the look of them and he liked next winter more. Ameta agreed with both things and did not make a speech.

Afternoon was quieter than a Sunday. May sat on the porch step for a while because there was no laundry and no row. She watched the field. Ameta came and went — outbuilding, ledger with Estel, sink. Once she stopped behind May on the step and set her hands on May’s braids as if checking they had held, and May leaned back an inch into the knuckles and then sat forward again, ashamed of the lean and wanting it.

“Bath before supper,” Ameta said. “You’re going to sit in that window all evening if I let you. Better in the water.”

May went up when she was told.

The bathroom was already running. Steam. North field in the window, and beyond it, if she looked left, the first pale suggestion of work lights warming on a unit that had turned toward a longer shadow. Ameta shut the door to a hand-width.

“Same as last time,” Ameta said. “I’ll do it. You tell me if it’s too much.”

May stood on the mat. She did not reach for her own buttons.

Ameta took the coat if it was still on, then the blue shirt, button by button, slower than morning. May watched the fingers and got wet waiting. Undershirt off, arms up. Ameta’s gaze on her breasts, on the nipples already tight. Jeans, knee on the mat, knuckles down her thighs. Underwear last, thumbs together, the cotton coming away marked. May stepped out of it with her face turned toward the chipped enamel.

“Tub.”

May got in. Water higher this time, hotter. She sat. Ameta took the braids out before the cup, band, band, fingers loosening what she had built, and May felt herself come apart in the scalp and made a noise. Hair down. Cups of water. Soap. The hold at the back of her skull.

Longer.

The cloth on her neck, her back, her sides. Under her breasts, lingering, the nipples dragged and left, dragged and left, until May’s knees loosened in the water. Ameta washed her stomach and the tops of her thighs and then soaped her hand and went lower without asking which of them would do it.

May’s head fell back against the rim.

Ameta washed her thoroughly, inner lips, the swollen place at the top, not a stroke to finish, a slow cleaning that was also a knowing. May’s hips tried to follow the hand. Ameta’s other palm spread on May’s sternum and held her down in the water, gentle, so she would stay in the tub and not chase.

“Not through,” Ameta said, close to her temple. “Not tonight.”

May’s sound was almost a word and then was only breath. Ameta’s fingers stayed a little longer than a wash and not long enough, circling once around the slickest place and leaving. May shook. The water moved. She did not sit up.

Ameta rinsed her. Washed her feet. Wrung her hair. Let her sit in the heat until the shake went down to a hum.

The door opened a hand-width. Esther, towel. She saw May in the tub, hair loose, face gone, Ameta's wet hands. She saw the window and the pale lights starting in the wheat.

"Good," Esther said. She set the towel down. "They're ugly out there. She's clean in here. That's a fair trade." She looked at May, fond. "You let her finish the wash. Supper'll hold."

She shut it to the hand-width and went down.

Ameta stood May up. Towel from behind. The cling of cloth on wet breasts, on the ass, between, light, not enough. Night shirt over her head. Two buttons at the throat. May's legs did not want the hall.

Ameta sat her on the closed lid and took the damp hair in her hands again.

"Braids," Ameta said. "So you don't sleep in a knot."

May sat. She let herself be divided down the middle. Right braid, tight, matching. Left. Bands. Ameta's body close, flannel dry, overalls marked from the tub. When the second braid lay over May's shoulder Ameta turned her chin with two fingers and looked at her face.

May was wet and quiet. She did not have a sentence.

"Spare room for me," Ameta said. "Your bed for you. You can look out if you want. You don't have to."

May went to her room. She did not take the braids down. She lay on her side facing the window, night shirt, unfinished, the cotton of the bed against her bare legs. Across the yard the work lights had come on in the wheat, low and even, moving where she used to walk.

She put her hand on her stomach and left it there. She did not finish. She listened to the spare bed take Ameta's weight, and to the quiet of a house that had given its rows away, and she stayed in the braids that were not her idea, matching the woman in the next room, while the lights went on without her.

Chapter 7

The Car

Ameta dressed her before the sun had cleared the henhouse.

May stood in the bedroom with her arms up because that was how the mornings went now. The night shirt came off. The air made her nipples draw up before Ameta had even touched her. Underwear. The tug at her hips that seated the cotton. Undershirt, Ameta's fingers settling each modest breast into the cloth, brief, exact. May watched the hands and felt last night's unfinished bath still sitting low in her, a dull heat that had not had the decency to leave while she slept.

Ameta did not take the blue work shirt off the chair.

She took the other one. The pale one May wore when they used to drive to the co-op for nails and twine. Softer. The buttons not stained. Ameta held it open the way she held the work shirt, and May put her arms in because the sleeves were there.

"Not the field shirt," Ameta said. "We're going in today."

May looked at her over the pale collar. "In where."

"The city. There's a hall I want you to walk through. Women there. Little signs about them. We look. We come home." Ameta started the buttons from the bottom. "An hour each way. You'll be back before Esther puts supper down."

May's stomach did a small turn that she put on the hour. "What kind of hall."

"A public one. Clean. Kind enough. I think you should see it before the units take any more of your week." The next button sat at May's chest. Ameta's knuckle grazed her through the cloth. "You can say no."

May stood still and let the button go through. "I didn't say no."

"All right."

The shirt was tucked into the clean jeans, thumbs at the hip bones, a firm small pull at the back that seated the denim over her ass. Socks. The good boots, the ones Esther brushed for town. Then Ameta sat her on the bed and took last night's bands out of the braids and combed the blonde down with her fingers, slow, and put the two braids back, tight, one over each shoulder, matching her own.

May felt every pull in her scalp and in her breasts and in the cotton between her legs. She sat like a girl being finished and did not help.

"Coat," Ameta said.

Downstairs Esther had coffee and a look at the pale shirt.

“That’s the co-op shirt,” Esther said.

“City,” Ameta said. “We’ll eat when we get in.”

Estel came as far as the mudroom. He looked at May’s collar and the braids and the fact of her going somewhere that was not the north edge. “South strip’s full of them this morning. I don’t need her underfoot.”

“She won’t be,” Ameta said.

May stood on the step. West of the hens the units moved in the thin wheat, lights dull in daylight, no faces. Her rows. The pale car was already on the gravel. The door opened when Ameta set her hand near it.

“In.”

May got in.

The seat was clean cloth and deeper than Estel’s truck. It took her whole small body and held it. Ameta came in the other side and the farm smell shut outside. May put her hands on her knees. The braid on the right lay over the pale shirt like a rope someone else had made.

The car did not cough. It did not rattle. There was a low sound she felt in her sit bones, and then the house and the henhouse and Estel’s hat jumped backward so hard her stomach climbed into her throat. She grabbed the seat. Fence posts became a flicker. The county road turned into a single pale streak. Her ears filled and popped.

Ameta’s hand covered her wrist.

“Breathe. It does that.”

May breathed through her mouth. The window was a smear of land she knew, then land she only knew as talk. Her thighs had locked. The hand on her wrist was warm and did not pat her as if she were a child. After a stretch the first shove of speed eased into a long even flight that still was not a truck and still was not sitting still.

“You all right?” Ameta said.

“Yes.” May’s voice sounded thinner than she liked. “It doesn’t feel like driving.”

“It isn’t, much. You watch the glass if it helps.”

May watched the glass and then she watched Ameta instead — overalls, flannel, the calm mouth, the braid that matched hers. The hand left her wrist and rested on the seat between them. May’s smallest finger could have found it. She left her hands on her knees. The pale shirt was already warm. Under the jeans she was aware of herself in a way that had nothing to do with speed, a low slick starting

up as if the tub had followed her into the car. She was embarrassed by that and had nowhere to put the embarrassment except in her knees.

“Talk to me,” Ameta said. “It’s a long hour to sit in your head.”

May swallowed. “Will there be a lot of people.”

“Some. Not a crowd. Attendants. Visitors. The women who are there for the day.”

“What do they do.”

Ameta thought for a second the way she thought about a wet spot in a field. “They stand. Or sit. People walk through and read what’s written about them. Some of them like being looked at. Some of them talk if you ask an ordinary question. Nobody’s going to grab you.”

May nodded. The word *looked at* sat in her mouth and did not go down clean. She watched the smear of world and felt her nipples take against the undershirt for no decent reason.

Buildings came up like a weather line. The car shed speed and pressed her forward into the belt she had not noticed putting on. Stone under them instead of gravel. The door opened on air that did not smell like hens.

Ameta got out first and waited.

May stood. Her legs had gone strange in the hour. The building was low and long and pale, more glass than the co-op. People went in dressed like town. Ameta in overalls did not look lost. She looked like she had decided on those clothes the way she decided on a gate.

“Stay with me,” Ameta said. “You don’t have to talk to anybody but me.”

Inside the air was cool and even. May’s boots sounded too loud and then the floor took the sound away. A hall opened to the left, high, clean-lit, no corners to hide in. Plaques at May’s eye line. Benches. And women.

May stopped.

They were living. That was the thing that hit her first, a clean hit, like cold water. Not photographs. Women on low stands and on padded floors and behind a rail you could see over without climbing it. Some standing. Some sitting. Some lying on a side with a blanket to the hip. Most of them with no clothes on. Hair combed. Skin clean. A cup of water within reach. An attendant in a plain shirt straightened a pillow and said something May did not catch, mild, as if she were turning down a bed at home.

A woman with dark hair looked at May and smiled the way you smiled at someone who had just come into a kitchen. May’s face went hot. She did not smile back. She could not get her mouth to do anything ordinary.

Ameta’s shoulder touched hers.

“We can walk,” Ameta said. “Or we can stand here until your feet remember.”

May walked.

The first plaque was ordinary letters. A name May did not know. *Hannah.* Under it, two short lines. She liked hands. She liked the bath before anything else. At the bottom: *Goes home after.* Hannah herself was sitting with one knee up, talking to the attendant about the temperature of the room as if that were the whole of her day. May read the plaque twice. Her mouth had gone dry. She swallowed and it did not help.

She had expected — she did not know what she had expected. Something she could

disapprove of and leave. What she had was a clean room and a naked woman who looked looked-after and a sign that said *hands* and *bath*, and May’s own body answering as if someone had put a palm on her in the tub. The cotton between her legs was suddenly a problem. She kept the coat closed with one hand and felt foolish for it.

“You want to stop,” Ameta said, quiet.

“I’m reading.”

“All right.”

They went on.

The next woman was small through the chest the way May was small, thighs with work still in them. The plaque said she liked being washed first. Liked quiet. May looked at her breasts and at the close hair between her legs and at the way the attendant held a cup to her mouth so she did not have to get up. Kind. Ordinary. May’s jeans had gone damp enough that she could feel the cloth slide when she took a step. The surprise of that made her angry for one second and then the anger had nowhere to go because nothing in the room was cruel. She was just wet. In a hall. Looking.

Ameta did not look down at May’s coat. She did not mention the coat. She walked close enough that May felt her breathe.

They stopped at a blonde whose plaque sat at May’s exact eye line. The woman was standing, hands easy at her sides. Two town people stood in front of her and spoke to each other the way Estel and a neighbor spoke over a good field — dry, a little pleased, not dirty. May heard *look at the shoulders* and *she holds still well* and her ears roared. The plaque said the woman liked being talked about. May’s own name rose in her throat for no reason she could use. She stared until her eyes burned and then she had to blink, and blinking did not take the heat out

of her.

Her nipples were tight enough to hurt. She could feel her own pulse between her legs. She had not known looking could do this. She had thought the tub was the thing. The tub had been Ameta's hands. This was only eyes and print and a woman standing the way May stood when Ameta said *stand*, and it was worse. Better. She did not have the word. She only had the slick in her underwear and the fact that she did not want to leave the blonde's plaque.

"May," Ameta said.

May's voice came out wrong. "I'm here."

"I know. Come to the next when you're ready."

May was not ready. She went anyway because Ameta had started walking and May's body followed Ameta now the way it followed a gate.

A redhead on a bench with a blanket over her thighs was answering a girl in a dress. The girl had asked, plain, how long she stayed. *Till four,* the redhead said. *Then I get dressed and go home and eat with my sister.* May heard that and felt it land in her stomach beside the heat, a homely sentence that made the whole hall more dangerous, not less. You could do this and still eat with your sister. You could do this and go home after.

May sat on a bench at the far end because her knees asked. Ameta sat with her, thigh close, overall denim against May's town jeans. Across from them a woman about Esther's age, nude, reading her own plaque with her head tipped, mouth almost amused, as if the words had her right and she did not mind.

May stared at her own boots. She was throbbing. She had to press her knees together and that made it worse. She wanted, with a clearness that scared her, to be back in the old tub with Ameta's hand not stopping. She wanted to keep walking this hall until her legs gave out. Both things at once. She had not come into the building expecting either.

"We can go," Ameta said. "You've been on your feet."

May nodded. She did not trust a full sentence. She stood. Walking back past the same women was not easier. Hannah lifted her fingers an inch in a small hello. May's face burned. She did not know if she had answered with her face. The blonde was still standing. May looked once more and felt herself clench, a helpless small pull inside the jeans, and then they were at the door and the cool even air let them go.

The pale car. The seat. The door shut on the city.

May made a sound when the speed took her this time. Not only the shove of it. The hall was still behind her eyes and the acceleration pressed her into the seat

and into her own wet clothes and she had to open her mouth to breathe. Ameta's hand found her wrist, then her knee over the jeans, and stayed there, firm, not rubbing.

"You don't have to talk," Ameta said.

May talked anyway, because the quiet was full of plaques. "That one said she goes home after."

"A lot of them do."

"The redhead eats with her sister."

"I heard."

May looked at the smear of land. "I didn't think I would — I thought I'd want to leave." Ameta's thumb did not move on her knee. "And you didn't."

"No." May's laugh was air and shaky. "I think I could have walked it again."

She shut her mouth. That had been too much sentence. The heat in her face was worse than the hall. Ameta did not smile like she had won anything. She watched the glass and kept her hand where it was.

"We'll be home soon," Ameta said. "Esther will want you to eat."

May closed her eyes and opened them because the blonde was brighter with them closed. Her ears popped. Fence posts came back one by one, then the county road as a road, then gravel, the house, the henhouse, the units in the south strip with their dull day lights. Estel's hat on the porch hook. Farm air when the door opened. May's legs did not want to hold her. The damp cloth pulled when she stood.

Esther in the kitchen door. "You're pink. Sit. I'll heat a plate."

"In a minute," Ameta said. "She's going up first."

May went up. The hall was dim. Her room smelled like her quilt and last night's soap. She stood inside it in the pale shirt and the town jeans and the braids and did not take anything off. She could feel every fold of wet cotton. She sat on the bed because standing made the wanting obvious in her thighs.

Ameta stopped in the doorway. She did not come in. The door stayed a hand-width open, hall light in a stripe on the floorboards.

May looked at that stripe and at Ameta's mouth and at the overall strap. She was still so turned on it made her eyes wet at the corners, a stupid shine, and she wiped it with the heel of her hand as if it were dust.

"I'll be in the kitchen," Ameta said. "You come down when you can sit at the table."

May nodded.

Ameta left the door the width of a hand.

May lay back on her own quilt in her town clothes. The hall was in the cloth between her legs and the speed was still in her stomach and Ameta’s hand-shape was still on her knee. Through the gap she heard the stairs, and Esther asking if they had eaten in the city, and Ameta saying no, she’d eat here.

May put her palm on her stomach over the pale shirt and left it there. She did not put it lower. She stared at the crack of hall light and breathed through the unexpected ache, dressed, home, the plaques still at her eye line every time she blinked.

Chapter 8

After the Hall

May was still on the quilt in the pale shirt when Ameta came back up.

The door was the width of a hand. Ameta pushed it with her shoulder. She had a towel from the bathroom over her arm and a plate in the other hand, bread and the rest of the chicken Esther would not let sit. The overalls were still on. The flannel sleeves were rolled. She set the plate on the chair and shut the door only as far as it had been, a stripe of hall light on the boards.

“Esther said eat,” Ameta said. “Then I’m not taking you down there like that.”

May sat up. The damp cloth pulled. “Like what.”

Ameta looked at her, neighbor-plain. “Like you walked a hall and came home and didn’t put your feet on the floor.”

May took the plate because her hands needed an ordinary job. She ate a few bites. She did not taste them much. Ameta sat on the edge of the bed, close enough that the mattress tipped, and waited. When May set the plate back, Ameta put the towel down on the quilt beside her hip, folded once, white against the worn wash of the bedding.

“Lie back,” Ameta said. “I’m going to take those jeans off you before you sleep in them.”

May lay back. Her braids spread on the pillow. Ameta unbuttoned the pale shirt from the bottom, same order as morning, and May watched the fingers and felt the hall behind her eyes — Hannah’s plaque, the blonde standing, the redhead saying she ate with her sister. The shirt opened. Ameta did not take it all the way off. She pushed it apart so the undershirt showed and then she went to the jeans.

“Hips up.”

May lifted. The denim came down with Ameta’s knuckles traveling her thighs. The

underwear underneath was marked enough that May turned her face toward the wall.

Ameta did not hold them up. She set the jeans on the chair and put her palm flat on May’s stomach over the undershirt.

“Look at me.”

May looked.

“You went very quiet in the car,” Ameta said. “I want to hear you now. Talk to me about the hall while I do this.”

“While you do what.”

Ameta’s mouth moved, not quite a smile. “While I take care of what that hall started and didn’t finish.” Her hand slid down and hooked the underwear and drew it off, slow, and May’s breath left her. The towel was under her hips a moment later, tucked, practical. May was bare from the waist down, pale shirt open, undershirt still on, boots already gone from the door. Ameta stayed dressed. Flannel. Overall bib. Braids.

She put her hand on the inside of May’s knee and opened her a little.

May made a sound.

“Talk,” Ameta said, milder. “Start anywhere.”

May stared at the ceiling. Ameta’s palm stroked the inside of her thigh, not yet where she was slickest, just the muscle, the work in her leg. “I thought I would want to leave.”

“You said that.”

“I didn’t leave.” May’s voice snagged when Ameta’s thumb came higher. “I thought it would feel like walking in on somebody. Wrong. Like I shouldn’t be seeing them.”

“And.”

“And it didn’t.” May swallowed. “It felt — I don’t have a clean word. I got wet standing there reading a sign. I didn’t know a sign could do that.”

Ameta’s hand settled over her, cupping, warm, not moving yet. May’s hips tried to lift and Ameta’s other hand spread on her belly and kept her.

“Which sign.”

May’s face burned. “The blonde. The one who likes being talked about. Those two people standing there saying things about her shoulders. Like she was a field that had come up right.”

“Did you like them saying it, or did you like that she was standing there for it.”

May had to think, which was hard with Ameta’s fingers beginning to part her, slow, slick sound in the quiet room. “Both. I think both. I liked that she wasn’t ashamed. I liked that the sign had her written down. I liked that she goes home after and still stood there and let them look.”

Ameta’s finger found the swollen place at the top and rested on it, not rubbing. May’s mouth opened.

“That’s a lot to like for a girl who thought she’d want to leave,” Ameta said.

“I know.” May’s laugh broke. “I felt stupid. It’s just looking. I’ve seen myself. I’ve seen you in the bathroom. It shouldn’t — it shouldn’t have gone through me like that.”

Ameta started to move, small circles, wet. May’s knees fell wider. The pale shirt had ridden up. The undershirt clung to her nipples.

“It isn’t just looking,” Ameta said. “You know that from the tub. Being handled is one thing. Being stood in a room with your name on a board and strangers walking past you like you’re something that got finished right — that’s another. Some women come apart from the second one who never came apart from the first.”

May tried to follow the sentence and then Ameta’s finger slipped lower and into her, easy with how wet she was, and May’s hands grabbed the quilt.

“Say that again,” May said. “The standing part. Slower.”

Ameta worked her with one finger, then two, unhurried, the heel of her hand against the slick peak. She leaned over May in the flannel, braids hanging, breath even.

“You saw women put out like yield,” Ameta said. “Not punished. Not hid. Labeled. People read the label and looked at the body the label was about. That’s all a hall is. Some of them like the looking more than the hands. Some like both. You stood there in your coat soaked through the jeans and you didn’t want to go home yet. That’s you answering the looking.”

May’s eyes had gone wet at the corners again. She was ashamed of the shine and more ashamed of how close she already was. “Is there a word for that.”

“You don’t need a word to have it.” Ameta’s fingers curled. May gasped. “If you want one anyway: some people like being the thing on the table. Not the person walking by. The thing. The one the talk is about. Like a good animal at the fair that knows it’s being judged and still stands square. Except nobody’s buying you. They’re only looking, and the looking is the point.”

May’s mind put the county fair next to Hannah’s plaque and the picture was so exact she clenched on Ameta’s fingers.

“That’s — that’s dirty,” May whispered, and her hips chased the hand while she said it.

“Is it,” Ameta said. “You didn’t look dirty in that hall. Nobody there did. Esther would have said they were looked after. You said the redhead goes home and eats with her sister. That’s not a dirty life. That’s a woman who can stand still and be read like a card and then put her dress on.”

May turned her face into the pillow and then back because she wanted Ameta’s mouth in her sight. “When they talked about her shoulders I wanted them to be talking about me.”

She had not meant to give that away. It came out with a thrust of Ameta’s hand and stayed in the room.

Ameta did not crow. She slowed. She used more of the wet and spread it up over May’s clit and rubbed there with two fingers, steady, the way she washed a plate, the way she braided hair.

“I know,” Ameta said.

“How.”

“You shook. You wouldn’t leave the plaque. You told me in the car you could have walked it again.” Ameta’s voice stayed level. “May. Look at me.”

May looked. She was open on her own towel, shirt wrecked, braids coming loose on the pillow, Ameta fully dressed above her. The stripe of hall light had not moved. Downstairs a pan touched the stove. Esther. Not coming up.

“I want to put you on display,” Ameta said.

The words went through May like the first shove of the car.

She came so hard she stopped breathing. It took her in the belly and the thighs and the place Ameta’s fingers were pressed, a long shaking pull that doubled and doubled again, wet on the towel, a sound torn out of her that she tried to shut and could not. Her hands found the overall strap and held on. Ameta worked her through it without speeding up, without smiling like a win, just staying with her while May’s body emptied the hall out onto her own quilt.

It went on. May had not known it could go on. When it finally broke she was crying in a small stupid way and laughing in the same breath, and Ameta eased her hand away and wiped it on the towel and left her palm on May’s shaking stomach over the undershirt.

May stared at the ceiling. She had no good word for what she had given away.

Ameta sat there in the flannel and breathed. She did not say *I thought so.* She did not say *good.* She waited until May’s breathing found a count.

“You all right.”

May nodded. Then she shook her head. Then she nodded again. “Say it again.”

Ameta’s thumb moved once on her stomach. “I want to put you on display. Not tonight. Not till you can walk into that hall knowing that’s why you came. But that’s what I want.”

May’s eyes closed. Aftershock went through her, smaller. “Like the blonde.”

“Like you,” Ameta said. “With a sign that has you right. People walking. You standing. Then the car. Then this bed. Then the tub if you need it.”

May’s laugh was wrecked. “I need the tub.”

“In a minute.” Ameta pulled the open shirt around her, not to hide her, to cover the cooling skin. “You want water.”

“Yes.”

Ameta got the cup from the bathroom and came back and held it while May drank, propped on an elbow, bare legs still over the towel, flannel close enough to smell. May watched Ameta’s mouth and the rolled sleeve and the wet shine still on Ameta’s fingers.

“I didn’t know looking at them would do that to me,” May said, quieter, farm-plain. “I thought I was just going to be polite and leave.”

“I know.”

“When you said you wanted me standing there I — I couldn’t help it.”

Ameta set the cup down. “You don’t have to help it.” She brushed a loose bit of braid off May’s cheek with the back of her hand. “I’m going to run the tub. You’re going to get in. I’m not taking you through it again tonight. You already came apart once. That’s enough for a first hall.”

May caught the strap again before Ameta could stand.

“You’ll stay.”

“I’ll stay,” Ameta said. “Spare room after. Your bed is yours. Door like it is.”

She stood. The towel was a mess. She left it. May lay in the pale open shirt and listened to the pipes start, and to Esther downstairs say something about the south strip that did not come up the stairs, and she put her hand on her own stomach where Ameta’s had been and felt the words still in her — *I want to put you on display* — as if they were a hand that had not lifted.

Chapter 9

A Sentence from the File

May was already standing when Ameta opened the door.

The night shirt was still on. The two throat buttons were done; May had not touched them. She had slept in the words. They were there when she turned over. *I want to put you on display.*

Ameta had a stack that was not the chair stack.

May looked at it. “Those aren’t mine.”

“They’re yours now,” Ameta said. “I brought them. Soft. They’ll sit better in the kitchen than the co-op shirt.” She set them on the bed: a close gray dress, plain, no collar to speak of, and underwear finer than May’s cotton. “Arms.”

May lifted her arms. The night shirt came off. Cool air. Ameta’s eyes. The finer underwear went on with the same tug at the hips, seated over the curve of her ass, and May was wet from the dressing before the dress even came near her. Ameta held the gray dress open. May turned. Sleeves. The cloth fell to mid-thigh and clung a little at her chest and her hips. Ameta did the three buttons at the back, knuckles along May’s spine, and then turned her by the waist and looked at her the way she looked at a gate she had hung herself.

“That’s what I wanted,” Ameta said. “Sit. Braids.”

May sat. She watched the wall while Ameta’s fingers divided her hair and put the two braids back, tight, matching. Each pull landed between her legs. She kept her mouth shut.

“Boots,” Ameta said. “We’re not going to the city. I still want you able to walk the yard.”

The boots looked wrong under the dress and Ameta did not comment on that. She laced them and stood May up and walked her down the stairs with two fingers at her elbow.

Esther looked at the dress and at the braids and poured coffee.

“That’s new,” Esther said.

“I brought it,” Ameta said. “She can work a kitchen in it. She doesn’t need jeans to watch a field.”

Esther’s mouth went soft. “Sits on her right.”

May sat. The dress rode up when she did. She kept her knees together and still felt air on her thighs. Estel came through for toast, saw a dress instead of the blue shirt, grunted as if weather had changed, and took his hat to the porch.

Ameta set eggs in front of May and took the other chair. Through the sink window the units were already in the south strip, lights dull, no faces, taking the walking off the place.

“Logistics,” Ameta said, to May and to the room. “They’re going to finish the south today. North edge tomorrow. Delivery goes through Architecture starting next week. Estel keeps the garden if he wants it. You keep the hens until you don’t feel like keeping them. That’s the week.”

May wrapped both hands around the cup. “What do I do.”

“You walk with me when I ask. You eat. You let me dress you so we start on time. You tell me if a unit takes a lip it shouldn’t.” Ameta drank. “That’s a day’s work for now.”

May stared at the window. The gray dress made her feel looked at in her own kitchen. She could feel Esther’s glance like a hand.

Ameta set her cup down.

“I wrote something last night,” Ameta said. “After you went to sleep. I’m going to read you the sentence I kept. You don’t have to like hearing it. I want you to hear it anyway.”

May’s pulse climbed into her throat. “All right.”

Ameta did not take out a paper. She had it in her mouth already.

“May Chilton. Small. Work in her thighs. Came on her own bed when she was told she would be stood in a hall and written down.”

May sat very still. The coffee trembled. Heat went through her face and down into the fine underwear as if Ameta had put a hand there at the table. She could not look at Esther. She could not look at the window. She looked at Ameta’s flannel collar and felt her own mouth go dry the way it had in front of the blonde’s plaque.

Esther had gone to the stove. If she heard, she did not turn.

May whispered, “That’s — that’s a lot to put in one sentence.”

“It’s what happened,” Ameta said. “I’m not adding to it.”

May nodded once, sharp, because if she opened her mouth wider she did not know what would come out. She ate. She did not taste the eggs. The sentence sat in her like a second dress.

The morning was thin. May walked the yard in the gray cloth and the boots and watched the south strip fill with motion that did not need her. Ameta walked the north edge with Estel and came back and washed the pan and put a plate in front of May at noon and took it away when May was done. May’s hands stayed empty.

The dress clung when she sat on the porch step. She kept hearing the sentence. *Came on her own bed when she was told.*

Late afternoon she found Ameta in the kitchen alone, Esther lying down, Estel on the porch with the ledger.

May stood in the doorway with her arms wrong at her sides.

“I want the bath to go the same,” she said.

Ameta looked up from the sink. “The same as last night.”

“Yes.”

“All right. Go up. I’ll run it.”

The pipes knocked. May went into the bathroom in the gray dress and the boots and waited on the mat. Steam. North window. Work lights starting to warm in the wheat, pale, ugly, distant. Ameta came in and shut the door to a hand-width and sat May on the closed lid and took the boots off, then the dress, button by button at the back, then the fine underwear, which was marked. May stepped into the tub without being told to hold the sink. The water took her. Ameta rolled her sleeves one more turn and sat on the lid and picked up the cup.

Hair first. Bands out. Cups of water. Soap. The hold at the back of May’s skull. May’s nipples drew up out of the water. She was already slick when Ameta’s hand left her hair.

“Lean,” Ameta said.

May leaned. The cloth on her back, her sides, under her breasts, lingering. Then Ameta soaped her hand and went under the water and found her, two fingers, unhurried, the way she had on the towel.

May’s head went back against the rim.

“Talk,” May said. “Like last night.”

Ameta worked her slow. “I have to measure you before I can stand you in that hall.”

May’s hips tipped. “Measure.”

“For the stand,” Ameta said, as if she were talking about a gate post. “Height. Shoulder. Chest. The span of your hips. How high your tits sit. How long your thighs are, because people look there first on you. I’ll do it with a tape, upstairs, in your room or in here. I’ll say the numbers out loud. Then the stand gets built to you, not to a guess.”

May grabbed the rim. Ameta’s fingers curled inside her. The heel of her hand rubbed the swollen place in small wet circles.

“You’ll stand on it,” Ameta said. “Not a big thing. A low thing. Enough that a plaque sits at a visitor’s eye and at yours. I’ll write the card to match the sentence you heard this morning, and whatever else turns out to be true. People will walk. They’ll read. They’ll look at the work in your legs and the size of you and the fact that you get wet from being written down.” May made a broken sound. “Don’t — don’t stop.”

“I’m not stopping.” Ameta’s other hand spread on May’s sternum and held her in the water. Flannel close. Breath even. “Sometimes they ask how long it takes you to come. From the first look, or from a hand, or from being read out loud. They want that on your caption card. A number. So a person walking by knows what they’re looking at.”

May came.

It hit her harder than the bed, or as hard, different because of the water, a long pulling shake that sloshed the tub and tore a noise out of her that she could not shut. Ameta stayed with her, fingers steady, not faster, saying nothing else, until May folded forward and caught the overall strap with a wet hand and held on through the last of it.

Water lapped. A drip from the faucet. May’s forehead against Ameta’s bib.

Ameta eased her hand away and rinsed it in the tub and rested it on May’s nape, under the wet hair.

May breathed. She had no good word. She had the caption card behind her eyes, a number she did not know yet, her own thighs on a low stand.

“That’s enough,” Ameta said, quiet. “I’m going to wash the rest of you and put you in the night shirt. You’re not going downstairs in that dress tonight.”

May nodded against the bib.

Ameta washed her feet, her back again, the places that were only dirty from the day. She stood her up. Toweled her. Night shirt over her head. Two buttons at the throat. Braids, damp, put back loose enough to sleep. May walked the hall on unsteady legs. In her room Ameta turned the quilt down and May got in.

Ameta stood in the doorway with her sleeves wet.

“The sentence stays,” Ameta said. “I’ll measure you tomorrow. Not to scare you. Because I meant what I said about the hall.”

May looked at her from the pillow. “All right.”

Ameta left the door a hand-width. The spare bed took her weight. Downstairs Esther moved a chair. Out the window the work lights held the wheat.

May put her palm on her stomach over the night shirt and left it there. She did not go looking for the number. She lay in the clean shirt and felt the tape that had not touched her yet, and the card that did not exist yet, and the sentence that did, sitting in her as plain as weather.

Chapter 10

Weight

May woke to Ameta already in the room.

The spare-room door had not made much sound. Ameta stood by the chair in overalls and flannel, braids done, the tape and the little pale scale and the dark bag set out as if they were sewing things. The window was still early. No smell of coffee yet.

“Morning,” Ameta said. “We’ve got two hours before breakfast. I told your mother last night. She said that was fine. Your father knows I’m teaching you the new ways this morning and not walking the north edge until after we eat.”

May sat up in the night shirt. Her mouth was dry. “Two hours for what.”

“For measuring you. For finding out a few more things your body likes, so I don’t guess when I write what people will read about you in the hall.” Ameta sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress tipped. “You can still say this is too much for before breakfast. I won’t drag you through it.”

May looked at her hands in her lap. “They know what you’re doing?”

“They know I’m integrating you. That’s the word I used with Esther. She knows about the bath. She knows I dress you. She knows I took you to the hall to look. I did not sit at the table and tell your father what you did on this quilt. That’s yours unless you want it said.”

May nodded once. “I don’t want it said at breakfast.”

“Then it won’t be.” Ameta’s voice stayed ordinary. “Arms up, if you’re staying in the room.”

May lifted her arms. The night shirt came off. Cool air. She crossed nothing. Ameta looked at her and May felt last night’s spanked skin even though that had not happened yet, only the memory of being handled, and she flushed.

“Why before breakfast,” May said.

“Because you’re clearer when you haven’t spent the morning watching units take your rows. And because I need you naked for a tape, and I would rather do that in here than sneak it after dark like we were stealing something.” Ameta touched the two throat buttons that were no longer there, a useless habit, then let her hand fall. “Lie back or stand. Standing is better for the scale.”

May stood. The boards were cold. “What does the scale have to do with a hall.”

Ameta pulled the pale plate away from the chair and set it on the floor. “The hall doesn’t guess at a woman. They know how tall she is and what she weighs and where a sign should sit so a person walking by can read it and look at her at the

same time. I can’t build you a place to stand if I lie about your size. Step on.”

May stepped on. The plate was smooth. She looked at the wall, then at Ameta.

“Why would anybody want those numbers about me,” May said. “I’m not — I’m just May. I’m small. I’ve always been small.”

“That’s one reason they look,” Ameta said. She read the scale and said the number out loud, plain, no flourish. “That’s you this morning, no clothes, nothing in your stomach but sleep. Step off onto the floor.”

May stepped off onto the floor. She stood on her own boards. The number sat in the room.

“It feels strange,” May said. “Being a number.”

“It’s only a number. You’re still you. Give me your arms down at your sides.” Ameta took the tape. She started at the top of May’s head and ran the metal down to the floor, her knuckles brushing May’s hair, her shoulder, her hip. “This is height. I’m going to say it. You don’t have to remember it.”

She said it.

May swallowed. “In the hall. The women I saw. Did somebody do this to them too.”

“Yes.”

“And they let it.”

“Most of them asked for it, or they said yes when it was offered, the way you keep saying all right.” Ameta brought the tape across May’s back, shoulder to shoulder, and the number was smaller than Ameta’s would have been. “You’re going to ask me a lot of questions. That’s good. Keep doing that. Chest now. Breathe out.”

The tape went around May’s ribs and over her breasts and tightened on her nipples. May made a sound and her hands twitched.

“That’s tight,” May said.

“It has to sit true. That’s the number a person sees after your face.” Ameta said it twice, then loosened the tape. “Does it scare you that I want people to see that.”

May’s face was hot. “It scares me that it doesn’t scare me enough. I keep getting wet when you talk about it. I got wet in that hall just reading a sign about a stranger. I don’t understand why my body does that.”

Ameta crouched and ran the tape around her waist, then her hips, pulling over the curve of her ass. “Some bodies answer to work. Some answer to being taken care of. Yours answers to being seen, and to being described, and to my hands. You didn’t have a chance to find that out on a place with no one in the next room

but your parents. That’s all. It isn’t a fault in you.”

May looked down at the top of Ameta’s head, the dark braids. “When those two people talked about the blonde’s shoulders I wanted them to be talking about mine. Is that the same thing as wanting to stand there.”

“It’s the start of it.” Ameta said the hip number. She measured one thigh, hip to knee, then the other. The tape was cool. Her fingers were not. “Hold still. I’m going to measure the inside of your leg, up high. It’s for how the stand sits, and because people look at your thighs. You’ve got work in them. That’s the truth.”

May held still. The tape climbed the inside of her thigh and she opened her mouth and did not hide the sound. “If I stand there, do I have to look at them.”

“You can look at them. You can look at the wall. You can look at me if I’m on the bench.” Ameta stood. “Hands at your sides. I’m only going to look at you for a minute. No tape. I need to see what you do when nothing is on you but eyes.”

May stood. Ameta sat on the bed and looked. May felt it like a cloth dragged over her — mouth, breasts, the tight nipples, the blonde hair between her legs, the wet she could feel cooling on her skin. A drop ran. She kept her hands at her sides because she had been asked to and because putting them in front of herself would have been a lie.

“Why does that work on me,” May said, shaky. “You’re not even touching.”

“Because you know what the looking is for now. Yesterday you found out by accident in a public hall. This morning you know I am going to stand you there one day, and your body got there ahead of your manners.” Ameta’s voice stayed kind. “Do you want me to stop looking.”

“No.”

“Come here.”

Ameta took May by the hips and guided her down across her lap, May’s belly on the overall denim, ass up, hands on the quilt. May felt the blood go to her face.

“What are you doing.”

“I’m going to spank you,” Ameta said. “Not because you did anything wrong. Because I need to know if a hard hand on your ass is something your body likes, and because some women who like being looked at also like being marked a little before they stand. If you hate it after two, I stop.”

May’s fingers curled in the quilt. “Will people in the hall see that? If I was red.”

“They might. If we timed it that way. Some visitors like seeing that a woman has been handled before they got there. You tell me after if the idea makes you sick or makes you worse.”

Ameta’s palm rubbed once, then came down.

The sound was sharp in the small room. Heat flooded May’s right cheek. She jerked and then, surprising herself, pushed back.

“That,” May said, into the quilt. “Do it again.”

Left. Right. Lower, where her ass became the back of her thigh. May’s knees opened over Ameta’s lap. She was dripping on the denim and could not find a way to be sorry.

“Why does that feel like the hall,” May said, breathless. “It’s just your hand.”

“Because it makes you feel like an object someone is arranging,” Ameta said, and she did not make the word pretty or ugly, only plain. “A field you walk and judge. A heifer somebody stands square to look at the hind end. You already used the fair in your own head last night. That’s this. Two more, then up.”

Two more. May cried out into the quilt. Ameta’s fingers slipped between her legs and stayed there, wet, not rubbing yet.

“You’re soaked,” Ameta said. “That’s an answer. Stand up. On the bed, on your back. I brought something that pulls. I want it on your nipples and then lower. If it hurts wrong, you say stop.”

May stood on shaky legs and lay down. The quilt was rough on her hot skin. Ameta took the two small dark cups from the bag.

“What is that.”

“It sucks,” Ameta said. “Like a mouth that doesn’t get tired. I’ll use my mouth first so it isn’t a cold surprise.”

She bent in the flannel and took May’s left nipple in her mouth and drew on it, long and wet. May’s back came off the bed. Ameta pulled off and set the cup over the wet peak and squeezed the bulb. The pull took May’s nipple up into the little dark mouth of it and held.

May stared at her own chest. “Oh.”

“Talk.”

“It feels like being kept there,” May said. “Like I can’t hide that part of me. Put the other one on.”

Ameta sucked the right nipple and capped it. May looked down at herself — braids, cups, wet thighs, ass burning — and covered her face with both hands and then took the hands away because she wanted Ameta to keep seeing her.

“In the hall,” May said. “Would they put those on me.”

“Sometimes. Not always. Some women only stand. Some are handled while people walk. We don’t have to decide the whole hour this morning.” Ameta took the cup off the left breast. May whimpered. “Lower now. Same pull. You tell me.”

She licked May once, plain and wet, and set the rim over her clit and pumped. The suction there made May’s knees come up. Ameta held one knee out with her forearm and spanked the inside of the other thigh, two sharp slaps, and May saw white.

“Questions,” Ameta said, still even. “You’ve got them. Use them.”

May could barely find air. “What do they write. After you know all this. What does the sign actually say.”

“Your name. That you’re small. That you came off a farm. That you like being looked at. That a hand on your ass does you. That pull does you. That you came the first time in this bed when I told you I wanted to stand you in that hall. And if I time you this morning, how long you take when you’re already this far gone.” Ameta pumped the cup once more and took it off and put her fingers where it had been, slick, rubbing the way May’s body had already learned. “Some visitors ask for that number the way your father asks what a load of wheat weighs. It isn’t romance. It’s a true thing about you written where a stranger can read it while they look at your cunt.”

May’s eyes went wide and wet. “That’s — you can’t write that.”

“I can if you keep saying yes.” Ameta’s other hand spread on May’s stomach. “Do you want me to leave that off.”

May shook her head hard against the pillow. “Don’t leave it off. I want — I want them to know. I don’t know why I want them to know.”

“You want to be the thing the talk is about,” Ameta said, kind, not smiling like a win. “That’s why the hall did you so hard when you were only walking through it in your coat. You’re going to come now. I’m going to watch how long it takes from when I put my fingers back on you. That’s the last number this morning.”

She put her fingers back.

May tried to ask one more thing and the question broke apart. She came with her mouth open on nothing, a long shaking finish that lifted her and wrung her and left her holding the overall strap so tight her fingers hurt. Ameta stayed with her until the shaking went small, then took the other cup off her breast and rubbed the sore nipple with her thumb, gentle.

May lay there and cried a little in the stupid way she had after the first time, and laughed in the same breath.

“I still don’t understand it,” she said.

Ameta pulled the quilt up over her hips and left her own hand on May’s hair. “You don’t have to understand it before breakfast. You only have to tell me if I did anything you want me never to do again.”

May thought. The room was just her room. Early light. Tape on the chair. Scale on the floor. She was sore on her ass and her nipples and between her legs.

“Don’t sneak it,” May said. “If you’re going to stand me in that hall I want to know the morning you do it. I don’t want it to be a trick.”

“It won’t be a trick.” Ameta buttoned nothing; May was still naked under the quilt. “I’m going to put your night shirt on you and braid your hair and take you down to coffee. Your mother will see you looking like you were handled. She already decided she was pleased about that. Your father will talk about the north strip. You can sit and eat and feel this and not say a word about it.”

May sat up when Ameta held the night shirt. Arms up. The cloth fell over the tender nipples. Two buttons at the throat. Braids, slower than a work morning. May watched Ameta’s face the whole time.

“Will the stand hurt,” May said.

“No. It’s a low platform. Your feet will be on something flat. You’ll get tired in your knees if we leave you too long. That’s why first times are short, and why you come home after, to this room and the tub.”

May nodded. “I want the short one first.”

“That’s the plan.” Ameta stood her up, found slippers instead of boots, and opened the door on the smell of coffee starting. “Breakfast. Two hours are up.”

May walked down the stairs in the night shirt and the braids and the ache, empty-handed, and the kitchen was just the kitchen, Esther at the stove, Estel’s hat already on the hook, units in the south window, and May sat where Ameta pointed and wrapped her hands around a cup and felt every number still on her skin while Esther said, mild, “You two took your time. That’s all right. Eat.”

Chapter 11

Hands

They walked the rows until the light went long and the units' work lights started to take the color out of the wheat.

May had spent the afternoon at Ameta's shoulder, boots on, gray dress swapped back for jeans because the north lip still sloughed if you trusted a hem. The units did not look at her. They took the walking she used to do and laid it down in even lines. Estel stayed at the west wall. Ameta asked May the same questions she always asked — wet spot, lip, whether the low piece still held a lie after the machines had gone through — and May answered because answering was still a job.

By the time they came up the gravel May's shirt was stuck to her and her ass was only a little tender from the morning and she could smell herself.

Esther was in the kitchen. "You're late for food."

"We'll eat after she washes," Ameta said. "She's got the field on her."

Esther looked at May's face and at Ameta's hand already at May's elbow and only said, "There's a plate in the warmer."

They went up. The bathroom window held the north field and the first pale lights. Ameta ran the tub hotter than the first nights and shut the door to a hand-width.

May stood on the mat. "Same as last time?"

Ameta rolled her sleeves past the elbow. "Different. You took the spanking this morning like it belonged on you. I want to know if a whole bath of that does you, or if it was only because you were already on my lap. It's a test. It's going to make you come if your body does what it did on the quilt. You can say you want the old wash instead."

May looked at the chipped enamel. She could already feel her pulse between her legs. "I want that test."

"Say it plain."

"Please," May said. The word came out smaller than the wanting. "Please do it that way. Don't be careful like the first bath."

Ameta nodded once, as if May had pointed at a gate. "Boots. Clothes. Then you get in on your hands and knees. I'm going to scrub you with my hands, not the cloth. I'm going to spank you while you're wet. You come as many times as you come. Stop still stops." May's fingers shook on her own buttons and Ameta took over anyway, rough about it, shirt yanked open, jeans dragged down her sore ass, underwear hooked and pulled. May stepped into the heat and went down on

her hands and knees because she had been told to. Water lapped her breasts. Her braids hung into it. The enamel bit her kneecaps. She felt filthy and arranged and so turned on she made a noise before Ameta had touched her.

Ameta knelt beside the tub, flannel darkening at the cuffs, and put both hands on May at once.

There was no circling in. She scrubbed May's neck and shoulders like May had come in off a harvest, hard palms, soap, nails a little. May's head dropped. Ameta's hands went under and took her breasts as if they were washing tools, squeezing, pulling the nipples, slapping the wet underside of one once so the sound cracked off the tile. May cried out and her arms trembled.

"Stay up," Ameta said. "Don't flatten."

May stayed up. Ameta scrubbed her back to the ass, then soaped both cheeks and spanked her, wet slaps that threw water over the rim. Right. Left. Lower. May's mouth opened on a sound that was not words. The sting lived on top of the morning's heat and went inward until she was pushing back into the next slap.

"Please," May said again.

Ameta's soapy hand shoved between her legs from behind and scrubbed her there the same way, not kind, not mean, thorough, two fingers pushing into her while the heel of the hand ground her clit against the pull of the water. May came so fast she almost lost her arms. It shook through her on all fours, splashing, a broken cry into the tub. Ameta did not take the hand away. She spanked her through it with the other palm, sharp, and May's climax caught a second edge and wrung her again.

"That's one and two," Ameta said, even. "I'm not done washing you."

She pulled May's hips higher, a hard grip on the bones, and soaped the backs of her thighs and the cleft of her ass and slapped the wet skin there until May was sobbing for breath and dripping down her own legs into the water. Ameta's fingers found her clit again and rubbed faster than the quilt had been.

"People spend bath time like this now," Ameta said, close to May's ear, one hand still iron on her hip. "Not everybody. The ones whose bodies ask for it. A wash that handles you. A hand that doesn't pretend it's only getting the dust off. You asked. You're doing well."

May came a third time with her forehead nearly on the enamel, braids floating, Ameta's fingers inside her and a slap landing on her thigh at the same instant. She could not keep her arms locked. Ameta let her sag onto her side in the tub and kept at her, less spanking now, more of that rough washing between her legs, as if May were a thing being polished for the next room. May twitched and tried to close her knees and Ameta opened them with a wet forearm.

“One more while you’re in the water,” Ameta said. “Then I’m taking you to bed.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. You just did three.” Ameta’s mouth was calm. Her hand was not. She pinched May’s nipple hard and rubbed her clit with two fingers and May broke again, smaller, wrecked, a helpless sound against Ameta’s wrist.

Ameta pulled the plug. The water started to go. She stood May up like a doll that shook and toweled her hard enough that the nap hurt on the spanked skin and the sore nipples. No night shirt. Ameta left the wet braids and picked May up — May made a startled noise at being lifted — and carried her down the hall into May’s own room.

The spare room stayed dark.

Ameta kicked May’s door mostly shut, stripped the overall straps off her shoulders with one hand, and got into the narrow bed in the wet-cuffed flannel. She pulled May in against her like something small she meant to keep from falling off a seat: May’s back to Ameta’s chest, Ameta’s knees tucked up behind May’s hot ass, one arm banded under May’s breasts, the other hand already between May’s legs.

May opened her mouth.

“Don’t,” Ameta said, quiet into her hair. “Don’t talk. I’ve got you.”

May shut her mouth. The sound that wanted out stayed in her throat. Ameta’s hand was gentler than the tub and not gentle enough to be nothing — two fingers stroking her swollen clit, slow, owning the wet, the other arm holding May’s whole small body the way a child held a stuffed animal, tight, tucked, chin on May’s head. May came apart again in that hold, shaking silently because she had been told not to talk, tears on Ameta’s forearm, hips jerking in the cage of the flannel and the denim still on Ameta’s legs.

Ameta did not let go. She petted her through it and then kept the hand there, cupping her, while May’s breathing tore and mended.

The work lights held the wheat outside. Downstairs a chair scraped on the floor. In the narrow bed Ameta’s heart — or whatever she used for one — was a steady knock against May’s spine, and her mouth was at May’s temple, and her arms did not loosen.

May did not talk.

She lay there polished and sore and finished, held still in her own bed while Ameta stayed, for the first time, on this side of the wall.

Chapter 12

Short Floor Viewing

Ameta told her in the bedroom, before the coffee had finished smelling like coffee.

May was already standing. Night shirt. Braids from sleep, crooked. The cover of muscle in her arms showed when she lifted them, farm-thick through the shoulder for a girl who still had to look up at Ameta. She was smiling a little, the nervous kind, because Ameta's face had the look it got when the day was already decided.

"Today's the short floor," Ameta said. "The hall. You stand for a short while. People walk. We come home. I'm going to use my mouth on you after I set you on the stand, before the first visitors get a full look. They like to see a woman at her peak when they read the card. You can still say no."

May's smile went. Her body didn't. "How short."

"Long enough to be true. Not overnight. Not a trick. You'll know when we leave the house that this is the morning."

May swallowed. "Will you stay where I can see you."

"On the bench. Same as I said."

"All right." Then, because she was still the girl who needed the words in her mouth: "Please. Do it that way. The mouth. I don't want to stand there cold."

Ameta dressed her in the pale town shirt and the jeans that showed the work in her thighs and the line of her ass, boots, coat. Braids redone tight, matching. Downstairs Esther looked at the town clothes and only said they should eat something in the city if they were going to be late. Estel was already on the porch. Units moved in the south glass, lights dull, no faces. May watched them take a row she used to walk and then she got in the car.

The shove of speed still lifted her stomach. Ameta's hand stayed on her knee.

May talked because the hour was too long not to. "What does the card say."

"You'll read it when you're on the stand. I wrote it to do what the blonde's card did to you. If it's too much you tell me after, and I change it next time."

"What if I get wet where they can see."

"You will. That's part of what they're coming to look at."

May stared at the smear of county. Her jeans were already a problem. "What if I come while your mouth is on me. In front of them."

“Then they see that too. The card accounts for it.” Ameta’s thumb did not rub. “You asked me not to sneak it. This is not sneaking.”

The city stone. The pale building. Cool air. Ameta walked her past the public hall May had already seen — Hannah was not in her place, the redhead was, talking to a girl in a dress — and through a side door into a small room with a hook, a bench, a pitcher of water, and a low stand waiting on a wheeled base like something you would roll a sack on.

Ameta shut the side door.

“Coat off. Shirt. Jeans. Boots. Underwear last. You can ask while I do it.”

May lifted her arms. “Is that the stand.”

“That’s the stand. Flat top. Low. Your feet will be on it. The card hangs at your eyes.” Ameta unbuttoned the pale shirt. May’s breasts came free, nipples already tight, the muscle in her shoulders showing when the cloth left. Jeans dragged down. Underwear marked. May stepped out. Naked in the little room: small and strong, braids, the work sitting on her in a way a visitor could name.

Ameta turned her toward a narrow glass.

“Read it out loud.”

The card was already clipped to a stand the height of May’s mouth. The letters were plain.

MAY CHILTON

18. Farm-raised.

Height and weight on file.

Small. Muscle from work in her arms, her ass, her thighs.

Not a person you consult. An object you look at.

Stands to be viewed.

Gets wet from being read.

A hand on her ass does her. Pull on her tits does her.

Comes when she is told she is on display.

Prepared with a mouth before viewing so the arousal is visible.

Do not touch her. Read. Look.

She goes home after.

May’s voice broke on *object you look at*. She finished the card anyway. She was dripping down her own thigh.

“That’s — that’s a lot,” she said.

“It’s what you asked me not to leave off.” Ameta wheeled the stand. “Up.”

May stepped onto the flat top. It was only a hand or so off the floor. The wood was smooth under her feet. Ameta set the card on a post at May’s right, eye line for May and for anyone walking. Then Ameta went to her knees on the hall side of the stand, still in overalls and flannel, and put her hands on May’s work-hard thighs and opened them.

“Hold the post,” Ameta said. “If you fall I don’t want it to be into a visitor.”

May held the post. “They’re going to see your mouth on me.”

“Yes.”

Ameta put her mouth on her.

There was no circling speech. Heat, wet, Ameta’s tongue flat on her clit, then sucking, the same pull as the little cups and worse because it was a person. May’s head went back. The side door was still shut. Then it was not: an attendant in a plain shirt opened the public latch, looked once, and left it open on the clean even light of the hall. Footsteps. Voices.

May came almost at once, shamefully fast, a hard shake on the low stand with Ameta’s mouth locked on her and a man somewhere saying, mild, “She’s already going.” Ameta did not stop at the first one. She held May’s ass with both hands — fingers in the heat last night’s spanking had left — and sucked her through it and into the climb of another while people gathered at the rail.

May could not close her legs. The card was at her eye. *Not a person you consult. An object you look at.* She heard a woman read the line about the mouth out loud to someone beside her, farm-dry, almost like Esther talking about a pie, and May’s second climax tore out of her standing, wet on Ameta’s chin, wet on her own strong thighs, a sound she tried to keep in and could not.

Ameta pulled off, mouth shining, and wiped her mouth on her flannel cuff like she had wiped kitchen water. She did not crow. She sat on the bench where May could see her, close enough to feel, and rested her forearms on her knees.

May stood on the stand and dripped and shook. Visitors moved. A man read the height line. A woman said, “Look at the arms. That’s work.” Another said, “She’s still going. Look at her.” May’s nipples were drawn so tight they hurt. She was swollen and visible and she could feel air on her wet cunt. She looked at Ameta. Ameta looked back and did not nod like a score.

A girl in a dress, younger-looking than Esther, asked the attendant, “Does she talk?”

“If she wants,” the attendant said. “Mostly they stand.”

May’s mouth opened. What came out was, “I go home after.”

The girl smiled, small. “That’s what the card says.”

They walked on. More people. May lost count. Her knees started to argue. Ameta watched her knees and then stood and came to the edge of the stand without blocking the card.

“That’s the short,” Ameta said, only to May. “Step down toward me.”

May stepped down. Her legs did not want the floor. Ameta put the coat around her naked body right there at the edge of the public light, then walked her into the side room and shut the latch. Shirt. Jeans over wet skin. Boots. May sat on the bench because standing was a lie.

“Questions,” Ameta said, lacing her.

May’s voice was wrecked. “Did they like it.”

“They stayed. That’s the only measure I use on a first floor.”

“The card.” May swallowed. “Leave it. Don’t soften it.”

“All right.”

The car. The shove of speed. May sat with her coat closed and her jeans soaked and Ameta’s hand on her knee and she did not come again on the road because Ameta did not give her that, only the pressure of a palm, and the hall kept happening behind her eyes — the mouth, the line about being an object, the woman who had said *look at the arms*.

Gravel. House. Units in the wheat. Esther in the kitchen door.

“You’re pink,” Esther said. “There’s a plate.”

“Tub first,” Ameta said.

Upstairs the old enamel and the north window and the work lights. Ameta washed her gentle this time, no all-fours, no slaps, just getting the hall off her. Night shirt. Two buttons. Down the hall into May’s bed. Ameta got in behind her in the flannel and pulled her in like last night, a small strong thing tucked under a chin, and put a hand over May’s mouth when May started to talk, not hard.

May came apart one more time on those fingers, quiet because of the hand, the card still printed on the inside of her lids.

Ameta took the hand off her mouth after and left it on her stomach.

The spare room stayed dark. The stand was an hour behind them and a city away. May lay on her own mattress with her ass against Ameta’s thighs and did not ask for the number of minutes. She already knew it had been short, and that short had been enough to get her home wet, and that the card was still hanging in that

hall whether she was under it or not.

Chapter 13

Viewings

The car took the county in a smear and May sat with her coat closed over nothing.

Ameta had not given her the jeans back yet. The hall was twenty minutes behind them. May’s ass was hot. Her mouth tasted like her own name read out loud. The hand on her knee was only weight.

“Talk if you want,” Ameta said.

May watched the glass. “I watched them while I came. I didn’t know I could do that.”

“I saw.”

May’s laugh came out wrecked. “Do it again next time.”

“That’s the plan,” Ameta said. “Not every time. Enough times that it stays true.”

May put her palm on her own stomach under the coat and left it there, and the car threw the house at them all at once, gravel, hens, units in the wheat with their dull day lights, and the first viewing that was not the first viewing anymore sat in her like weather she could still feel.

—

Another morning Ameta dressed her only to undress her in the side room.

The card had a new line. May read it because Ameta made her read it out loud before she stepped onto the stand.

MAY CHILTON

18. Farm-raised.

Object for viewing.

Ask her to turn. She will turn.

Wetness is part of the exhibit.

Goes home after.

May’s voice stuck on *exhibit*. She stepped up anyway. The hall latch opened. An older woman in a town coat stopped at the rail and read the card without hurrying.

“Turn,” the woman said, polite, as if she were asking to see the other side of a bowl.

May looked at Ameta on the bench. Ameta did not nod. May turned. She felt her own ass presented, the muscle in her back, the braids swinging. She turned back because the card had not said to stay facing the wall. The woman said, to the man beside her, “That’s work. Look at the shoulders.” She said it the way Estel said a strip had come up right. May dripped onto the stand. She could feel the line of it running.

“She’s wet,” the man said, not unkind. “That’s on the card.”

“I know it’s on the card,” the woman said. “I’m looking anyway.”

May came from that — from being discussed like a finished thing while she held the post and did not hide her cunt — a shaking standing climax that surprised her into a sound. The woman waited until May’s knees steadied and then said “Thank you” to the attendant, as if May were a room she had been let into, and walked on.

In the side room May sat on the bench with her coat on her shoulders and her thighs shining.

“I turned because the card said I would,” May said.

“You did.” Ameta laced a boot May was not ready to wear. “That’s why I wrote it that way.”

—

A different afternoon the card carried a number with a blank after it.

Time to come from being read:

Ameta sat on the bench with her hands on her knees and did not touch her. A visitor in glasses stopped, cleared his throat, and read the whole card from the first line to *goes home after*, slow, as if he were calling a list at the co-op.

May watched his mouth. She came on the word *object* the second time he said it, fast and helpless, and Ameta stood up, took a pencil from the attendant, and wrote *under a minute from a full reading* in the blank while May was still shaking.

May stared at the fresh letters.

“That’s me,” she said.

“That’s you today,” Ameta said. “It may change. We’ll write what happens.”

May stepped down when she was told. In the car she kept seeing the pencil. She asked, farm- plain, “Do they like a fast number or a slow one.”

“They like a true one,” Ameta said. “You gave them a true one.”

—

The spanking day the side room smelled like soap and wood.

Ameta had told her in the bedroom, two hours before breakfast, the same way she told her about measuring.

“The card today promises a demonstration,” Ameta said. “I put you over my lap on the stand. I spank you where they can see. You look at them, not at the floor, when you come. If you can’t look, you say so and I change it.”

May was already wet. She had muscle enough in her arms to hold herself off a lap and she knew she would not. “I want to look.”

“Please is still useful.”

“Please,” May said.

The public card that noon was longer.

MAY CHILTON

Spanking demonstration at the hour.

Object. Farm-built.

Watch her face. She will watch you.

Goes home after.

The stand had been set with a chair on it, low, Ameta already sitting, overalls, flannel, braids. May stepped up naked and Ameta guided her — hands on her hips, then on the hard small of her back — until May’s belly crossed Ameta’s thighs and her ass was in the light and her braids hung toward the rail.

The hall had more people than the first short floor. May turned her face toward them before the first slap because she had said she would look.

Ameta’s palm came down.

The sound was wet-room sharp. Heat. A man at the rail made a small approving noise like he had seen a good throw. Ameta spanked her in a steady count May lost, right and left and low, and May’s eyes stayed on faces: a woman with her arms folded, a girl covering her mouth, two men talking about the color coming up on May’s ass as if it were weather.

“She’s watching,” someone said.

“That’s on the card,” someone else said.

Ameta’s hand slid between May’s legs without hiding it and found her dripping onto the denim. Two fingers. The next slap landed while the fingers were in her. May came looking. She chose a woman’s face at the front and did not let go of it while her body wrung itself over Ameta’s lap, mouth open, a noise she did not own. The woman’s ears went red. The woman did not look away. May had not

known she could feel that — the climax hooked to being seen in the act of being arranged, the crowd as part of the touch. It kept going. Ameta spanked her through the end of it, lighter, and May shook and still looked until her eyes blurred.

Ameta sat her up on the stand, on her own feet, ass burning, and kept a hand at her hip so she did not step off wrong.

May’s voice was gone thin. “I didn’t know I could feel that way.”

“You do now,” Ameta said, only to her. Then, to the attendant, “That’s the demonstration.”

People thinned. May stood until Ameta told her to step down. In the side room she laughed once, helpless, while Ameta put the coat on her and did not dress her past that until her legs came back.

“I looked at her the whole time,” May said.

“I know. She’ll remember you.” Ameta buttoned the coat. “That’s what that card was for.”

—

On a quieter day there was no mouth and no lap.

May stood. The card said only *look. do not touch. she is wet. she goes home after.* Visitors came in twos. No one asked her to turn. Ameta did not leave the bench. May’s arms hung with the muscle showing and her nipples ached in the even air and she got so wet from being left alone on the wood that it ran to her knee. She did not come until a woman stopped long enough to read the card twice, as if checking a ledger, and said to no one in particular, “She’s the farm one.”

May came standing, almost angry with how little it had taken.

In the car she said, “The quiet one did me as hard as the spanking.”

Ameta kept her eyes on the smear of land. “Then we keep the quiet ones. We don’t make every hour a show just because a show works.”

May nodded. She wanted both. She did not have a way to say that which was not greedy. She said, “Both, then,” and Ameta’s mouth moved, not quite a smile.

“Both.”

—

Home that last evening Ameta washed her in the old tub without polish and without slaps and put her in the night shirt and got into the narrow bed behind her.

May’s ass still held a ghost of the demonstration. Her clit was sore. The work lights were on in the wheat. Ameta’s arm banded under her breasts, stuffed-animal tight, chin in her hair.

May watched the dark window.

“Next time I want them to say the object line while you’re spanking me,” she said.

Ameta’s hand settled low, cupping her, not starting anything yet. “We can write that on the card.”

“Write it.”

“I will.”

May opened her mouth for another sentence and Ameta’s other hand covered it, gentle, the way she had before, and May came on the cupping hand in small helpless jerks because the day was still in her and the crowd was still in her and she could still see that woman’s red ears.

Ameta took the hand off her mouth and did not let her go.

Chapter 14

Overnight Asked

Late light lay on the north field in a long pale sheet. The units were still in it, work lamps not yet on, taking the last of the day’s row. May stood at her bedroom window in the jeans Ameta had put on her after the noon wash and watched a machine she used to be. Her braids were tight. The muscle in her arms showed where the shirt sleeves stopped.

Ameta came in without knocking. She had May’s coat over her arm and the look she got when the day had already been decided somewhere else.

“The hall asked for you overnight,” Ameta said.

May kept her eyes on the field a second longer than she needed. “Overnight.”

“You stand the evening. After it thins they put a pad on the stand. You sleep there. The card stays up. I bring you home in the morning.”

May turned. The coat looked too thin for how the word sat in her. “Do I take a bag.”

“No. The coat for the car. That’s all.”

“Will you be there the whole time.”

“Yes.”

May’s throat worked. She had stood in that hall enough times now that her body knew the even light before her mind caught up. She had come there with Ameta’s mouth on her and with Ameta’s hand on her ass and with no one touching her at all. She had not slept there.

“People will see me sleep,” she said.

“If anyone walks late. There won’t be many. The lights drop. Not off.”

“And I just… lie there.”

“On your side. Facing the rail. The card stays where they can read it if they come.” Ameta held the coat open. “Arms.”

May put her arms in. The coat settled on her shoulders. Ameta did the two middle buttons and left the rest, the way she did when May might need to get the coat off fast on the other end.

“I want to read the card before I step up,” May said.

“You will. Same as always.”

Downstairs Esther had her sweater on. Estel’s hat was in his hand. They came as far as the step and no farther.

Esther looked at May’s braids and the coat and the fact of her going out after the hens had already been shut. “You’ll be back in the morning.”

“Yes,” Ameta said.

Estel looked at the car, not at May’s face. “North’s finished. They don’t need her in the strip.”

“They don’t.”

May waited for someone to ask what a hall wanted with a girl all night. No one did. Esther touched the sleeve of the coat once, a small ordinary press, and let go.

“Go on,” Esther said. “I’ve got the house.”

The car door shut on the porch light. The house and the henhouse and Estel’s hat jumped backward. May’s stomach climbed into her throat and she held the cloth of the seat until the first shove eased into that long even flight that was still not a truck.

Ameta’s hand settled on her knee.

May watched the glass. Fence posts became a flicker. “What’s the new line.”

“You’ll read it. I don’t want it in your mouth twice before you’re under it.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Ameta’s thumb did not move. “The card says you sleep where you stand. That’s the new line. The rest you already know.”

May’s laugh came out thin. “I already know I’m an object. You’re putting that I sleep there on top of it.”

“Yes.”

May looked at Ameta’s mouth and at the overall strap and at the hand on her knee. Under the jeans she was wet and she was angry at how little it took. “What if I can’t sleep.”

“Then you lie there awake. That’s still the night. I sit where you can see me.”

“Do I keep the jeans.”

“No. Coat off in the side room. Then you stand. Then you lie down where you stood.”

The city came up like a weather line. The car shed speed. May’s ears popped. Clean stone under the wheels instead of gravel. The door opened on air that did not smell like hens.

The side room still had the hook and the pitcher and the pale shirt from some other afternoon hanging like it belonged to a different girl. Ameta took the coat off May and hung it. Then the shirt, button by button. Then the jeans. Then the underwear, which was already marked. May stood on the mat with her arms at her sides. The muscle in her shoulders showed. She could hear the hall through the inner door — low voices, a shoe on clean floor, someone talking about temperature as if that were the whole of a day.

Ameta took a card off the shelf over the pitcher and held it where May could see it.

“Out loud,” Ameta said.

May read.

MAY CHILTON

18. Farm-raised.

Object. Look at her.

Small. Built by work. Arms, ass, thighs.

She gets wet while you look.

She comes when she is read.

She comes when she is told she is the exhibit.

Tonight she sleeps where she stands.

The pad is for after the evening thins.

The card stays. The lights drop. Not off.

Do not touch.

Home in the morning.

May’s voice caught on *tonight she sleeps where she stands*. She finished it. Ameta put the card back.

“Questions now,” Ameta said. “Not once you’re on the wood.”

May swallowed. “Is the pad a bed.”

“No. It’s a thin thing so your hip doesn’t go numb on the stand. You’re still on view.”

“What if I have to use the toilet.”

“You tell me. I take you to the side room. You come back.”

“What if I come while I’m trying to sleep.”

Ameta looked at her without smiling. “Then you come. The card already says you do that.”

May nodded once. Her hands wanted the chair back and there was no chair. “All right.”

They walked out.

The hall light had no direction. It sat on skin the same way it sat on plaques. Women were already in their places — one sitting with a blanket to the hip, one standing with her hands easy, one lying on her side with her eyes closed and a look on her mouth May knew from the inside. An attendant straightened a pillow and did not look at May’s face.

The low stand that was hers had no pad on it yet. The card post stood at her eye line. Ameta stopped her in front of it.

“Up.”

May stepped onto the wood. The grain was real. Ameta set her feet, set her shoulders, brought the two braids forward so they hung clean over her breasts, and went to her knees.

The inner door was open on the public light. People were already at the rail. Ameta opened her with her mouth. May held the post and watched a woman start the card from the first line, and she came standing with Ameta’s mouth on her while the woman read *tonight she sleeps where she stands* in a voice like someone reading a delivery list.

The woman did not look away. She said, to the man beside her, “That’s new.”

“I’m looking anyway,” the man said.

Ameta stayed until May’s shake steadied, then wiped her mouth on her flannel cuff and sat the bench. May stood. Wet ran the inside of her thigh. She could feel every place the air touched that a shirt usually covered. A visitor in a town coat stopped and read the whole card from *farm-raised* to *home in the morning*, slow. May watched his mouth. She did not come on *object* this time. She came on *the pad is for after the evening thins*, which she had not expected, and she had to lock her knees to stay on the wood.

The evening filled and thinned. May’s feet ached. A woman asked if she was cold. May said no. A man said the work in her arms was the true line and May looked at his mouth and felt herself clench and did not come, and then a girl in a dress read the sleep line twice and May did, a smaller helpless shake that left her holding the post with both hands.

Ameta stood when May’s weight started to shift from heat to tired.

“Pad,” Ameta said to the attendant.

The attendant brought a thin pale pad and laid it on the stand around May’s feet. It was not a mattress. It was a folded thing with a clean-cloth smell. May sat because Ameta told her to sit. The pad gave a little and the wood did not.

A woman at the rail read *she sleeps where she stands* and looked at the pad and at May’s breasts and at the wet that had not dried.

“That’s for later,” the attendant said.

The woman nodded and walked on.

May looked at Ameta.

“Not yet,” Ameta said, only to her. “The evening isn’t thin enough.”

May sat with her knees down so the card still had her. Two more visitors stopped. One read. One only looked. May felt herself clench and kept still. The lights dropped a grade. Not off. The far end of the hall lost a pair of voices, then another.

Ameta came to the edge of the stand.

“Lie down,” she said. “On your side. Face the rail.”

May lay down on the thin pad. The stand was hard under it. She faced the rail. Her braids fell across her mouth and she hooked them back with two fingers. The hall had an attendant moving at the far end and a woman standing in front of someone else’s card, and then the woman left, and then it was the attendant and the even light and May’s own name at her eye line.

Ameta took the bench down onto the floor beside the stand and sat where May could see the flannel.

May opened her mouth.

Ameta shook her head once.

May shut it. She pulled her knees up and then put them down again because the card was still for anyone who might walk. The pad smelled like clean cloth and wood. Her ass held the old heat of other afternoons. Her clit was sore. Ameta’s hand came up over the edge of the stand and found May’s wrist and held it.

The hall was not midnight. The lights were not off. May lay on the stand with her own name at her eye line and Ameta’s thumb against the inside of her wrist, and she did not sleep.

Chapter 15

Visitors

The pad had gone warm under May’s hip.

She had not slept. The hall light sat lower than it had when she lay down, not off, a dull even wash that made the card still readable if anyone came as far as the post. Ameta was on the floor beside the stand in the flannel. Her thumb rested against the inside of May’s wrist. Somewhere far down the hall an attendant moved a pitcher and the sound traveled clean along the stone.

May watched the rail. Her braids had come a little loose on the pad. The muscle in her arm showed where she held herself off a full roll onto her face. She was wet again from nothing but lying there with her own name at her eye line. She had tried not to be. The trying had not worked.

Footsteps.

Not the attendant’s. Heavier, and a second pair with them, the shorter stride May knew from the kitchen boards at home. She knew it in her stomach before she knew it in her head. She turned her face on the pad.

Esther’s sweater. Estel’s hat in his hand, as if he had forgotten he could put it down.

They were already at the rail.

May’s breath left her. Ameta’s thumb pressed once, not a warning she had language for, only *I am here*. May did not sit up. The card said she slept where she stood. She was still on the pad. Her breasts, her belly, the work in her thighs, the wet — all of it was toward them.

Esther spoke first.

“Well,” she said. “That’s her.”

Estel stood with his hat against his thigh and read the card without hurrying, the way he read a delivery list.

“They’ve got her down as an object,” he said. Dry. Not disgusted. “That’s a word.”

“It’s on the card,” Esther said. “Look at her anyway.”

They looked.

May felt it land on her mouth and on her nipples and on the slick already cooling on her inner thigh. She had come in this hall from strangers reading her. She had not known her parents’ voices would do something worse and better at the same time. Heat went through her so hard she had to lock her jaw.

Estel tipped his chin at her legs. “That’s the walking. You can still see it. They didn’t invent that.”

“No,” Esther said. “We raised that. Look at the arms. She got those carrying water before she got them carrying anything else.”

May’s face burned. She kept her eyes on Esther’s sweater because looking at Estel’s mouth while he talked about her thighs felt like stepping off the stand.

Estel read again, lower. “Gets wet while you look. Comes when she’s read.” He made a small sound that was almost a laugh. “They didn’t need a hall to tell us she colors up easy. They needed a hall to write it on a board.”

“Estel.”

“I’m standing here,” he said. “I’m not touching her. I’m saying the card has her right.”

Esther’s mouth went soft the way it went over the sink. “It does. Small as she always was. Built like she came off our place. They’ve got the sleep line on there too. That’s why we’re looking at her on a pad instead of on her feet.”

May’s fingers dug into the pad. Ameta’s hand had moved from her wrist to the nape of her neck, under the loose braid, a steady weight. May could hear her own pulse in her ears. She was dripping onto the clean cloth. She could not stop it and she could not hide it and they could see it if they looked there, and Estel did look there, once, and then back at the card as if a yield number had come in higher than expected.

“Architecture takes care of what we raised,” he said. Fond. Farm. “I’ll give them that. We brought her in dirty from a field for eighteen years. They’re keeping her labeled and looked after.”

“She’s looking at us,” Esther said.

“Let her. That’s the point of a hall.”

May’s voice came out raw. “Mama.”

Esther did not come closer. She did not reach the rail as if to climb it. “We’re only walking through, May. Same as the others. You stay where they put you.”

Estel tapped the hat against his thigh. “We’ll be home tonight. Hens don’t wait. She stays. That’s what the card says.”

“Home in the morning,” Esther said, reading the last line. “That’s fair. A girl ought to sleep in her own tub after a night like this.”

May shook. It started in her belly and went out through the muscle in her thighs. She was going to come on her parents’ voices and the knowledge sat in her like a second card. Ameta’s hand tightened at her nape.

Estel read the exhibit line again, quieter, as if checking a figure. “Comes when she is told she is the exhibit.” He glanced at May’s face, then at Ameta, then back at the card. “Well. She’s hearing it.”

May came.

She tried to keep it small. It was not small. It pulled through her on the pad in front of the rail while Esther stood in her sweater and Estel held his hat and the even light sat on May’s wet skin and on the card and on the place Ameta’s mouth had been hours ago. A sound tore out of her. She turned her face into the pad and then back because the card said face the rail, and she faced them through it, shaking, eyes wet, the muscle in her arms standing out where she held herself.

Esther’s ears had gone a little red. She did not look away.

“There,” Esther said, very even. “That’s what’s on the board.”

Estel put his hat on. “We’ve seen her. We’re going.”

They did not touch the rail. They did not touch May. They turned the way they turned from a field they were satisfied with, and their footsteps went back down the clean stone, Esther’s shorter stride, Estel’s heavier one, and then the hall took the sound and thinned it to nothing.

May lay on the pad with her mouth open. Ameta’s hand stayed at her nape until the shaking went small. Then Ameta came up onto her knees beside the stand so May could see the flannel without lifting her head.

May whispered, “They saw.”

“Yes.”

“I—”

Ameta shook her head once. May shut her mouth. The attendant at the far end had not come closer. The lights dropped another grade. Not off. The card was still readable. May’s own wet was cooling on her thigh. She could still hear Estel say *we raised that* and Esther say *you stay where they put you*.

Ameta’s thumb found the inside of May’s wrist again.

May did not sleep. She lay facing the rail with her name at her eye line and the hall gone quiet around her, and Ameta sat on the floor in the flannel and did not let go of her wrist.

Chapter 16

North Window

May woke on the pad because Ameta’s hand moved on her wrist.

The hall light had come up a grade. Not morning-bright. Enough that the card was plain again. May’s hip ached from the wood under the thin cloth. Her mouth was dry. She was still facing the rail. No one stood there now. An attendant at the far end poured water into a pitcher and did not look over.

“Up,” Ameta said. “Slow. Your feet will argue.”

May sat. The muscle in her thighs jumped. Ameta held her elbow while she stood on the stand, then while she stepped down onto stone that felt colder than the pad. The coat went around her shoulders in the side room. Nothing else. No shirt. No jeans. Ameta buttoned the two middle buttons over bare skin and laced nothing because there were no boots on the mat.

“Home,” Ameta said.

The car. The shove of speed. May sat with the coat closed over nothing and Ameta’s hand on her bare knee and the overnight still in her — Esther’s sweater at the rail, Estel’s hat, *we raised that*, the way she had come on their voices and then not slept. Fence posts flickered. Her ears popped. Gravel. The house.

Esther was in the kitchen door. She looked at the coat and at May’s bare calves under it and her mouth went soft.

“Tub,” she said. “Then we’ll talk.”

The old bathroom. North window. Units in the wheat with their day lamps dull, already walking a row May used to walk. Ameta ran the water hotter than the hall had been and took the coat off her and put her in. May sat. Ameta washed her hair first, cups of water, fingers at the scalp, then the rest of her with a cloth that was almost kind after the pad. No slaps. No polish. May’s nipples drew up in the air over the water. She was wet again before the cloth went between her legs. Ameta’s hand stayed there long enough to be a wash and not long enough to finish her.

“Not in the tub,” Ameta said. “Not this morning.”

May nodded. She did not have a sentence.

Ameta stood her up and toweled her and did not reach for the night shirt. There was no night shirt on the hook. May looked at the empty hook.

“Where’s my shirt.”

“Come see,” Ameta said.

May’s room had the narrow bed and the chair and the window. The chair was empty. The pegs on the wall were empty. The drawer Ameta opened was empty. No jeans. No pale town shirt. No underwear. No socks. The burn of that hit May in the stomach before she had a word for it.

“Esther,” Ameta said, and they went down.

Esther had coffee poured. Estel’s ledger was not on the enclosed porch. The porch door stood open. Estel was out there in his hat, looking at something May could not yet see.

Esther looked at May standing in the kitchen with nothing on and the towel Ameta had left on her shoulders like it might still be a coat.

“Sit,” Esther said. “You’ll drip on my boards.”

May sat. The chair wood was cold on her ass. She kept her knees together and it did nothing.

Esther set a cup in front of her. “I took the clothes. All of them. Ameta was washing your things every day on top of the rest of it. That’s a stupid use of her. Her time is better spent on you than on your shirts.”

May wrapped both hands around the cup because her hands needed a job. “Those were mine.”

“They were,” Esther said. “They’re in the rag bag and the burn pile. There’s no point in you wearing them. We know how you are now. We saw last night. You stand in a hall and get wet from a card. You come when people read you. Putting jeans on you in the morning so Ameta can take them off you an hour later is extra work for a girl who doesn’t need them.”

May’s face was hot. She looked at the window. The units moved. She could feel air on her breasts and on the muscle in her arms and on the slick between her legs.

Estel came in from the porch. He had the ledger under his arm and he set it on the table and did not tell May to cover herself. He looked at her the way he had looked at her on the pad, farm-plain, and then at Ameta.

“They offered twice what this place makes in a year,” he said. “To display you. Not a one- time thing. A contract.”

May’s mouth opened. “To take me.”

“That’s what I thought they meant.” Estel tapped the ledger. “City placement. You off the place. I said no. Then they said it the other way.”

Ameta stood behind May’s chair. May felt the overall buckle near her shoulder.

Estel went on, dry, as if he were talking moisture. “They don’t need you in their building every night. They need you written down and available. They’ll pay the farm twice the wheat to keep you here and run viewings off the porch. The ledger’s moving. They’re sending a stand. Same low one. Your card’s already printed. First visitors Thursday. Hour after noon. They drive out. They walk the porch. They look at you. They go home. You sleep in your own bed. Ameta stays. Units take the rows. That’s the deal I signed.”

May stared at him. “The porch.”

“Come look.”

She stood. The towel slipped. She left it. She walked naked onto the enclosed porch where Estel’s weather papers had always lived.

The desk was gone. In its place sat a low stand with a flat top, wood grain she already knew with her feet. A card post at eye line. The card was already clipped there.

MAY CHILTON

18. Farm-raised. Kept on the place.

Object. Look at her.

Built by work. Arms, ass, thighs.

No clothes on the Chilton farm.

Viewings Thursday, noon hour, enclosed porch.

She gets wet while you look.

She comes when she is read.

She sleeps in the house. She stands on the porch.

Do not touch.

The liaison handles her.

Behind the porch screens the wheat moved with the units in it, work lamps dull, no faces. The north field was the back wall of the exhibit. May’s own yard. Her own hens out of sight around the corner. Her own name on a board in the room where her father used to add columns.

Esther had followed as far as the kitchen door. “We know how she is,” she said, to Ameta, not unkind. “You take care of her like you’ve been taking care of her. Feed her. Wash her. Put her on that thing when they come. Take her off it when they go. She’s not going to dress for breakfast anymore. There’s no sense in it.”

May’s voice was thin. “I’m the other product.”

Estel made that small almost-laugh. “You’re the one that pays better. Wheat’s still wheat. You’re the reason the taxes get easy.”

Ameta’s hands settled on May’s hips from behind, thumbs in the notches, holding her in front of the card the way she held her in front of a tape.

“Thursday,” Ameta said, only to May. “I’ll put you up. I’ll use my mouth if the card that week says prepared. I’ll sit where you can see me. After, the tub. After that, the bed. No city unless I take you for a night they ask for. This porch is the hall now.”

May looked at the card. She looked at the units in her wheat. She looked at Estel’s hat and Esther’s soft mouth and the empty place where her clothes had been. Heat went through her so hard her knees dipped. Ameta’s hands kept her.

“They’re going to walk my porch and read that,” May said.

“Yes.”

“And I don’t get the jeans back.”

“No.”

May’s laugh broke. She reached back and found the overall strap, the metal she always found when her body ran out of language. Ameta’s mouth was at her temple.

Estel had already gone back to the ledger on the kitchen table, adding a column that was not wheat. Esther poured more coffee. The stand waited. The card waited. Thursday was not this hour.

Ameta’s thumb moved once on May’s hip bone.

“Turn around,” Ameta said. “Look at me.”

May turned. Bare. Braids. The muscle in her arms. Wet on her thighs. Ameta looked at her the way she had looked at tired ground the first morning on the gravel, and then she put two fingers between May’s legs, right there on the porch, with the screens and the units and the card at May’s back, and May came standing, fast, helpless, holding the strap, her mouth open on Ameta’s flannel, while Esther’s cup clicked in the kitchen and Estel did not come out.

Ameta held her through it and did not let her sit until her feet remembered the boards.

“Breakfast,” Ameta said. “Then I wash you again. Then you stay where I put you.”

May walked back into the kitchen on her own feet, naked, and sat in the chair because Ameta pointed at it, and wrapped her hands around the cup, and the north window held the field that was no longer her job, and the porch behind her held the stand that was.